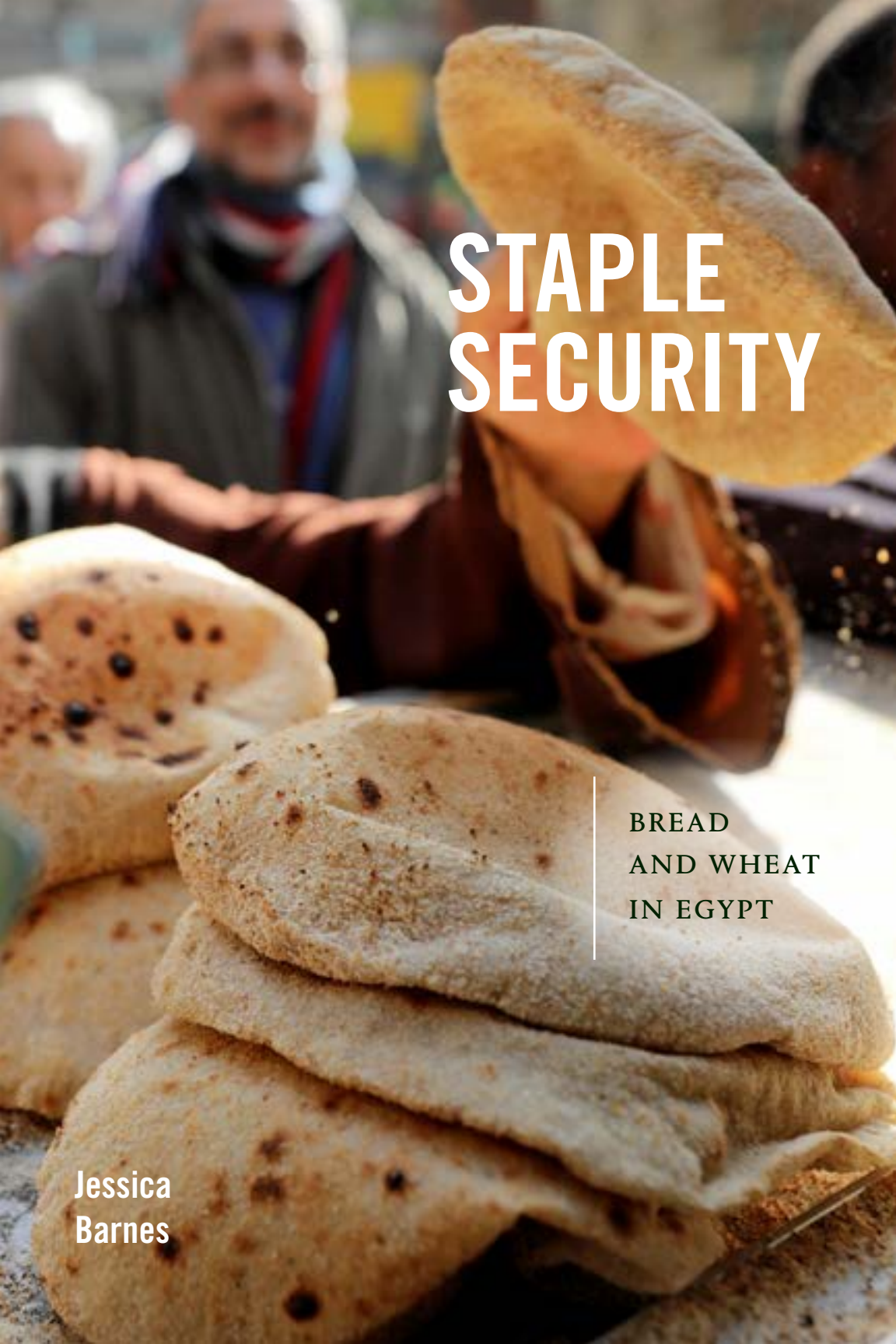

STAPLE SECURITY

BREAD AND WHEAT IN EGYPT

Jessica Barnes

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Cover art: A woman carries bread after purchasing it at a bakery. Cairo, Egypt, March 9, 2017. Reuters/Mohamed Abd El Ghany.

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TRANSLITERATION

I have used a simplified version of the standard system for transliterating Arabic. I represent the letter *ayn* with ʿ and omit diacritics, long vowels, and initial hamzas.

CURRENCY

The Egyptian currency is the Egyptian pound, EGP. One Egyptian pound is made up of 100 piasters. At the time of writing in December 2021, 1EGP = $0.06.

LAND AREA

The common unit of area measurement in Egypt is the feddan. One feddan is made up of 24 qirat and is equivalent to 1.04 acres or 0.42 hectares.

GRAIN QUANTITY

Egyptian farmers typically assess grain quantities using a volume measure called the keila, which comes from the scooping implement that was traditionally used for grain. Twelve keila make up an ardab. The weight of a keila of grain is approximately 12 kg; an ardab is thus generally rounded up from 144 kg to 150 kg. Grain traders and policy makers assess grain quantities using the weight measure of the metric ton. One metric ton is 1,000 kg.

GRAIN QUALITY

The Egyptian measure of grain quality is the qirat, not to be confused with the area measurement. This is an indicator of purity that is measured out of 24. Wheat that is 22 qirat, therefore, has a 92 percent purity level.

Preface

On my first trip to the Middle East in 1999, while visiting my sister who was working in Jordan, the meze accompanied by freshly baked bread made almost as much of an impression on me as the exquisite ancient city of Petra. When I returned to the region after college to work for a Palestinian research institute for six months, my favorite spot in Bethlehem was a café where I would chat with friends over large platters of bread cut into strips, deep-fried, and sprinkled with salt and thyme. The following year, as a master's student, I spent a summer doing an internship with an agricultural project in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. My main memory of those summer days, other than of the mouse that would play around my feet late in the day when the office was quiet, is of the mid-morning snack that my colleagues would pop out to buy—manaqish, a thin bread topped with thyme or cheese, wrapped in paper and hot from the oven. In Syria several years later, I did a summer of preliminary PhD research in Aleppo. It was cherry season and the old woman with whom I lived made wonderful cherry jam; that was a summer of cherries and bread.

So when the political situation in Syria rendered doctoral research there unfeasible and I shifted my research site to Egypt, bread was one of the first things I looked for. I arrived in the village of Warda in Fayoum Governorate in the summer of 2007.[1] At that time, Warda, a village of around three thousand people, did not have many places where you could buy food. The only options were a couple of small fruit and vegetable stands, where women sold produce that they had purchased at the weekly market a few villages away, and several kiosks that sold dry goods like tea, sugar, rice, and pasta alongside small packets of brightly wrapped chips and cookies. Nonetheless, with the few items that I brought with me from Cairo, I was confident that I could manage. With bread, I knew that I would not go hungry.

Not being accustomed to baking my own bread, I set out to find a village bakery. But I could not find one.[2] Loaves of white pita bread, packaged in plastic bags and brought from a bakery in another village, were sometimes available at the fruit and vegetable stands, but these never looked as appetizing as freshly baked bread. Occasionally, when passing through the provincial city, I would buy the government-subsidized baladi bread, but I was put off by its gritty texture and what I found to be a bland taste. When visiting people's homes in Warda, I would sometimes join them for meals served with delicious homemade bread, but this bread was not for sale. I asked around for someone who might be willing to bake for me, but the woman I found said that she would have to bake with 10 kg of flour a time. Even as an avid bread eater, I knew that this would be too much for me to get through. In the end, I managed primarily on the foods that I could buy and bread that was given to me; each time a woman I knew well would bake, she would give me two or three large round loaves, which I would cut in quarters and store in my freezer until I was ready to eat them.

Hence, from the beginning of my fieldwork in Egypt, bread was on my mind. I thought little about its deeper significance, though. My attention was focused on irrigation, the topic of my doctoral research, and everything else seemed peripheral. I noted crowds in front of bakeries and complaints about shortages in the supply of government-subsidized bread, but I did not look into the complexities of the subsidized bread program or think about whether it was being impacted by the global food crisis ongoing at that time. I wrote fieldnotes on farmers' practices of cultivating wheat and storing grain within the home, but I did not ask where the rest of the wheat, sold to traders, went. I observed women clustered around ovens baking bread, but I did not pause to think about what inputs this production was contingent upon.

Shortly after I received my PhD, however, as I was turning my dissertation into my first book, the Egyptian revolution took place. The call of the revolution—for bread, freedom, and social justice (ʿaish, huriya, ʿadala igtimaʿiya)—reverberated through the media coverage, scholarly work, and political commentaries. The first of this trio of demands, bread, was partly a call for better livelihoods, but it was also a call for the food that constitutes the cornerstone of Egyptian diets. This food was everywhere: in Tahrir Square, in the hands of protestors waved above the crowds; on the front page of newspapers in a widely circulating image of a man wearing a helmet fashioned out of bread; in downtown Cairo graffiti art of a tank facing off against a citizen carrying a tray of loaves on his head. Yet the one place where bread was relatively absent was in the scholarly literature.[3] This led me to reflect back on what I had

learned about bread during my earlier period of fieldwork in 2007 and 2008. It also made me wonder about how the story of bread is intertwined with processes of cultivating, trading, and milling the wheat from which that bread is made.

This book is my effort to tell that story. Initially, I thought the book would be about bread shortages, long lines, and protests. But when I began my fieldwork for the book in 2015, I did not find any lines. Instead, I found a government subsidy program that was under reform and introducing electronic ration cards. I discovered ways of handling bread on the street and in the home that had always been there but which I had never noticed before. I learned about the importance of grain storage, something I had thought little about previously. I followed the archival records to trace the transboundary flows of seeds and expertise that have made Egypt's wheat what it is today. I entered the mysterious world of the grain trade and came across a whole new language and way of thinking about wheat. As costs of living rose precipitously after Egypt devalued its currency and removed fuel subsidies (under the conditions of an IMF loan agreement signed in 2016), I observed the significance of cheap bread come into relief. When the coronavirus pandemic hit in early 2020, I read about President al-Sisi's calls to stockpile wheat amid fears of an interruption in global trade flows. I came to appreciate how, to most Egyptians, the prospect of being unable to obtain a decent loaf of bread is an existential threat.

I introduce the concept of *staple security* to explore the ways in which different people endeavor to counter this threat and ensure that they have good bread to eat. Staple security refers to a set of practices that seek to secure the continuous supply of a palatable staple, on a national, household, or individual level, so as to address anxieties about staple absence and meet desires for staple quality. These practices are diverse, ranging from scientists breeding productive and resistant wheat varieties to farmers planting seeds, government agencies procuring huge amounts of grain, bakeries producing subsidized bread, and women warming loaves of bread for a family meal. They are practices that sometimes work in tandem, other times in opposition. In approaching these varied acts as staple security, I depart from the common frame of food security by focusing attention on staple foods specifically and by bringing security—as an affectively charged state of being and a form of action—to the fore.

This book speaks to multiple audiences beyond those interested in Egypt, the Middle East, or the particular case of wheat and bread. To those interested in food, it offers an in-depth theorization of staples. It also offers a nuanced understanding of the nexus between food and security. To scholars of security, the book demonstrates how security extends beyond military domains

into lived experience, in the Middle East just as it does elsewhere, and into the realm of food specifically. To anthropologists and geographers interested in environment-society interactions, the book presents a framework for understanding how security is part of the way resources are imagined and managed on both a national and household scale.

The book follows wheat from the seed, through its planting and importation, to its transformation into and consumption as various kinds of bread.[4] At each of these stages, I trace the ways in which different actors work to secure the continuous supply of quality wheat and quality bread. These multiple practices of staple security are underpinned by varied meanings, take place across contrasting temporal and spatial scales, utilize a range of devices, and rely on different measures for gauging success. Some of these acts are in alignment; others run counter to one another. Yet all play a part in shaping whether the Egyptian people have bread to eat each day and what that bread tastes like.

The introduction lays out my argument and introduces wheat farming in Egypt, the process of wheat importation, and the different kinds of bread consumed by Egyptians. I explain what I mean by *staple*, how I use the word *security*, and the value of bringing these words together through the concept of staple security. I end the chapter by outlining my methodology for following Egypt's wheat and bread.

Chapter 1, "Staple Becomings," tells the story of the becoming of wheat and bread in Egypt over the course of the twentieth century and on through today. I start by tracing the history of the development of wheat varieties and the production of a high-yield, disease-resistant crop, showing how this has been tied to concerns about the threat of disease epidemics and the nation running out of food. I then follow the seeds from research stations to the fields, probing the work of seed production, dissemination, and fertilizer-heavy cultivation required to translate these new seeds' promise into reality. The points of tension in this process are revealing of how farmers' security calculations do not always match those of the government. In the second part of the chapter, I shift my focus to the history of Egypt's government-subsidized bread. I show how successive governments have tweaked the price, size, composition, and style of subsidized bread over time in an effort to maintain an unfailing supply of bread that the general public deems acceptable. While these two histories—of a breeding program and a bread subsidy—engage distinct groups of actors and forms of expertise, staple security underscores the necessity of reading them together.

Chapter 2, "Gold of the Land," follows the wheat seeds from their implantation in Egyptian fields to the moment of their harvest. It explores what staple

security means to rural households that cultivate wheat, as well as the relationship between those households and the government agencies that claim a national stake in this homegrown staple. I begin by tracing the seasonal cycle of planting and harvesting wheat through Arabic newspapers, analyzing the attention given to wheat as a crop of national significance. I contrast this with how small-scale farmers, who produce the majority of Egypt's wheat, see the seasonal cycle of the crop. The second part of the chapter turns to procuring domestic wheat as the mechanism through which the government moves wheat out of the domain of household bread production and into the domain of national subsidized bread production. I look at the procurement price as a device that the government employs to incentivize farmers to grow wheat and sell their harvest. I then examine the disconnect between this vision and the reality of small-scale farmers, who grow wheat primarily as a crop for household consumption rather than for profit.

In chapter 3, "Grain on the Move," I examine procuring foreign wheat, assessing wheat quality, and storing wheat as practices of staple security. First, building on the discussion of domestic wheat procurement in the previous chapter, I look at the government's procurement of imported wheat, which meets roughly half the country's consumption needs. I explore the factors that shape the government's ability to secure wheat from global markets and the popular and political anxieties that surround the government's procurement process and the question of whether Egypt will be able to access sufficient wheat for its population's bread needs. Second, I look at quality concerns regarding imported wheat, which stem from the threat of contaminated bread to Egyptian people and contaminated grain to Egyptian fields. I use the case of a recent controversy over a fungus called ergot to explore these questions of quality, trust, and security. Third, I look at storage and the role it plays in ensuring that the supply of the staple grain is consistent. I examine the political salience of strategic storage and the government's efforts to expand and improve its storage infrastructure. I also look at how storage itself can pose a threat as a locus of corruption.

Chapter 4, "Subsidized Bread," looks at the widely eaten government-subsidized baladi bread, a foundation of most Egyptians' daily sustenance. Such is the centrality of this food that the possibility that it could run out or become unpalatable is understood as a threat not only to those who depend on it but to the stability of the nation. This chapter, coauthored with my research assistant, Mariam Taher, is about the everyday practices of countering this threat by securing the supply and quality of baladi bread. We begin by looking at bread lines, which are emblematic of scarcity, and the reforms implemented by the

Ministry of Supply in 2014 to reshape production and purchasing practices at bakeries so as to address shortages. While these reforms have ensured, by and large, that there is bread in the bakeries, access to this bread is now mediated by an electronic ration card. We turn to the labor involved in getting one of these smart cards and keeping it working, both of which are preconditions to people being able to buy baladi bread at the subsidized price. The second part of the chapter looks at practices of securing quality baladi bread and at how the 2014 government reforms encouraged competition between bakeries as a way of incentivizing them to produce quality bread. The government's bread specifications and bakers' production practices only shape the quality of baladi bread through to the moment of sale, though, leaving a final stage—between purchase and consumption—during which its quality can shift. The final part of the chapter examines how people handle baladi bread, at the bakery and on the street, and the role these practices play in shaping the taste and texture of the loaves they end up eating.

In chapter 5, "Homemade Bread," I turn from the baladi bread associated with the government to the various homemade breads eaten in Egypt. For those who consider good bread to be bread made within a home, staple security means ensuring a steady supply of such bread. I explore, first, homemade bread in a rural context. Drawing on my work in Warda, I examine the value that rural residents attach to homemade bread. I then discuss the practices they employ to make sure that they have this bread in their homes: sharing labor, accessing the necessary inputs, and handling the loaves to preserve their quality. Second, I look at homemade bread in the city. While the consumption of homemade breads in Cairo is far outweighed by the consumption of baladi bread, the fact that some urban residents choose to buy more expensive homemade breads is revealing of the importance they attach to taste. I examine the tactics that these urban residents use to secure their supply of homemade bread in the city, including identifying street-side vendors through local knowledge networks, making informal arrangements with home bakers, and bringing bread from rural areas. Finally, I look at homemade bread as an object of national concern. I follow narratives of Egypt's bread-baking heritage and the story that some Cairo residents tell of a decline in baking knowledge and bread varieties. I examine the efforts of Cairo elites to sustain Egypt's homemade breads as objects of cultural heritage through crystallizing them in museum exhibits, recording them in encyclopedias, and logging them in online databases.

The conclusion brings together these strands and reflects on the significance of this work. I draw parallels between this case and those of other staple foods around the world, showing how staple security can further understandings of

food politics. I examine what this analysis of food and security says about the nexus of other environmental resources and security, calling for a more dynamic approach to resource security—as a mode of practice rather than as an achieved status—and adding nuance to how the resource itself is conceived. I close with a quotidian scene of a family eating a meal with bread, a moment that captures the social, material, and political relations that are produced through the presence and taste of this staple food.

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STAPLE SECURITY

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of January 25, 2011, Egyptian protestors took to the streets, calling for "bread, freedom, and social justice." The bread that featured in their rallying cries was in part symbolic. *Bread*, in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, is *ʿaish*, which means life. Alongside the demands for freedom and social justice, bread was a reference to livelihoods, to people's frustrations at their inability to access basic services, get good educations, find jobs, and build decent lives for themselves. But it was also literal. Some protestors carried loaves of bread in their hands, waving them above the crowds. They were calling for bread because bread is a food that most Egyptians eat every day, three times a day.

EATING BREAD, EATING WITH BREAD. *Photograph by Mariam Taher.*

They were calling for bread because the years prior had seen severe shortages in the supply of the widely eaten government-subsidized bread and widespread complaints about quality. To the protestors, these deficiencies were emblematic of the Mubarak regime's shortcomings. The lack of satisfactory bread was not acceptable.

Eight years later, one morning in 2019, Hisham left his apartment in a Cairo neighborhood to get bread. By this time, subsidized bread was no longer in short supply. But its significance had not waned; it was still a central part of daily sustenance for most Egyptian families, especially at a time when other costs of living were escalating. At the bakery that sells subsidized bread, Hisham handed over his ration card and requested twenty loaves of bread for his family of four. These round, flat loaves are made from a mix of domestic and imported wheat, procured by the government from Egyptian farmers and international grain traders, stored in silos, milled, and distributed to bakeries as flour. As the server placed the loaves on the counter, Hisham picked up each one to check it. He handed back a couple of loaves that were slightly burnt and another that had a tear in it, asking for replacements. He then laid the loaves to cool for a few moments on the hood of a car parked nearby, before stacking them carefully in his bag. He took the bread back to his apartment, where his wife prepared breakfast, placing a pile of bread on the table next to bowls of stewed fava beans and pickles. The family began to eat.

Eighty miles away in the village of Warda in Fayoum Governorate, Marwa rose early. She took a large metal bowl and the sack of unrefined flour ground from her family's wheat harvest the previous year. She mixed flour, salt, and yeast, then added water by the cup until it came together into a dough, which she kneaded. Leaving the dough to rise, she and her daughter spread a mat on the floor and covered it with bran. When the dough was ready, she divided it into balls, dipping her hands in oil, taking out a handful and throwing it between her hands a few times, then placing it on the mat and pressing down slightly to form a dome. She lit her gas oven. Picking up the first mound of dough, now enlarged after resting on the mat, she put it on her matrah—a circular wooden implement with a handle. She tossed the matrah gently up and down, expanding the dough until it reached the edges, forming one of the large round loaves that her family prefers to eat. The bread was ready to bake.

These moments are united by bread and, implicitly, by the wheat from which that bread is made. The first is a moment of exception in which bread deficiencies reverberate as a symbol of popular unrest and dissatisfaction with an autocratic regime. The latter two are moments of normality, one in which a man buys bread, the other in which a woman produces it. The monumental-

ity of overthrowing a nearly thirty-year regime stands in stark contrast to the mundanity of feeding a family. Yet they are linked by bread as a staple food.

This book is about bread and wheat in Egypt. It is about the central role they play in Egyptian daily life, the sense of existential threat tied to the possibility of good bread not being available, and the acts designed to ensure that it is. I introduce the notion of *staple security* to describe a set of practices that seek to secure the continuous supply of a palatable staple on a national, household, or individual level, so as to address anxieties about staple absence and meet desires for staple quality. Staple security is not something that a country or individual has or does not have. Rather, staple security is an ongoing process of ensuring not only that people do not run out of bread but also that they are able to eat bread that they find satisfying. People care about the quality of the wheat and they care about the flavor of the bread. There is a taste to security.

Among Egyptians, there is a prevalent sense that they cannot live without bread, even though physiologically this is not necessarily the case. Bread is a central component of the Egyptian diet, eaten at almost every meal, and often used as a vehicle for eating other foods. It is also inexpensive and so, for poor Egyptians, constitutes a major portion of their caloric intake. From an individual perspective, therefore, not having bread is a threat to one's very being. From the perspective of the Egyptian government, on the other hand, not having bread is a threat to the state's very being. Cheap wheat bread has become an expected part of the state's social contract with its people. Violent protests in the past—in 1977, for instance, when the government tried to increase the price of one kind of bread; in 2008, when there were bread shortages; and in 2011, when revolutionaries took up bread as a central part of their call for change—have underscored how people do not sit idly by when their bread expectations are not met. The absence of good bread carries the risk of political instability.[1]

Hence at the national level the link between wheat, bread, and security is clear. Military symbols abound as politicians talk about procurement campaigns to secure the wheat necessary to produce subsidized bread for the masses, build strategic stores of grain to guard against harvest risks, and call on the army to distribute bread in times of shortage. At a household or individual level, the explicit security discourse fades, but the underlying rationale remains.[2] Individuals are just as concerned with securing their supply of good bread as the state is, whether through carefully handling the bread that they buy each day or growing their own wheat to bake bread.

By connecting disparate realms of action—breeding seeds, altering government bread specifications, planting wheat to make homemade bread, building silos to store imported wheat, standing in line to get a ration card, and freezing

and heating a loaf of bread—this book reveals the multiple practices that go into securing a quality staple food. It connects the labor of policy makers, who frame security planning as their domain, with the less visible security labors of crop scientists working in experimental fields, women preparing bread for a meal, or men making daily trips to the bakeries. It shows how staple security infuses everyday life.

Wheat in Egypt

The field is a half-feddan in size, roughly half an acre, full of a golden-headed crop.[3] It is bordered by an irrigation ditch on one side, which intermittently feeds the crop with water from the Nile that has traveled here through a network of canals. Across the drainage ditch on the other side of the field is a small patch of Egyptian clover, which the farmer is cultivating as fodder for his livestock, a field of onions, and a cluster of olive trees. Then there is another field of gold. Small fields like this, which dominate the patchwork landscape of Egypt's cultivated land through the winter season, are the source of roughly half the nation's wheat (figure I.1).

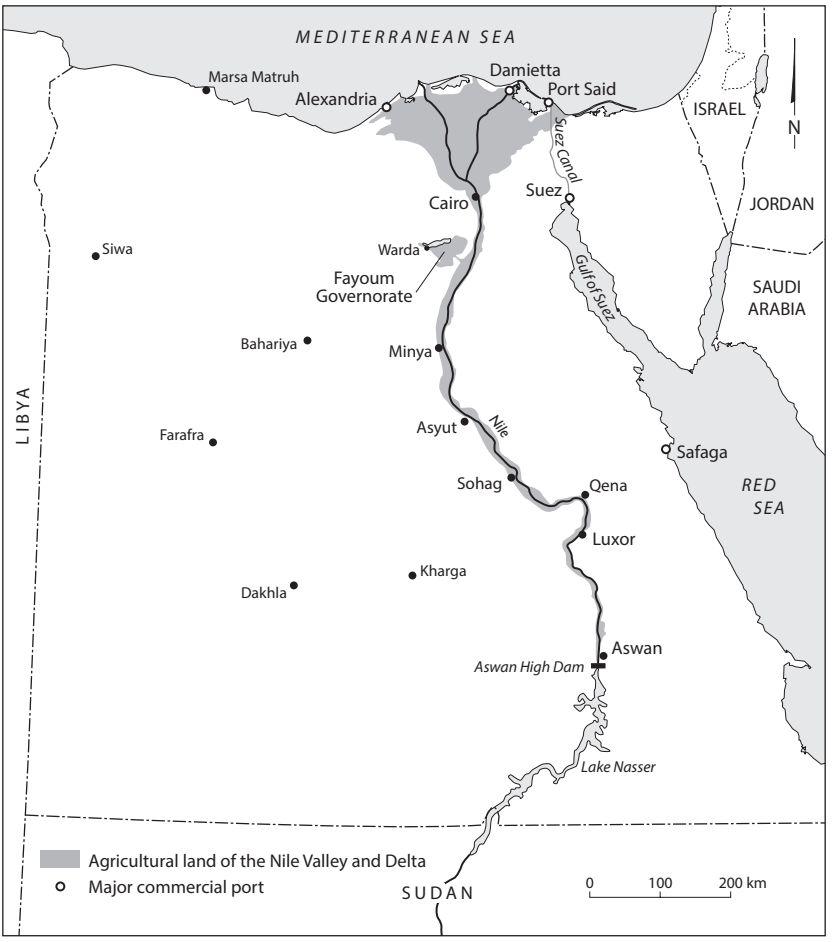
Wheat is Egypt's most widely grown winter crop, planted in October through December and harvested in April and May.[4] It is grown primarily on small-scale irrigated farms, characteristic of an agricultural landscape in which almost two thirds (63 percent) of farms are less than 1 feddan in size and 99 percent are less than 10 feddans (McGill et al. 2015: 13).[5] All farmers use modern varieties, some replanting seeds saved from the previous year's harvest, others obtaining certified seeds from the agricultural ministry.[6] The varieties grown are mostly bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), although some farmers in the south grow durum (*Triticum turgidum*), which is used in the pasta industry as well as for bread production. In the Nile Delta, the triangle-shaped alluvial plain north of Cairo, many of the farms are mechanized. In the Nile Valley, the narrow strip of cultivated land along the river between the Aswan High Dam and Cairo, much of the sowing and harvesting is still done by hand. Outside the Nile Valley and Delta, wheat is grown on some large-scale, highly mechanized farms in the reclaimed desert lands, but these constitute just a small part (11 percent) of the area in wheat cultivation (map I.1).[7]

Egypt has a long history of wheat cultivation, dating back thousands of years. During the period of Ottoman rule, Egypt was often referred to as the granary of the empire, exporting wheat to other areas under Ottoman rule and to Europe (Richards 1986). In the nineteenth century, cotton eclipsed wheat as the country's most valuable export, the latter increasingly unable to compete

FIGURE I.1. Wheat field, Fayoum. Photograph by the author.

on international markets with grain produced elsewhere. Farmers continued to grow wheat, though, and the cultivated area remained stable through the early decades of the British occupation and into the twentieth century. The flow of wheat in and out of Egypt also continued. Around 1900, Egypt became a net importer of cereals. This was due not to a decline in domestic production but to an increase in demand; population growth and rising living standards led more families to purchase imported flour, which at this stage many saw as being higher in quality (Owen 1969). Over subsequent decades, through the First World War, the depression of the 1930s, and the Second World War, the balance between wheat flowing in and out of the country fluctuated, with shifting government policies that variously permitted and banned exports, taxed and subsidized imports (Scobie 1981).

Government interventions in the wheat sector continued after the formation of the Egyptian Arab Republic in 1953. While wheat remained a widely cultivated winter crop, exports of wheat ceased and imports comprised an increasing proportion of the nation's wheat consumption (Scobie 1981, Kherallah et al. 2000).[8] This was stimulated by the flow of subsidized wheat from the United States after 1954, with the exception of the 1966–74 period, when the



MAP 1.1. Egypt. Map by Bill Nelson.

United States suspended this aid (Burns 1985, Dethier and Funk 1987, Mitchell 2002, Iyer 2014). By the mid-1980s, Egypt was producing only a fifth of its wheat. The situation changed with agricultural liberalization in the 1990s, and the partial removal of controls on wheat production and trade (Sadowski 1991, Fletcher 1996). Domestic wheat production rebounded to its current level of meeting about half the country's needs. Today, wheat is grown on 4.3 million small farms (McGill et al. 2015: 6).

The ministry that oversees production of this crop, which the government considers to be a strategic crop (mahsul stratigi), is the Ministry of Agriculture

and Land Reclamation (wizarat al-zira'a wa istislah al-aradi). This ministry gathers statistics on cultivated area and production totals and, through its extension program, offers advice on seed choice and fertilization rates. It also has a research wing, the Agricultural Research Center, which occupies a large compound opposite Cairo University in the Giza district of Cairo. On this network of experimental fields, far removed from the clamor of the streets beyond the gates, as well as at several research stations around the country, government scientists are developing new varieties of wheat and managing the production and distribution of seeds to farmers.

At harvest time, when the millions of small farmers around the country cut their wheat, many keep a portion of the harvest for their own use. This wheat they grind in village mills into a coarse flour, which they use to make homemade bread. The remainder they sell, either directly or via a local trader, to one of the three government agencies responsible for domestic wheat procurement. (It is illegal for private companies to purchase Egyptian-grown wheat.) The government-procured wheat is ground into 82 percent extraction flour, meaning that 18 percent of its weight is reduced in the milling process as the grain's germ and bran is removed.[9] This milling is done in both public mills and private mills that have been contracted by the government for this purpose. The 82 percent extraction flour is then used for the production of the government-subsidized baladi bread (figure I.2). Thus the two potential endpoints for the wheat grown in small fields throughout the Nile Valley and Delta are loaves of homemade bread eaten within the home, or loaves of government-subsidized bread, baked and sold at small bakeries scattered around the country's cities and villages. None of the wheat grown in Egypt today is exported. But while no wheat leaves Egypt through its ports, considerable wheat enters Egypt at these points.

Half of Egypt's wheat arrives in the country as grain on bulk carrier cargo ships. Wheat is Egypt's most important agricultural import by far.[10] Global commodity trading firms and regionally specialized traders manage the import process, connecting sellers of wheat (these days, primarily countries around the Black Sea) with buyers within Egypt. About half of this imported wheat is destined for use in the subsidized bread program. This wheat is purchased by the General Authority for Supply Commodities (al-hai'a al-'ama lil-sila' al-tamwiniya), which is part of the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade (wizarat al-tamwin wa al-tigara al-dakhiliya).[11] It is then distributed to mills for processing into 82 percent extraction flour. The remainder of the imported wheat is bought by the private sector and processed in private industrial mills into a more refined,

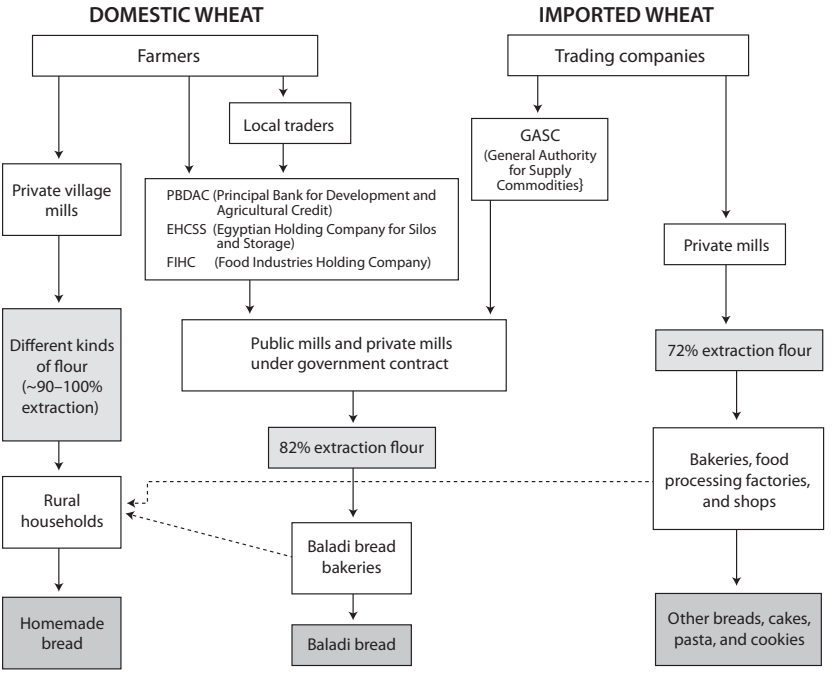


FIGURE I.2. Egypt's wheat sector. Figure by Bill Nelson.

Note: The dotted lines indicate relatively small flows of wheat. They represent the fact that women baking in rural homes sometimes add refined flour in small amounts to their homemade bread, and, if they do not have sufficient wheat from their own harvest, they use 82 percent extraction flour as a supplement (see chapter 5). This diagram notably does not include flows of wheat that are illegal but still take place (such as some farmers' sale of wheat to private mills that produce 72 percent flour), nor does it include other parts of the wheat grain and crop (such as the bran or straw), which may be put to a number of different uses.

72 percent extraction flour, which is used in the production of other kinds of bread, as well as in foods like pasta, cakes, and cookies (see figure I.2).

My ethnography focuses on the two ends of this production and consumption process: the cultivation and import of wheat and the baking and eating of bread. I dwell less on intermediary sites, like the ports through which imported wheat passes or the flour mills where grain is transformed into flour, in large part due to my inability to access these politically sensitive sites.[12] Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the role that practices taking place in these multiple locales play in shaping the staple that Egyptians eat on a daily basis.

Bread in Egypt

A young girl knocks on my door. "Come," she says. "Come eat dinner." It is an evening in March 2008, and I am living in the village of Warda in Fayoum Governorate. I walk over to my neighbor's house and sit on the floor around a low, round table, joining the male members of the household who are already seated. The mother and her daughters are in the room next door, crouched beside a double gas burner on the floor, finishing their meal preparations. They start bringing in bowls of steaming food and place them on the table. It is a Sunday, market day, and the one day of the week when the family always eats meat and rice.[13] The women place a large dish of rice in the center and several bowls of mulukhiya (a thick broth made from finely chopped jute leaves), potatoes stewed in tomatoes, and salad around the table for the family to eat from communally. One of the girls brings in a pile of homemade bread—large, round, flat loaves, which the women have cut into quarters. She passes a quarter or two to each person. Another girl places a few spoons around the table. The girls squeeze in, finding space between the men. Everyone begins to eat, pulling pieces off the bread in front of them and dipping it in the mulukhiya, or using a fold of the bread to pick up salad or a chunk of potato. The mother selects a piece of chicken for everyone from the large pan at her side, carefully choosing an appropriate part and size for each recipient. As she passes around the meat, each person places their chunk in front of them, on top of their bread.[14]

The cooked dishes being served are special foods, eaten just once a week. Yet despite the meat and rice on the table, bread remains a core component of the meal. It is not just an object of consumption, but a tool for eating. There are spoons, but the family members use them only occasionally—to eat a mouthful of rice or have a spoonful of soup. The rest of the time, they use the bread to dip in or scoop up the other foods. Eating takes on a rhythm. Pull off a piece of bread, look around the table for the next desired item, dip the bread, eat and repeat.[15] The bread acts not only as an implement for conveying food to the mouth but also for holding food. Whereas bread can be placed directly on the table, tablecloth, or serving tray, other foods—like meat or, in more everyday meals, a boiled egg or taʿmiya, the Egyptian version of falafel—cannot; the bread therefore acts as a buffer.[16] Over the course of the meal, the bread plate becomes smaller, as the person eating tears pieces off the edge, and the food on top also becomes smaller, until eventually it is gone and the bread can be eaten in its entirety. Throughout the meal, the mother monitors consumption around the table, keeping an eye on any bowls that might need refilling and passing around bread as people approach the end of theirs. This is part of her

FIGURE I.3. Meal with bread. Photograph by the author.

care for the family, a way of demonstrating bounty at the family level. Those eating should always have bread in front of them.

Many Egyptians, like the family that I lived next to in 2007–8, eat bread three times a day. Sometimes, as in the meal described above, bread is an accompaniment; other times, like breakfast and lunch, it is the main constituent, eaten with just a small amount of cheese, beans, or egg (figure I.3). The prevalence of bread is evident within the home, in the daily meals consumed by family members within most Egyptian households. It is evident, also, outside the home, in small slivers of outdoor space. Walking around Cairo one might see, for instance, a group of policemen on a street corner, sitting on the ground, a bowl of ful (stewed fava beans) between them, using bread to eat from the shared dish; store employees pausing their work to breakfast on some falafel and salad with bread; several female street vendors clustered around a plastic container of food, using bread to scoop it up; a boy sitting at a makeshift table fashioned out of a crate with a loaf of bread, some cheese, a pile of arugula, and a tomato.

Not only do Egyptians eat bread frequently, but they eat bread in quantities that "experts" sometimes describe as excessive.[17] One agricultural specialist working for an international agency in Cairo commented to me that bread consumption in Egypt is "too high." He illustrated his point with some figures.

"In Egypt," he said, "people eat 160 to 190 or 200 kg of bread [per year], possibly more." He talked with confidence, evidently not feeling the need to explain the source of his figures or the basis on which he was judging this level of consumption to be inappropriate. "This contrasts," he said, "with the average worldwide, in the countries where bread is a staple, of 90 kg." A nutritionist I spoke with, who was working on a donor-funded food security project, described her work with rural households on fruit and vegetable production and rearing small animals. When I asked whether they were looking at bread as part of household food security she looked surprised at my question. "We want to *decrease* the amount of bread people are eating," she said. In her view, consumption of a calorie-rich, micronutrient-poor food runs counter to food security objectives. Indeed, one study of nutritional standards in Egypt, which ranks among the countries with the highest rates of obesity (a third of the female adult population is classified as obese), concluded that high bread consumption is tied to overnutrition in both urban and rural areas (Ecker et al. 2016).

Looking at bread through a nutritional lens, however, misses the broader social context of bread consumption and the role it plays in people's daily lives, as I discuss further below. Bread is also not singular, but rather a food that comes in multiple forms. When I arrived in Cairo for my initial fieldwork for this project, I was keen to observe one type of bread in particular: the government-subsidized bread, typically referred to as baladi bread, which costs a mere five piasters for a loaf, less than half of a US cent.[18] On my first walks through the city searching for baladi bread, though, I could not find it. I saw many bakeries, but none that seemed to be selling subsidized bread. I saw many people buying bread, but no one using the ration card that is required to get bread at a subsidized price. I saw bread packaged for sale in grocery stores that was marked as baladi bread, and plastic bags of loaves labeled high-quality baladi bread (khubz baladi fakhir) for sale in news kiosks, but none of these cost just five piasters. I also saw lots of bread that I found difficult to identify. Arranged on tables under road bypasses, being carried on palm-frond trays, balanced on the heads of bicycle delivery men weaving through the traffic—this bread looked like subsidized bread, but it was circulating far from the bakeries that sell such bread.

The bakeries that produce baladi bread are not always easy to locate. Privately owned but licensed by the government, these bakeries are small premises, typically comprising just a couple of rooms in a larger building, with a separate booth or window where sales take place.[19] Some of the production process is now mechanized, like dough mixing and baking; other parts, like the shaping of the loaves, are still done manually. These bakeries are unevenly

distributed throughout the city, more common in poorer neighborhoods than affluent ones, sometimes located on narrow alleyways, unmarked by large signs. They are identifiable by the ration cards that are used to complete the purchase at these bakeries alone, which might be clasped in the hands of customers waiting in line or passed over the counter to a vendor who places it in a small, handheld card reader. But cards and card readers are not always highly visible. Thus while baladi bread bakeries are well known to people living in a neighborhood, to visitors they are not readily apparent.

In addition, there are a number of round, flat, pita-style breads in Egypt that are similar to the government-subsidized bread but differ slightly in color, size, and texture (table I.1). Some of these, like siyahi and shami breads, are frequently discussed in policy reports and newspaper articles about Egypt's bread. But whereas in those texts the distinctions appear clear cut—siyahi bread being lighter and less bran-rich than baladi; shami a white bread made from refined flour—in an urban landscape full of breads, these distinctions are far from clear.

This observational challenge is compounded by a linguistic one. There are, in fact, a number of breads that people describe as baladi bread (hence the labeling on the packaged breads I saw for sale during my first visit). The word *baladi* has national associations—it can mean *my country*, or *belonging to the country*—and class connotations: it can be a descriptor for something that is cheap or low-class. *Baladi* can also mean traditional, rural, or local and so can be used to describe any bread that is perceived as holding one of these characteristics. Any round, flat bread that is relatively dark and has a noticeable bran content may be called baladi bread. For clarity, in this book I reserve the term *baladi bread* for the government-subsidized bread. This is the most common name for this bread, although there are other terms that people sometimes use, including the literal translation "subsidized bread" (al-ʿaish al-mudaʿam) or "the bread of the [Ministry of] Supply" (ʿaish al-tamwin), after the governmental body that manages the subsidy program.

The apparent lack of baladi bread during my early walks around Cairo was less a reflection of the bread's limited circulation than an outcome of me not knowing where to look. Baladi bread is Egypt's most widely eaten bread by far (figure I.4). Around 70–80 percent of Egyptians have a ration card that entitles them to baladi bread at the five piaster price (the rest of the population has to buy bread at a higher price).[20] These figures do not necessarily reflect consumption patterns—some of those entitled to baladi bread may prefer to bake their own, especially in rural areas, or may choose occasionally to buy other breads. They do, however, speak to this bread's prevalence. Baladi bread is not just a food of the very poor; it is eaten not only by those below the poverty line

TABLE I.1
Breads Commonly Found in Cairo

Baladi bread (ʿaish baladi or ʿaish al-tamwin)	This round, flat bread is made with 82 percent extraction flour. It is made and sold by private bakeries, which are licensed by the government. Egyptians with ration cards are entitled to up to five loaves a day at the price of 0.05EGP/loaf.
Siyahi bread (ʿaish siyahi)	This bread is similar in appearance to baladi bread, but it is made with a more refined 72 percent flour and less bran and so is whiter in color. Despite its name, which means "tourist bread," this bread is readily available from small bakeries around urban areas, as well as from stands in the street, and is widely eaten by Egyptians.
Shami bread (ʿaish shami)	This bread is similar to breads found in countries like Lebanon and Syria (the name means "Levantine bread"). It is a round, flat bread that is distinctly whiter than baladi and siyahi breads. It is made from 72 percent extraction flour. It is sold from bakeries and stands in the street.
Fino bread (ʿaish fino)	This bread, sold from bakeries, is a soft white roll. It is made from a refined flour and has a slightly sweet taste.
Homemade bread (ʿaish beiti)	This is a bread, sold by women on the streets of Cairo, that is homemade rather than produced in a bakery. It is a round, flat bread, larger than baladi bread. Sometimes women mix millet and corn flour into this wheat bread.
Miladin bread (ʿaish miladin)	This is a round, crunchy bread made from drying out siyahi bread. It is sold from bakeries and stands on the street.
Diet bread (ʿaish sin or ʿaish regim)	This is a very dark, round, flat bread. It has a high bran content and is hard. Bakeries sell this bread by weight.
Roqaq	This is a large, round, white bread made from refined flour, often with added milk and sugar. The bread is thin and hard, like a cracker. It is sold from bakeries. Homemade versions are also sold on the street.
Bitau	This is a round, flat bread made with a mix of maize, sorghum, and wheat flour and flavored with fenugreek. It is homemade and sold by the side of the road, usually in a dry form that can be stored; the loaves are then dampened to soften before eating.
Specialty breads	Specialty breads can be found in bakeries in upscale neighborhoods, including various forms of sliced bread (typically called *toast*) and baguettes.

Note: I do not give price indications for the nonsubsidized breads because they fluctuate widely both in time (they have increased considerably since the 2016 currency devaluation) and space (the same bread can sell for different prices in different neighborhoods and depending on who is buying it). As of 2019, most nonsubsidized breads cost around 1EGP a loaf, and subsidized bread bakeries sold baladi bread to those without ration cards for 0.5EGP a loaf. Outside of Cairo there are also regionally specialized breads, such as the ʿaish shamsi found in southern Egypt.

FIGURE 1.4. At the bakery, with baladi bread. Photograph by Mariam Taher.

(30 percent of the population) but also by the vulnerable and lower middle classes above it. Nor is it just a food of the cities; it is eaten both in urban areas (where 43 percent of the population lives) and in the countryside.[21] This bread, decent in taste, cheap in price, is something Egyptians expect the state to deliver, perhaps because over the span of most Egyptians' lifetimes, it has always done so.[22] To those who consume it, baladi bread provides about 52 percent of daily calorie requirements and 70 percent of carbohydrate and protein needs, as well as some vitamins and minerals (Hassan-Wassef 2012: 13). To most Egyptians, baladi bread is a staple.

Staple—Security—Staple Security

Staple Foods

Staple foods have long featured in ethnographies of everyday life, from early discussions of millet consumption among the Bemba (Richards 1932) and milk among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940) to later studies that highlighted the role of potatoes and barley in Highland Ecuador (Weismantel 1988), bananas for the Haya (Weiss 1996), and rice in Japan (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Scholars have

also probed the question of how various staples—including maize (McCann 2007), rice (Carney 2002), bread (Andrae and Beckman 1985, Head, Atchison, and Gates 2012), potatoes (Earle 2018), milk (Du Puis 2002), and sugar (Mintz 1985)—came to be established in particular places and among particular peoples over time. Yet there has been little recent theorization of the meaning, provisioning, and consumption of staple foods. Here, therefore, I draw together elements from the literature with my own research to identify the core elements of what defines a staple as a type of food.

One day in 2008 I was driving through Fayoum Governorate with a community organizer from the Ministry of Irrigation. It was a time of severe baladi bread shortages, long lines at bakeries, and high flour prices. As was frequently the case during this period, the conversation within the car turned to bread. "I didn't bring bread for my children today," commented the driver. "They won't have anything to eat." His words were striking. For by this he did not mean that his children, literally, would not have anything to eat all day; rather, that without bread, their meals would be incomplete.

This comment captures the first characteristic of a staple. *A staple is a food that defines a meal.* In the absence of the staple, there is a sense that a meal is not a meal or that someone has not properly eaten. Liberians talk about not having eaten unless they have eaten rice (Trapp 2016); some Ghanaians say the same thing about a day without fufu (a thick dough made from cassava and plantains) (Williams-Forson 2010). Moroccans consider bread a food that must be available at every meal (Graf 2018). In Japan, the full-stomach feeling cannot be achieved without rice, no matter what else is consumed (Allison 1991, Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Although the French are eating less bread than they did in the past, in France there is still a common understanding that a real meal requires bread (Kaplan 2006, Gnaba 2011). In rural Mexico, corn tortillas are a fundamental part of the main meal of the day (Wynne 2015).

As defining features of a meal, staples may be foods that are eaten in the largest quantities, as is suggested by Avieli's (2012: 22) description of the two to three bowls of rice served to adults in a Hoianese meal (a local cuisine within Vietnam), or by the figures of baladi bread constituting over half people's caloric needs. But this is not necessarily the case (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Rather, there is something about a staple food, whatever the quantities in which it is consumed, that is central to the experience of feeling satiated. As my neighbor in the village of Warda once said to me, "It's impossible to last a day without bread. Bread is something fundamental [asasi]." Another Egyptian I spoke with, who comes from a wealthier background and lives in Cairo, described himself as being "addicted" to bread. Having developed diabetes, he can no longer eat

three to five loaves a day as he used to, but still, he says, "If a day passes and I don't eat a loaf or one and a half loaves, I don't feel right."

The association between staples and meals is evident in linguistic markers. In Rincón Zapotec, for instance, the invitation to eat, "gáuru yht," means, "Let's eat tortillas" (González 2001). In Vietnam, the term for cooked rice (com) is also the word for a meal in general; the Vietnamese refer to the three meals of the day as morning rice, noon rice, and evening rice (Gorman 2019). In the Singida region of Tanzania, the grains with which people make the staple food ugali (a stiff porridge) are referred to simply as food (chakula) (Phillips 2018). Thus a staple is the most foundational of foods. It is a food that should be present in the house and should be present on the table.

At the same time, the everyday significance of a staple is shaped by lines of social difference, including class, ethnicity, gender, and age. The staple food among the poor may not be the same as that among the rich. In Weismantel's (1988) study of Highland Ecuador, for example, she described the staple of the Indigenous as being barley, whereas for white families it was rice. Among the Gadaba ethnic group in India, while both rice and millet are eaten, rice is a higher-status food, associated with lowland peoples (Berger 2018). In Egypt, although bread is eaten across classes, it tends to be less prominent in the diets of those who can easily afford alternative staples like rice or pasta. Across generations and gender, too, there are differences in staple consumption. One young woman who lives in Cairo, for instance, talked about how she does not eat bread with every meal. She ensures that bread is on the table at every meal, however, because otherwise her father, who is accustomed to eating bread three times a day, will ask for it. While this woman tied her limited bread consumption to her personal preferences, I have heard several women, but never any men, talk about limiting their bread consumption so as to keep their weight down (this does not seem to be a prevalent theme, though, unlike in other countries where low-carbohydrate diets have become popular).

Beyond their importance as central items of consumption, staples are also distinct in the ways in which they are typically eaten. *A staple is a vehicle for or accompaniment to other foods*, as opposed to a food that is eaten on its own. In Richards's (1932) classic account, for example, she describes how a satisfactory meal for the Bemba must comprise two elements—a thick millet porridge and a relish of vegetables, meat, or fish. In his study of the Haya in northwestern Tanzania, Weiss (1996) describes a similar pattern of meals comprising a starch staple and vegetable relish. Among the Zapotec in Mexico, a meal consists of maize tortillas alongside beans, soup, or vegetables (González 2001). In southeastern China, an ordinary meal is made up of rice and trimmings (Oxfeld

2017). This is in part a matter of preferred taste pairings, but it is also because the staple may be used as a tool for eating the other foods. Bread may be torn and used to dip in a soup, as was illustrated in the meal I shared with my neighbors; stiff maize porridge formed into a ball and used to scoop up a stew; or a tortilla rolled and used to hold other ingredients. The staple also enables other foods to be stretched further, reducing the burden of obtaining more expensive goods. A small bowl of fermented cheese and some olives can become a meal for six if accompanied by bread.

Hence the staple is often the background food to another more varied part of a meal. But this does not mean that the staple's flavor is unimportant. Staples are highly differentiated by taste. Sometimes these variations derive from the crop variety—as, for example, in the nuanced taste distinctions between different varieties of potatoes (Keleman Saxena 2017) or rice ([Seung-Joon] Lee 2011, Temudo 2011, Avieli 2012). In other cases, the varying tastes and associated preferences stem from how the staple is processed and transformed into food. Among Yucatec Maya women in Mexico, for instance, there is a common "taste hierarchy," which positions home-cooked tortillas made from locally grown and ground corn as preferable to home-prepared tortillas made from purchased dough, which in turn are preferable to tortillas made on tortilla machines (Wynne 2015). In Singida, Tanzania, middle-class and urban residents tend to prefer soft white ugali made from hulled maize kernels, whereas rural residents prefer a coarser, denser ugali made with unhulled maize, which they find more filling (Phillips 2018). In terms of bread, its taste depends not only to the grain from which it is made but the leavening agent that makes it rise and the way in which it is baked. A bread leavened with sourdough starter tastes quite different from one made with instant yeast ([Jessica] Lee 2011). The breads featured in this book, however, are almost all made with wheat from similar varieties and commercially produced instant yeast. The primary source of taste differentiation in Egyptian wheat breads, therefore, is the degree of refinement of the flour that goes into them.

The third characteristic of a staple is that *a staple is a food that carries a deep symbolic resonance*. In Egypt, this is evident in a statement people commonly make about the link between bread and life. Chatting with a Cairo taxi driver, I mention that I am interested in bread. "In Egypt," he responds, "bread is life" (fi Masr, al-khubz ʿaish). In an interview with a program officer from an international organization, he tells me, "Very simply, bread is the life of Egyptians. They call it ʿaish, which means life." When the Minister of Supply gives a press conference about the subsidized bread program, he notes, "Egypt is the *only* country that calls bread ʿaish, because it is the basis of life (ʿaish) and living

(maʿisha)."[23] This repeated statement is in part a reference to the fact that Egypt is the only place in the Arabic-speaking world where the colloquial term for bread is *ʿaish* rather than *khubz*. But it is also a reference to the centrality of bread in Egyptian lives.[24]

While many foods have layers of symbolic meaning, there is something notable about the particular kinds of symbolism associated with foods that are staples. In Russia, for example, the potato is a symbol of survival; grown primarily on small household plots, it is an emblem of the population's hard work (Ries 2009). The tortilla in Mexico has traditionally been seen not only as a filling, cheap, and plentiful food, but one that holds "symbolic weight as an emblem of culture, comfort, and identity" (Gálvez 2018: 74). Sometimes, there is a spiritual dimension to the symbolism. To the Jola people of West Africa, for instance, rice is sacred (Davidson 2015). Bread, too, has sacred associations in both Islam and Christianity, the major religions in the world regions that have the longest histories of bread consumption (Jacob [1944] 2014, Hafez 1994, Kanafani-Zahar 1997, Laudan 2013).[25] In many parts of the world, these religious connotations permeate everyday practices of handling bread, imbuing in those practices a form of deference toward the bread. Such customs range from not wasting bread to picking up any bread that falls to the floor so that it is not stepped on, ensuring that a loaf is never turned upside down, or kissing loaves (Jacob [1944] 2014: 145–46, Hafez 1994, Kanafani-Zahar 1997, Kaplan 1997). Palestinians, for example, often place unwanted bread in outdoor spaces so that it may be reused by others, rather than throwing it away (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, chapter 4).[26]

This respect for bread is reflected in the careful ways in which Egyptians handle bread within their homes.[27] Although those who buy bread tend to do so on a regular basis, they do not necessarily go to the bakery every day. Since most Egyptian breads do not have preservatives in them, they require particular care to maintain their quality over time.[28] When people buy bread for several days, those who have fridge-top freezers often freeze some loaves. Before eating, some wrap the bread in cloth and place it on the counter to defrost; others heat it. In addition, just as in Palestine, it is considered morally wrong to throw away bread. Within a home, for instance, women typically collect uneaten quarters or half loaves at the end of a meal, dust them off, and place them back in the bag to be served again. They even save small scraps to feed to household livestock, in rural areas, or in urban areas, to sell to the informal traders who buy stale bread for animal feed. In public spaces, too, it is common to see discarded bread on walls or ledges—a plastic bag with a couple of

loaves in it, for example, or a half-eaten loaf laid bare. This is partly an offering to needy urban residents who might wish to consume this bread, and partly a result of the fact that it is considered unethical to throw a respected item of food on the ground.

These three characteristics of staples—foods that are defining features of meals, that accompany other foods, and that hold symbolic resonance—are not necessarily present in all cases. In the United States, for instance, although there is no clearly identifiable staple, there are still some foods that hold staple-like qualities.[29] Take, for example, milk and bread. The rush on these items in grocery stores when storms are approaching is indicative of how many people perceive them as basic items that they should have in their homes (even as a growing number of Americans choose not to eat them) (Du Puis 2002, Bobrow-Strain 2012). So while these foods may not hold the same kind of symbolism as the breads discussed in this book, they are foods that, like a staple, many American households are used to having on hand.

Staples are not fixed in time, as Mintz (1985) showed in his study of how sugar shifted from being a luxury for the elites to a staple among the working classes in England. Yet staples are associated with stability, with the consistent rhythm of the everyday, the meeting of basic needs. Any interruption in that stability, therefore—when people do not have enough of a staple to stave off their hunger, or cannot access a staple that tastes pleasing—carries a sense of threat. This is how a staple becomes a matter of security.

Security

For much of the latter part of the twentieth century, security was the domain of scholars working in the field of security studies. Emerging out of political science and international relations, this body of work focused primarily on organized violence and the strategies deployed to protect against military threats. Since the 1990s, however, security has been taken up in anthropology, geography, and related disciplines in response to changes in the political, economic, and geopolitical order after the Cold War. With the attacks of 9/11 and the launching of the war on terror, security has become a central motif of political rule. A number of anthropologists have looked at processes of militarization, surveillance practices, counterterrorism operations, and cultures of militarism that have emerged in the name of security (Lutz 2002, Maguire, Frois, and Zurawski 2014, Masco 2014, Samimian-Darash and Stalcup 2017, Gusterson and Besteman 2019, Rubaii 2021). They have also examined the mounting fear of racial, ethnic, and foreign others as security has come to the

fore of the public imagination, as well as associated practices of policing (Fassin 2013, Diphoorn 2016), migration control (Feldman 2011, Besteman 2020), and residential segregation (Low 2003).[30]

Yet despite the scholarly interest in the current "security moment" (Goldstein 2010: 487), security is not a new concern. It can take on many forms, extending far beyond the military domain. Goldstein argues, for instance, that security is a characteristic of neoliberalism—a tool of state formation and governance that capitalizes on the fractures of inequality produced through free-market policies.[31] Such a multifaceted understanding of security is evident in Gusterson and Besteman's (2009) analysis of insecurity in the United States, which highlights the multiple unsettling forces that shape American lives, including anxieties about jobs, health insurance, and debt. These concerns about economic security are not discrete from their military counterparts but, rather, closely intertwined: the desire to secure supplies of economic resources has often been at the root of military interventions, just as military contexts have often shaped economic priorities.

When it comes to the Middle East, however, these broader conceptualizations of security are frequently obscured by an overdetermined global discourse on terrorism. Such is the weight of Cold War legacies and Anglo-American policy interests that security in the Middle East tends to center on what Abboud and his colleagues describe as "well-rehearsed framings of sectarianisms, conflict, underdevelopment and terrorism" (2018: 274).[32] But security does not only mean countering extremism, preventing terror attacks, or reinforcing borders in times of hostility. Moreover, such a vision of security says little about how security and insecurity are being experienced in the region by both state and nonstate actors. Speaking to Abboud et al.'s call to move beyond these prevalent framings, I adopt security as a framework in this book not because of my own preexisting interest in the concept, as someone who has lived in the United States through the contemporary "security moment." Rather, I draw on the notion of security because this is the lens through which, either explicitly or implicitly, the Egyptians with whom I conducted my research see bread and wheat.

Glück and Low define security as "a modality of constructing danger, enemies, fear, and anxiety, and the measures taken to guard against such constructed threats" (2017: 282). This definition points to two dimensions of security: an affective domain and a concrete one (Low and Maguire 2019). On the one hand, there is the imaginary of a threat, which evokes an emotional response. On the other hand, there are the infrastructural measures that are taken to counter that threat, which have a material form. The significance of

the former—the framing as a threat—is that it justifies the latter, a particular form of action. At the same time, actions can either enhance or diminish the sense of threat, underscoring the deep interconnections between security's affect and practice.

Security is associated with threats of a certain magnitude. What generates this sense of danger, fear, and anxiety is not just any kind of threat, but an existential threat, something that is understood as threatening the very existence of a state or society. It is also a constructed threat. As Masco writes, "What a national community fears and how it responds to those fears are cultural forms as well as technologically mediated processes, the basis for a domestic politics as well as a geopolitics" (2014: 3). In the United States, for instance, given the high rate of car ownership and limited public transportation options, many people see gasoline as a staple. As a consequence, many Americans worry about gas prices going up and the national reliance on foreign oil (Huber 2009). In Egypt, there are similar concerns about wheat and bread.[33] Many Egyptians worry about bread prices going up and the national reliance on foreign wheat. The fact that it is possible to live without bread is immaterial; security is not about the assessment of "real" dangers, it is about the construction of a "collective understanding of something as a particular kind of danger, an existential threat to state, society, 'our way of life'" (Goldstein 2010: 492). Such national-level concerns generate what Masco (2014) terms "national security affect"—an atmosphere of anxiety stemming from the perception that a country is under threat, which in turn legitimizes a particular course of state-level action.

But the affective domain of security is not only linked to the possibility of a national crisis. Personal livelihood concerns also produce "ordinary affects" (Stewart 2007), which emerge in intimate spaces or mundane moments. Woven into day-to-day interactions, these security affects are tied to those things that an individual or household experience as directly threatening, such as a fear of crime that makes its way into dinner party conversations (Lemanski 2012) or the sense of hopelessness that emerges in the face of multiple precarities (Allison 2013). Affect encompasses multiple scaled domains, from the collective consciousness of the national body to an individual's mind, body, and emotion (Skoggard and Waterston 2015).

Within the literature on security, fear is a common trope. This is not, however, security's sole affective register. As scholars who have added a parenthetical prefix to the term—(*in*)security—have sought to demonstrate, insecurity and security are closely interlinked states. The duality of security and insecurity creates openings not only for negative affects like anxiety but also for positive affects like comfort (El Dardiry and Hermez 2020). Within an overarching

context of fear, there may be times and places where people experience safety, albeit fleetingly. In the midst of an ongoing conflict, the domestic space and kinship network of an extended family may provide reassurance (Fluri 2011). In a context where buses are associated with the risk of a terror attack, a journey in a car may provide a sense of protection (Ochs 2013).

Security, therefore, is a *state of being*. It is a lived experience of fear and risk, punctuated by moments of refuge, which shapes everyday lives in contrasting ways across lines of social difference. It is a state that is both produced by and productive of varied affective registers.

But security is also a *form of action*; it is the measures taken to guard against perceived threats. The practices through which a range of actors seek to be secure run across scales, from the body to the city to the nation and beyond. They are deployed not just by states but by communities and individuals as they interact with one another and with various branches of the state. Security is not only something practiced at a military checkpoint, in an airport screening, through an encounter with a police officer, or by a border patrol. It is something that becomes normalized in quotidian acts, whether choosing to wear a particular type of clothing (Fluri 2011), turning on a burglar alarm before going to sleep (Low 2003), or navigating a daily commute (Ochs 2013). In some instances, the act may be a conscious form of threat mitigation; other times, it is a ritualized behavior that becomes instinctual. In all cases, security is not a matter of navigating between a binary of being either secure or not secure but, rather, a process of moving along a gradient of possibilities between context-specific understandings of being more or less secure.

My interest in this book is primarily in exploring security as practice. I am attentive to security's affective dimension—the pervasive sense of anxiety about the supply and quality of wheat and bread in Egypt, as well as the moments of reassurance that come from the presence of abundant wheat and good bread. But my data relate mainly to the realm of action—not surprisingly, perhaps, given the difficulty of capturing ethnographically that which is felt or sensed.[34] I examine the ongoing efforts by various individuals and institutions to counter the threat of insufficient or poor-quality wheat and bread. These are not novel threats, defined by a post–Cold War, post-9/11, or post-neoliberal era. Indeed, as Goldstein (2010) points outs, security, broadly conceived, has been a fundamental concern for nations and states since these concepts first came into being. So, too, vagaries in agricultural production have always been something that farmers have had to deal with, and the production and distribution of basic foods has been a matter of concern for states as long as people have been living in cities and not growing their own.

Staple Security

For many scholars and practitioners working on food and agriculture, engagement with questions of security is channeled through the concept of *food security*. In coupling security with food, however, it becomes harnessed to a concept with a particular history, rooted in international conferences, negotiated definitions, and policy approaches. The conceptual dyad of "food security" emerged in the 1970s, when increasing grain prices and limited grain supplies directed policy communities' attention toward how the world's food supply was being distributed and whose needs were being met.[35] Early definitions of food security framed the concept in terms of agricultural production and food availability at a national level, with a central focus on staple grains. Over time, scholars and policy analysts working in this field, inspired by the work of Sen (1983) and others, shifted the concept to a focus, instead, on access to food. They also expanded its scalar dimension, noting the importance of thinking about food security on scales beyond the nation, from the individual and household through to the global (Jarosz 2011). With increasing focus on nutritional deprivation, practitioners further widened the frame from cereal staples to consider the full spectrum of nutritional needs. In addition, they recognized that food security is not only a matter of having enough food but having enough food that people like to eat (Appendini and Quijada 2016). Today, academics and development practitioners working on food security commonly turn to a definition from the 1996 World Food Summit, which described food security as a state in which "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."[36]

This conceptualization of food security has been taken up by a number of scholars working in the Middle East. Public policy analyses have surveyed how food security strategies have evolved in different countries of the region (Woertz 2013, Babar and Mirgani 2014, Harrigan 2014). Economists have debated the efficacy of particular food security policies, such as the investment in grain storage (Wright and Cafiero 2011, Larson et al. 2013). Several scholars have looked beyond the regional and national scale to probe household food security dynamics (Gertel and Kuppinger 1994, Khouri-Dagher 1996). International agencies have also produced a number of reports on the status of food security in Egypt and the Middle East (Breisinger et al. 2012, Maystadt, Trinh Tah, and Breisinger 2012, WFP 2013).

Yet despite the prevalence of food security within the scholarly literature and as a foundation for development planning, I argue that the concept has two

key limitations. First, even with the inclusion of the word *security* in the term, explorations of security itself are remarkably absent from work on food security. Scholars of food security seldom discuss the links between this form of security and other securities, for example. There is little recognition of the fact that limiting food access through siege or sanctions can be a way of achieving military security objectives (see, for example, Winter 2016). Nor is there much discussion of the popular unrest that can result from food shortages or inadequacies, or how concerns about such instability may underpin political leaders' interests in food security. In focusing on a state of being in which all people have access to all the food that they need, food security sheds scant light on what might happen in its absence. A bland definition about people being able to access food stands in stark contrast to a square in downtown Cairo thronging with protestors.

Moreover, while food security scholars certainly recognize that access to food is mediated by physical, economic, and social variables, and consider the vulnerabilities associated with rising prices or reliance on imports, they pay less attention to the deep anxieties that accompany these vulnerabilities and efforts to obtain particular foods. In other words, the affective domain of the security imaginary—the way in which a particular threat is conceived and how that shapes everyday life, as well as the sense of comfort that comes when that threat is removed, even if only momentarily—is largely missing. The concept of food security offers little insight, therefore, into why Egyptian newspapers would report each cargo ship that arrives at a port loaded with wheat, politicians would deploy military metaphors of strategic storage and grain procurement campaigns, or fathers would fret over their children not having bread, even when there is plenty of other food for them to eat.

Second, food security is not very helpful for thinking about staples specifically, even though cereal grains were the focus of much of the early work in this field (Shaw 2007). An increasing awareness of the importance of a variety of food types has shifted the focus of food security to "nutritious" foods that meet "dietary needs." It is impossible to be food secure only by eating bread. This was brought home to me during my fieldwork for this book, when I found that none of my interviewees working on bread were talking about food security (al-amn al-ghidhaʾi) and none of my interviewees working on food security were talking about bread. For those concerned about food security, the taste of security is a combination of vegetables, fruits, grains, and meat, not a piece of flavorful bread. Similarly, few of the works on food security in the Middle East and Egypt include more than passing references to bread. Indeed, some would

say that from a food security perspective, Egyptians eat too much bread (Ecker et al. 2016).

Thus, the concept of food security fails to capture how staple foods can become items of particular security concern, both to households and to the nation. Nothing about the notion of all people at all times having access to safe and nutritious food would explain why my entry into a bakery, for example, would be perceived as a security threat. Yet this is what I found the one time I tried to enter one. Accompanied by Hisham, a taxi driver I have known for a long time, I visited a bakery in his Cairo neighborhood. The workers were chatty and showed us around, but when the supervisor saw us she was very suspicious, insisting on taking Hisham's name and number, even calling while we stood there to check that the number was correct. She clearly felt threatened by my presence—without an official chaperone or formal paperwork documenting the purpose of my visit—as a non-Egyptian in a site of production for a subsidized staple. At the household level, too, people talk about their need for sufficient good bread in a manner different from that in which they talk about their ability to access other foods. There is a disconnect, therefore, between how people experience security related to particular foods and how policy scholars define food security.

The concept of food security has also come under critique by scholars working on food sovereignty. Emerging from peasant movements in Latin America, food sovereignty highlights questions of power, control, and rights in the production and consumption of food (see, for example, Patel 2009, Wittman 2011). Yet in spite of its peasant roots, food sovereignty has been taken up in Egypt as a largely elite urban project.[37] Egypt's small-scale farmers are not talking about food sovereignty (siyada ghidhaʾiya). The educated, wealthy Cairo residents advancing the concept are focused primarily on local seeds and the importance of challenging the hegemony of multinational seed corporations. For wheat, though, this is not a dominant concern, given that the wheat seeds being planted in Egypt are not imported from private companies but bred locally by the public sector (albeit from germplasm that is far from local, as I discuss in chapter 1). Food sovereignty activists are also concerned about the preservation of local foods—in the case of bread, Egypt's regional bread varieties (see chapter 5). However, in focusing their attention on these rare bread forms, they sideline the baladi bread that is consumed by the majority of Egyptians. Food sovereignty, conceptualized in this way, is removed from the day-to-day concerns of feeding a household. While work on food sovereignty has valuably critiqued food security for its failure to acknowledge the importance of justice

and control over food supplies, security still matters as an important affective, bureaucratic, and political practice.

I use the term *staple security* to move beyond work on food security and its conceptual associations to probe the nexus of *food and security*. This concept focuses the attention on staple foods, since these foods have an affective valence that other foods do not. The existential importance of staples to people's daily lives and to the legitimacy of the state is why their absence or substandard quality poses such a threat. Staple security speaks to the special kind of security that staple foods both require and produce.

The first component of staple security is its affective dimension: the feelings that surround the potential absence of a quality staple. In the case of Vietnam, for example, Gorman (2019) describes the high degree of anxiety that permeates Vietnamese society around the rice supply and possibility of shortages. There are similar fears in Egypt over whether the nation could run out of wheat and bread.

From the perspective of the state, anxieties over staple foods are tied to the possibility of protest. The figure of the food riot—of people taking to the streets to protest hunger—brings into dramatic relief the link between food and security. Described by Patel and McMichael (2009: 9) as "one of the oldest forms of collective action," food riots have occurred throughout history. In diverse political and economic contexts, rising prices and poor-quality food have been a focus of popular unrest (Tilly 1971, McFarland 1985, Engel 1997, Orlove 1997, Francks 2003, Hossain and Scott-Villiers 2017). The food riot, in its varied manifestations, underscores how state legitimacy may be tied to the accessibility and quality of basic foods. It demonstrates the threat that food insufficiency or inadequacy can pose to national security, challenging the stability of a ruling regime.

In Egypt, the bread riot occupies a central place in the political imagination. Whether in politicians' speeches, conversations with people engaged in food policy, or newspaper articles, references to past bread riots in Egypt are common. People recall these riots—just as I did in the opening of this book—as a way of signaling the significance of this staple food. They use them to explain why, as Egyptian politicians are fond of saying, the provision of cheap bread is a "red line" that cannot be crossed.[38] For on the other side of that line is the specter of the riot.

Yet as a number of scholars have shown, food riots are seldom about food alone. Rather, they are typically the outcome of complex and historically rooted political-economic relations (Bohstedt 2008, Wolford and Nehring 2013). As Thompson (1971) argued in his seminal study, instead of being "rebellions of the belly," the food riot is more an expression of people's sense that the

"moral economy" has been breached—that ruling parties have failed to fulfill their social obligation to meet certain basic needs of the poor. Hence while many commentators branded the protests that broke out around the world in 2007 and 2008 during the global food crisis as food riots, they were not so much about the high price of food as about people's perceptions that their entitlements were not being met and their frustration at the lack of political recourse (Patel and McMichael 2009). Similarly, Sadiki (2000) argues that, over the latter decades of the twentieth century, the uprisings across the Arab World that were labeled bread riots were in fact motivated by the rising cost of a number of commodities, as well as dissatisfaction with structural inequality and incompetent and illegitimate political rule.

In the case of Egypt, the bread riots most commonly recalled are those that occurred in January 1977. According to the common narrative, these protests—which are referred to as the intifadat al-khubz—broke out around the country in response to rising bread prices.[39] They were an expression of resistance to the Sadat government's proposal to cut back the bread subsidy as part of a package of reforms introduced to meet conditions attached to a loan from the International Monetary Fund. But the reforms also involved the reduction of other subsidies, including those on cooking oil and rice, and the freezing of state employee benefits and pay increases. In addition, the only bread price the government sought to raise was that of a white roll (fino), which was subsidized at the time; it made no change in the price of the widely eaten baladi bread. The protests, therefore, were not just about bread.

This book *is*, however, just about bread. Using the bread riot as a lens through which to approach questions of food and security hence provides only partial insight. The possibility of popular protest might loom large for government officials managing a subsidized bread program, but this is not the only level of security concern associated with the absence of quality bread. A political leader's fear of the bread riot is distinct from the unsettled feeling a parent has when there is no bread left in a home, a mother's frustration at her inability to bake the homemade bread her family prefers because she cannot afford the flour, or a family's vulnerability when they are unable to access subsidized bread and so have to rely on other people's donated bread. Such affective registers of staple security are linked not to abstract national threats but to very immediate individual livelihood concerns. They resonate with the stress that Garth (2020) describes in her account of Cubans' daily efforts to acquire food for a "decent meal," of which starchy staples comprise a key part. Garth describes how the dwindling of rice rations toward the end of the month impacts people's affective state, even when they still have pasta or other carbohydrates

on hand. Recounting the experience of one middle-class resident of Santiago, Garth writes, "It may be somewhat acceptable to have one meal without rice, but when she has to go multiple meals or even days without rice she begins to panic" (2020: 48).

There is a class dimension to this anxiety. The presence of bread, a cheap and filling food, matters in the daily lives of Egypt's poor and middle-class majority in a way that it does not matter to Egyptian elites. There is also a taste dimension to this anxiety. The quality of bread, and the sensorial engagement of handling and eating it, is part of how people understand themselves to be more or less secure. Bread does not equal calories, just like being secure is not the same as being alive. Hence fear is not the only affect at work here. There is also the pleasure of eating a meal with freshly baked bread, the yearning, among some, for breads that taste of rural childhoods, or the satisfaction of bringing home good bread for a family. Staple security is as much about the desire for palatable bread as it is about the fear of no bread.

The second dimension of staple security is the concrete actions that are taken to ensure that people have a good staple to eat. Garth (2020) describes, for instance, the daily struggles of low-income residents of Santiago to acquire the rice, beans, and tubers that form the center of a decent meal, involving time-consuming journeys around the city to seek good prices, borrowing from neighbors and relatives, and tapping into the black market. Gorman (2019) recounts the lines forming outside of supermarkets in Ho Chi Minh City as rice prices rose in 2008, people stocking up on rice in fear of scarcity. These practices are not separate from the affective dimension of security but, rather, interwoven with it. This is evident in Ries's (2009) discussion of the common practice in Russia of storing enough potatoes to last through the winter, even among families that buy rather than grow them. One urban dweller explains how both the act of growing potatoes on a small household plot and storing them in large quantities helps her feel more secure: "You can trust that if everything *really* falls apart, you have the skills and habits to survive. And, you can look at your potatoes in the apartment hallway in dark November, and *see* your food for the winter" (Ries 2009: 200).[40]

Throughout this book, I describe similar efforts by Egyptians to ensure that they have access to sufficient decent bread. For some, this means growing and storing their own wheat and turning it into bread. For others, it means standing in lines at bureaucratic offices to get a working ration card and making daily trips to the bakery to get bread, relying on others to grow, trade, and store wheat, mill it into flour, and transform it into bread. Once bread is in the home, further everyday labors prevent wastage and preserve quality. The nature of these practices

is closely tied to the materiality of the staples in question—grain has to be stored in a particular way because of its tendency to rot otherwise; loaves of hot bread must be handled with care or they will crumple, tear, or become soggy. These are some of the individual practices of staple security.

Staple security is also the purview of states, which have long mobilized to ensure that cities and armies have staples to eat. As Erkal writes, "An essential measure of government legitimacy and good governance in preindustrial societies, whether city-states or empires, was public food provisioning—most crucially, the supply of grain" (2020: 17). Thus, actions to maintain the supply of wheat and bread in Egypt have deep historical roots. In pharaonic times, for example, the state stored grain in large granaries to provide a buffer against variations in cereal productivity, in an effort to guarantee the consistent availability of bread (Murray 2000). The Ottoman administration of Egypt established and maintained a network of storage facilities, labor, and shipping routes, specifically designed to move grain within the country to supply the cities, and out of the country to supply the empire (Mikhail 2011).

In the contemporary era, many governments have taken actions to ensure that their populations have staples to eat. Some have promoted national self-sufficiency in staple crops as a way to mitigate vulnerability to volatile international market prices that could endanger the country's staple supply (Francks 2003, Clapp 2017, Zhang 2017, Gorman 2019). This goal of self-sufficiency is supply-focused; it is about ensuring that there is enough of a given grain within the country. It is a popular theme that has been taken up by successive Egyptian regimes. In 2009, the Ministry of Agriculture launched a strategy to raise wheat self-sufficiency from its current level of around 55 percent to 80 percent by the year 2030 (see chapter 1). After the 2011 revolution, President Morsi talked of Egypt becoming self-sufficient in wheat in just four years.[41] His successor, President al-Sisi, has stepped back from this ambitious goal but maintained a commitment to raising the self-sufficiency level. Whether or not wheat self-sufficiency is feasible, adopting a self-sufficiency target marks a government's dedication to securing the nation's wheat supply.

The other policy approach focuses on access, subsidizing staple foods as a way of ensuring that all members of the population are able to get them at an affordable price (Alderman, Gentilini, and Yemstov 2018). In India, the Public Distribution System provides subsidized wheat and rice to 800 million people (Bhattacharya, Falco, and Puri 2018); in Indonesia, the Rastra program provides subsidized rice to 62 million people (Timmer, Hastuti, and Sumarto 2018); in Jordan, until 2018, the government provided highly subsidized bread (Martínez 2017, 2018a). Even in the midst of conflict, during the Syrian Civil

War, the Assad regime, the Free Syrian Army, and armed Islamist groups have sought to provide subsidized bread in the areas they control, seeing the provision of bread as a way to prove their state-worthiness and bolster their authority among local populations (Martínez and Eng 2017, Martínez 2020). In Egypt, the government's commitment to providing cheap bread through its subsidy program has transcended major shifts in governance throughout the postindependence period, from President Nasser (1956–70), to Sadat (1970–81), Mubarak (1981–2011), Morsi (2012–13), and now Sisi (2014–).[42] Although Sisi's government has been cutting back a number of subsidies in recent years under the terms of a 2016 IMF loan, it has not made equivalent cuts to the bread subsidy.[43] This shows the lengths to which governments as well as individuals are willing to go to guarantee widespread access to a quality staple.

These practices, taken by governments and individuals, lead to momentary states of security, in which feelings of anxiety, fear, or yearning give way to those of reassurance, comfort, and stability. This sense of stability may come from there being more loaves on a table than family members can eat, a spreadsheet with figures showing the national silos full of grain, possession of a ration card that guarantees access to cheap bread, sacks of grain stored within a household, or a field of bountiful wheat. But even at such moments, the threat has not evaporated. The temporal horizons of security range from a day to a few months, but a horizon is ever present. The loaves will be eaten, the silo stores will be depleted, a ration card might stop working, the grain will be turned into flour, and the harvest could be disrupted by poor weather. The intensity of the labor may wax and wane, but the need to work for a good staple is a constant.

Staple security therefore describes a set of practices through which states, households, and individuals seek to secure the continuous supply of a palatable staple so as to address anxieties about staple absence and meet desires for staple quality. I use this concept to draw attention to a common dynamic that spans the varied domains I discuss in this book, but the staple security that features in these domains is not the same. The devices of staple security range from high-yielding seeds to procurement prices, bread specifications, grain quality standards, electronic ration cards, and shared baking labor. The metrics of success include yields per hectare, the amount of wheat harvested, silo capacities, contaminant percentages, bread prices, and preservation of traditional forms of bread production. The meanings attached to staple security are shaped by the social and political fields in which those acts are practiced. A woman who takes wheat harvested by her family to mill and bake into bread sees the grain differently from the breeder who develops new varieties, the government official who

procures wheat, the silo operator who stores grain, and the trader who buys and sells it. The grain they work with is variously a source of a family's food, an object of scientific study, a matter of national security, and a way of accruing profits. A father buying subsidized bread for his household thinks about this bread in a different way from the owner of the private bakery that produces it, who in turn sees it differently from the official charged with setting its specifications. The loaf of subsidized bread they interact with is variously a source of cheap calories, a way to make a living, and a mechanism for preventing popular unrest. Staple security is a singular concept, but its manifestations are multiple.

The value of staple security lies in how it captures multiscaled practices and their affective resonances. Global supply chains are part of the narrative, given that they deliver half the wheat that goes into Egypt's bread. The security of the supply chain—the smooth functioning of a transnational set of infrastructures, labor practices, and regulatory procedures—is critical to the arrival of this wheat at Egyptian ports (Cowen 2014). But staple security goes beyond the singular scalar vision and logic of supply chain security, linking a large complex system of grain transport around the world and a vast food subsidy program with small individual acts, like a woman drying homemade loaves so that they last longer. This is not just a matter of bringing together a cluster of disparate things. Rather, my analysis moves from fields to ports to silos to bakeries to spaces within a home because it is through the everyday practices taking place at these sites—practices that are in some ways similar but also quite different—that the feeling of security reaches the bellies of the Egyptian people.

While my analysis is specific to Egypt, this story is not unique. There are many countries where staple foods hold a comparable degree of significance and many staples that have generated comparable levels of concern. The concept of staple security can, therefore, inform understandings of countries beyond Egypt and staples beyond bread. In addition, staple security has broader resonance for thinking about other environmental resources that are commonly framed in terms of security, like energy security and water security, and that are essential to life. It raises questions of what it might mean to approach these resource securities, too, less as states of being and more as modes of practice that are underpinned by historically rooted anxieties, deeply embedded in politics, and contingent on quotidian labor. Furthermore, in disaggregating the category of food to focus on staples specifically, staple security invites reflection on what insights might be gained from dismantling other resources that come to be matters of security concern. I return to develop these points in the conclusion.

Methods

I am walking through a Cairo neighborhood. It is December 2016 and I am looking closely for bread. In my head, I am making a mental list of observations, which I will later turn into written fieldnotes. What bread are people carrying? Where is bread being sold? How is bread being eaten? In my arms, I am holding a squirmy child, my eleven-month-old son Oscar. Newly walking, he strains against my arms, wanting to run. He cannot understand why I am not putting him down. He does not see the broken sidewalk, impassable with trees, parked cars, and cracked pavement. He does not appreciate how close the cars, motorbikes, and minibus taxis are skimming by the pedestrians as they walk down the road. He does not recognize that he and his mother lack the skill of longtime residents in easily navigating Cairo streets. I find a small patch where he can run—the forecourt to a metro station. I put him down just as a crowd of people is coming off a train. He runs up to a man, a stranger, and raises his arms in the air, his intent clear. The man picks him up with a smile. "Habibi [my darling]," he says. Oscar beams. The man brings a smiling child back to me and I feel a flash of happiness at the joys of sharing a moment in my fieldsite with my son.

I have worked in Egypt since 2007. My first book, *Cultivating the Nile: The Everyday Politics of Water in Egypt*, drew on the year of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Egypt in 2007–8 as a doctoral student, as well as on follow-up trips in 2009 and 2011. This work was based in the village that I call Warda, in the western part of Fayoum Governorate, about three hours southwest of Cairo, where I lived in 2007–8.[44] Fayoum lies just west of the Nile Valley, its agricultural land irrigated by Nile waters through a network of canals (see map I.1). The village of Warda has around three thousand residents, many of whom are engaged in farming. It is also a village where a number of Cairo intellectuals, artists, and expatriates have weekend homes, which is the reason why I was able to live there without arousing the attention of the security authorities, who are wary of foreigners spending extended periods in rural areas outside the tourist zones. This makes the village in some ways anomalous. Many households have at least one member working in the construction of new villas, as house guards or gardeners, or catering to a growing number of mostly Egyptian day-trippers. But farmers having diverse income sources is not in itself uncommon, and most of these households also grow wheat and bake bread. My fieldnotes from this earlier fieldwork, therefore, constitute one of my sources of data for this book; my long-term experience working in Egypt comprises its ethnographic foundation.

By the time I began this project in 2015, however, I had two children, aged five and two, and was pregnant with my third. Although many ethnographers have reflected on how various aspects of their positionality and identity have shaped their data gathering, relatively few have written about how being a parent has affected their work. There remains a stigma attached to acknowledging that your personal life might influence your research. It is part of the "shadow side of fieldwork" (McLean and Leibing 2007) that is seldom discussed. By not talking about this issue, though, I think we miss opportunities to think through creative methodological approaches for balancing fieldwork with looking after children, caring for aging parents, or myriad personal responsibilities that might tie us to places distant from our fieldsites. I outline here, therefore, how I sought to combine my goals of writing a second book and raising, with my husband, three young children. In laying out my strategy, I hope to invite more conversation about methodological approaches that are both productive and accommodating of diverse personal circumstances.[45]

I conducted research for this book in Egypt between 2015 and 2019.[46] On my December 2016 trip, I took my youngest son with me. As other scholars have discussed, taking a child to the field is not only a good way to combine parenting and researching but can add to the research, creating space for different kinds of interactions (Cassell 1987, Flinn and Marshall 1998, Cornet and Blumenfield 2016). It was a wonderful experience bringing Oscar with me to Warda and introducing him to people with whom I have built friendships over the years. In a context where there is a strong identification of women with motherhood, it changed my relationships with people in the village for them to see me in a maternal role. But it was also mentally and physically exhausting. Typing up fieldnotes after getting my son into bed was even more tiring than typing up notes after a day of fieldwork on my own. Traveling across Cairo was challenging when I had to consider my willingness to take a child in a taxi without a car seat. Having a conversation in a rural home was tricky when also chasing after my toddler, who was heading for the gas burner on the floor where our tea water was being boiled. Assessing my comfort level with the security situation after a bomb in Cairo killed twenty-nine people was more complicated when I had to consider the safety of my son as well as myself. So in the absence of a broader support network of family or childcare in Egypt, and given that there are less mobile parts of my family, I decided to adopt a different approach in researching this book.[47]

Between 2015 and 2019, I made six research trips to Egypt. These were short (ranging from ten days to three weeks), but they allowed me to conduct interviews in Cairo with a number of people working on wheat policy, involved with

the subsidized bread program, and working within various food and agricultural organizations. Some of those I interviewed I knew from my first period of fieldwork, so we were able to step into a rapport from the outset. Others were new contacts, but in a few cases I met with them multiple times over successive visits, gradually generating a greater ease of interaction. During each of these trips, I also returned to Warda, where I built on the strong relationships with several farming households that I have established since 2007 to talk more about their wheat cultivation, home baking, and bread consumption practices. In the context of my longer engagement in Egypt, time spent in the country, and knowledge of the language, this approach provided valuable data, even if the time frame limited the scope for the kinds of chance encounters that can be ethnographically revealing. To gain some insight into the world of grain trading, I also attended the 2017 Global Grain Middle East meeting in Dubai, where I conducted participant observation and informal interviews with Egyptian and non-Egyptian grain traders.

Throughout my fieldwork in Egypt, there were some sites that remained inaccessible to me. My experience attempting to enter a baladi bread bakery with Hisham, referenced above, left me wary of trying again, for fear of endangering my contacts or getting in trouble with the authorities, particularly at a time of heightened political tensions.[48] My attempts to visit an agricultural research station where scientists are working on breeding new wheat varieties were also in vain. I corresponded with an Egyptian breeder, who invited me to visit his station when I was in Egypt in August 2015. Three days before my visit, though, he emailed to say that his director had told him that I had first to get permission from a senior official in the Agricultural Research Institute. I duly made an appointment with this official, but when I arrived for it, he was not there. Instead, I was met by three other senior officials, who were cautious and cool toward me. After brief introductions, they ended our conversation saying that they could not talk with me unless I had a letter from the Department of Foreign Relations within the ministry. I went to that office, but the person in charge refused to speak to me. When I was instructed that I would have to send a request on headed paper listing all the people I wanted to meet and the data I wanted to gather, along with a copy of my passport, I decided that not only was this line of research unlikely to be feasible, it was unwise to pursue it further. Bakeries, agricultural research stations, flour mills, cargo ships, or grain silos might not be places that readers immediately associate with security, but in Egypt these are politically sensitive sites—sites in which the presence of a foreign researcher would raise questions that could put those who facilitated her presence in a dangerous situation. The gaps in my data, therefore, are in

themselves revealing of the ways in which bread and wheat are tied to security, both in the affective sense of them being things that provoke danger or fear, and in the practical sense of them being things around which various groups actively take measures to guard against threats.

Since I was interested in the history of wheat breeding in Egypt and the subsidized bread program, there was an archival component to my work. I traveled to New York to conduct research at the archives of the Rockefeller Foundation, which has played a major role in funding research and training in wheat breeding around the world. I spent a week in Rome, in the archives of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, which has funded several regional wheat breeding initiatives. I conducted research at the US National Archives, in College Park, Maryland, which has a valuable set of records from the US Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service officers based in the American Embassy in Cairo.

While this research approach provided rich data, I understood from the beginning that it would not allow me to fully explore patterns of bread production and consumption in urban Egypt. I have spent considerable time in Cairo, meeting with government officials, policy experts, and international development practitioners, but I do not have a strong network in any residential neighborhood. Without such a base of established relations, I knew that it would be impossible to gain meaningful information about how urban peoples interact with bread in the context of short-term research trips. I decided, therefore, to work with a Cairo-based research assistant—a practice that has long been a feature of ethnographic fieldwork but one often obscured due to academic norms that privilege single authorship and sustain the myth of the proficient ethnographer as one who works alone (Middleton and Cons 2014). Collaboration, in its varied forms, has always been central to the production of ethnographic knowledge and a topic of much discussion in the literature, from early work in dialogical anthropology (for example, Rabinow [1977] 2007, Crapanzano 1980, Dwyer 1982) to more recent feminist and decolonial texts, which have underscored the critical insights that come from the integration of multiple voices (for example, Harrison 1991, Nagar 2014, Berry et al. 2017). My point here is to acknowledge how collaboration can also be a way to address the structural constraints that researchers may face at particular life stages, limiting access to their field sites.

Mariam Taher, the research assistant I found through a mutual acquaintance, is an Egyptian American who grew up in Cairo. She is from a relatively privileged background and studied overseas, obtaining bachelor's and master's degrees from universities in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. When

we met, she was managing a local foods delicatessen in the upscale neighborhood of Maʿadi. Between August 2015 and June 2017, Mariam conducted participant observation at two baladi bread bakeries in a working-class neighborhood adjacent to Maʿadi.[49] Three to four times a week, she went to these bakeries to buy bread (paying the nonsubsidized price, as she does not have a ration card). Since Mariam also felt the political sensitivity of the baladi bread bakeries, as sites so deeply linked to the governing regime through the subsidy program, she focused on observing other people buying bread and conversations between customers and bakery staff. She did not attempt any more explicit questioning, so as not to draw attention to herself and to maintain her personal safety, a priority we agreed was paramount. Mariam complemented her long-term observations at these two bakeries with occasional visits to bakeries in other parts of Cairo.

The research evolved collaboratively. Each week when Mariam sent me her notes, I wrote back with detailed questions about what she was observing, comments on what she had been doing, and suggestions for what she might look for, to which she then responded. The conversations that emerged in these correspondences became an important part of the data archive. The combined outcome was over one thousand pages of single-spaced typed fieldnotes. During my fieldwork in Egypt, I also visited these bakeries, which provided a helpful visual framework for engaging with this data.

In addition, Mariam kept a journal of bread-related observations. The journal included informal interviews that she conducted with key informants from the working-class neighborhood, as well as interactions concerning bread with members of her own more affluent community of family and friends. Mariam further assisted in a keyword search of seven Arabic-language newspapers, which we chose to gain a diversity in political perspectives.[50] Focusing on the period 2015–18, we used a series of keywords to search through online databases for relevant articles about wheat and bread.[51]

This approach of working with a research assistant proved highly productive for three reasons. The first was Mariam's skills as a researcher. Although she had only limited prior experience conducting fieldwork, Mariam proved an adept ethnographer. The detail of her observations and her ability to communicate what she saw to me through extensive fieldnotes were key to this becoming a valuable source of data. Second, my own experience living and working in Egypt and my command of the language were central to me being able to engage with, understand, and interpret Mariam's data. The final factor was our frequent communication throughout the research process. These conversations not only shaped the way the data collection unfolded, but also

informed my analysis of the data. We coauthored a paper drawing on this research (Barnes and Taher 2019) as well as chapter 4 of this book, which draws largely on data that Mariam collected. The collaboration was mutually productive. Mariam gained from the experience participating in an ethnographic research project—she is now working on her own research as a PhD student in anthropology at Northwestern University—and from the remuneration she received. I gained from the data Mariam gathered, and from the process of talking through our different perspectives on things that we both observed and read.

Together, these varied sources of data offer insights into the perspectives and practices of the multiple parties engaged in producing, trading, and consuming wheat and bread in Egypt. They reveal the complex, and sometimes contradictory, interests that underpin these everyday acts. In illuminating how this staple food features as a quotidian concern, to a nation and to a family, they paint a portrait of staple security.

Notes

PREFACE

1 The name of this village is a pseudonym.

2 At the time there was a cooperative system through which some households in the village purchased bread, but I never fully understood how it operated and it was clear that it was not open to me as a foreigner.

3 This is not to say that bread has received no attention at all in scholarship on Egypt. There are some notable discussions of bread in Mitchell's *Rule of Experts* (2002), for instance, and there have been a number of studies of Egypt's bread subsidy (e.g., Coelli 2010, Kamal 2015, Abdalla and Al-Shawarby 2017). There have also been several surveys of Egypt's regional breads and their modes of preparation, written in both Arabic (Shaʿlan 2002) and English (Davis 1985).

4 In structuring the book in this way, I build on the rich literature on commodity chains, which has demonstrated the value of linking sites of agricultural production and food consumption (e.g., Mintz 1985, Freidberg 2004, West 2012, Tsing 2015).

INTRODUCTION

1 For Egypt's authoritarian regime, protests spark a fear of escalation. Thus, while various forms of public mobilization have increased since the 1990s, so have the state's repressive responses. The Egyptian government's efforts to control protests, through its deployment of the security forces, plainclothes policemen, and hired thugs, speak to its perception of the associated risks (Vairel 2013, Beinin 2015).

2 Security is certainly something that Egyptians discuss on a household or individual basis. The poor and middle-class rural and urban residents with whom I interact talk about security as something that is desirable and that they want from their president. They do not use this terminology, though, when talking about bread.

3 The feddan is the Egyptian measure of area. One feddan is equivalent to 1.04 acres, or 0.42 hectares.

4 Despite its cultivation during the winter, Egyptian farmers grow what is known as spring wheat. Spring wheat varieties, unlike winter wheat varieties, do not require vernalization (a period of sustained cold temperatures) before the head develops. Due to the mild winters in Egypt, these spring varieties can be planted in the fall and harvested in the spring (the same timeframe for the planting of winter wheat in North America, for instance).

5 These statistics are approximations, as there is limited farm-level data collection in Egypt, but they offer a sense of the small-scale nature of most farms in Egypt. Almost all farms in Egypt are irrigated; only along the Mediterranean Coast is rainfall sufficient to support rainfed cultivation.

6 By modern varieties, I mean cultivars developed through scientific breeding over the course of the last century as opposed to varieties developed over centuries through farmer selection, which are known as landraces. According to Egyptian crop scientists, there are no landraces of bread wheat still being cultivated in Egypt. The Agricultural Research Center has samples of thirty-two landraces, though, which government scientists gathered during collection trips in the late 1980s and 1990s and which it is currently examining for potential use in its breeding program (Gharib et al. 2021).

7 Area figures from McGill et al. (2015: 14). Large wheat farms on reclaimed land likely contribute more than 11 percent of production and procurement totals, given their high levels of capital input and lack of losses to consumption.

8 Mitchell (2002) argues that increasing reliance on imported wheat was tied to shifting consumption patterns within Egypt. With growing demand for meat among the more affluent, Egyptian farmers diverted crops they had previously consumed themselves (maize, barley, sorghum) to fodder use, leaving them dependent on wheat bread, demand for which was met, increasingly, through imported wheat (Mitchell 2002: 215–16).

9 The wheat grain has three edible parts—bran (the multilayered skin of the kernel), germ (the embryo), and endosperm (the starchy portion).

10 In 2019, for instance, Egypt's imports of wheat exceeded those of its next largest import, maize, by 29 percent in quantity, 57 percent in expenditure. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAOSTAT database, accessed June 21, 2021, http://www.fao.org/faostat.

11 The General Authority for Supply Commodities (GASC) was established in 1968, in the aftermath of the United States suspending flows of subsidized wheat to Egypt through the PL480 program and subsequent shortages (see chapter 3). The creation of a public authority to procure strategic commodities for the state was part of a broader shift under President Nasser, during the 1950s and 1960s, from a predominantly free market system to a planned economy. At the most expansive point in the food subsidy program in the 1970s, GASC was responsible for buying fifty commodities. During the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, Mubarak's government excluded GASC (along with a number of other economic authorities) from its privatization program in an effort to reassure the public that the country's key assets were not going to be turned into private monopolies (Ikram 2007: 62). Today, GASC remains an example of centralized control within

Egypt's economy, but the government has narrowed its remit; it focuses now only on the procurement of wheat and a few other strategic commodities.

12 For insight into the workings of maritime trade and the infrastructures, legal frameworks, and labor relations that constitute ports (which I touch on only briefly in chapter 3), see Khalili 2020.

13 This family, as with many families in the village, seldom eats meat on other days of the week. Since they use meat broth to cook the rice, they typically do not eat rice on other days either.

14 The scene I describe here takes place in a rural context, but although the bread is different from that eaten in urban areas, the ways of eating it are not.

15 There is a technique to tearing off a piece of bread, folding it into a shape that people sometimes describe as "the ear of a cat," and then using it to pick up the food (Naguib 2015: 114).

16 Taʿmiya is an Egyptian food similar to falafel but made with ground fava beans rather than chickpeas. Given that *falafel* is a more familiar term, this is the word I use to describe taʿmiya in the remainder of the book.

17 Egyptians often refer to the long history of bread consumption, dating back to pharaonic times (see chapter 1). Of course, consumption patterns have not been static over the intervening millennia, but it is difficult to ascertain from the available data how exactly bread consumption has fluctuated. One notable transition, though, is the increasing consumption of wheat bread in the latter half of the twentieth century as farmers increasingly diverted other grains previously used in bread making (maize, barley, sorghum) to fodder usage (Mitchell 2002: 215). Reflecting this shift, per capita wheat consumption (primarily as bread) increased from 112 kg/year in 1970 to 185 kg/year in 1983 (Dethier and Funk 1987).

18 The Egyptian currency is the Egyptian pound, EGP, which is made up of 100 piasters. At the time of writing, in December 2021, 1EGP = $0.06.

19 There are some larger-scale bakeries run by the government and military that produce baladi bread, but the majority (88 percent) of the country's baladi bread is produced in small-scale, privately owned bakeries, which are licensed by the Ministry of Supply (McGill et al. 2015: 60). Some studies of Egypt's bread supply chain have noted that larger bakery operations would bring economies of scale and cost savings to the government (e.g., WFP 2012). The recommended shift toward large-scale production has not been manifest, though, perhaps due to the dense nature of Egypt's urban space and the common practice of daily (or near daily) bread collection on foot, which are better accommodated by smaller and more widely distributed production and sales points.

20 According to Abdalla and Al-Shawarby (2017: 111), the beneficiaries of the baladi bread program represent 85 percent of the total population. This figure declined, however, after the government introduced measures in 2019 to reduce the number of beneficiaries. In 2020, the Minister of Supply announced that 70 million people, or roughly 70 percent of the population, were eligible for subsidized bread ("5 Miliarat EGP taufir baʿd hadhf 10 malayin muwatin min daʿm al-khubz," 2020, *Mada Masr*, April 15). As I discuss in chapter 4, though, there are some people outside the system, without working ration cards, who are still reliant on subsidized bread.

21 These poverty and urbanization figures from Dang and Ianchovichina (2016: 44) and David, El-Mallakh, and Wahba (2019: 16) provide useful indications of general patterns but are shaped by the underlying definitions of poverty levels and urban areas—both of which are matters of considerable controversy in the case of Egypt.

22 This sense of a right to cheap, decent bread resonates with work that has conceptualized such material expectations in terms of citizenship, from Graf's (2018) analysis of poor, recently urbanized Moroccans as "cereal citizens," crafting bread from subsidized flour as a way of creating a sense of belonging, to Anand's (2017) analysis of Mumbai residents and the ways in which they forge "hydraulic citizenship" through their efforts to connect to the city's water supply. Indeed, there is a close parallel between the common discourses of "bread as life" (discussed later in this chapter) and "water as life." Just as Anand shows how water services are one mechanism through which people see the state, so too is the provision of a subsidized staple; the practices he documents through which individuals seek to attain those services in some ways mirror those through which Egyptians seek to attain their bread.

23 A recording of this press conference, given March 7, 2017, is available at eXtra News, "Muʾtamar sahafi li-wazir al-tamwin Dr. Ali Al-Moselhy," video, posted March 7, 2017, accessed June 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toyhWkF18SQ.

24 Egyptian Arabic is not the only language in which there is a link between the words for bread, sustenance, and life (Waines 1987).

25 Just as Davidson (2015) argues in the case of rice, bread could be considered what Mauss (2001) termed a "total social fact" in that it is a phenomenon that cuts across society, connecting social, moral, economic, political, legal, and religious domains (see also Counihan 1984).

26 Another indicator of the symbolic resonance of bread is its positioning within a variety of proverbs. In Egypt, "a bite of bread" (luqmit ʿaish) is a livelihood, "eating bread is bitter" (akl al-ʿaish mur) is a reference to life being tough, and the pairing of "bread and salt" (ʿaish wa malh) represents friendship. Similarly, in Lebanese Arabic dialect, there are numerous proverbs about bread, such as: "He who eats bread is healthy," "The hungry one thinks above all about bread," "A face that does not smile at freshly baked bread" (to describe an aggressive individual), and "He who eats your bread and steps on your foot" (to describe an ungrateful person) (Kanafani-Zaher 1997). In France, a boring experience is "as long as a day without bread"; a person who generates unrealistic expectations "promises more butter than bread" (Kaplan 1997).

27 This mode of interaction has a sacred element both for Muslims, who constitute the majority of the Egyptian population, and Christians, who constitute an estimated 10 percent.

28 There are some sliced breads that are sold in grocery stores, prepackaged and with preservatives, but these are expensive and not widely eaten.

29 It is difficult to make broad statements about American food consumption practices, given the regional variability and differences across social groupings. Beoku-Betts's (1995) study of food preparation and dietary patterns among the

Gullah people of coastal South Carolina and Georgia, for example, contains several striking articulations of rice as a staple within this community. She cites one woman as saying, for instance, "Many people feel that if rice isn't cooked, they haven't eaten." Another explains: "Rice is security. If you have some rice, you'll never starve. It's a bellyful. You should never find a cupboard without it" (Beoku-Betts 1995: 543).

30 Despite the extensive discussion of security in anthropology, geography, and related fields, there has been less among scholars specifically engaging with environmental themes. Within the subdiscipline of environmental anthropology, for example, security has not been a dominant topic of inquiry.

31 For more on the conditions of precarity and forms of dispossession that emerged in Egypt following the expansion of neoliberal markets in the 1980s and 1990s, see Elyachar 2005.

32 Notable exceptions and more nuanced explorations of security in Egypt include Amar's (2013) work on the "human security state" and Grove's (2015) analysis of gendered security and insecurity in Cairo.

33 That is not to say that wheat and bread are the only things Egyptians worry about. They, too, worry about gas prices going up, which affects the cost of fuel for cooking, other market goods, and public transportation.

34 Methodological approaches for studying affect are one of a number of controversies that have emerged in the growing body of work on affect within anthropology and related disciplines. The term itself remains slippery, the distinction between affect and emotion difficult to pin down, and to some, affect represents merely a seductive new framing of old questions. Delving into these theoretical debates is beyond the scope of this book, but for helpful overviews see Skoggard and Waterston 2015, Rutherford 2016.

35 While the 1974 World Food Conference resulted in the first effort by the international aid community to articulate food security as a concept, this work has a longer history, dating back to the 1943 United Nations Conference on Food and Agriculture in Hot Springs, Virginia, which defined "freedom from want" as meaning "a *secure*, an adequate, and a suitable supply of food for every man, woman and child" (Shaw 2007: 3, emphasis added).

36 In the glossary of its *State of Food Insecurity 2001* report, the FAO modified this definition, adding the word *social* to describe a third aspect of access (FAO 2001). Some contemporary analyses, but not all, include this addition in their definition of the concept.

37 A group of urban activists was successful in campaigning for explicit mention of food sovereignty in the new constitution, which was drafted in 2014. According to Article 79 of the constitution: "Each citizen has the right to healthy and sufficient food and clean water. The State shall ensure food resources to all citizens. The State shall also ensure sustainable *food sovereignty* and maintain agricultural biological diversity and types of local plants in order to safeguard the rights of future generations" (Government of Egypt 2014, emphasis added).

38 An article in the state-affiliated newspaper noted, for instance, how "the president has assured numerous times that the loaf of bread is a red line, from the first

moment in which he accepted the responsibility, when security was weak, chaos ruled the streets, and terrorism was hitting us here and there" (Mursi ʿAtallah, 2017, "Kull youm al-khubz khat ahmar!" *Al-Ahram*, March 11).

39 The term *intifada* means, literally, *tremor* or *shaking off*, but in close association with the Palestinian intifadas, it has come to denote a popular uprising against an oppressive regime.

40 Individual efforts to obtain staples are not separate from the geopolitical histories, military regimes, and global trade relations that have shaped and continue to shape nations' food supplies and agricultural production possibilities. Indeed, it is notable that the three examples in this paragraph come from Cuba, Vietnam, and Russia.

41 Sarah McFarlane, 2013, "Egypt's Wheat Problem: How Mursi Jeopardized the Bread Supply," Reuters, July 25.

42 In her discussion of postcolonial political rule in Egypt through to the 2011 revolution, Salem (2020) argues that the distinct feature of Nasser's hegemonic project was that he built sufficient consent to justify the coercive nature of his regime, in part through key interventions in social welfare. While Sadat and Mubarak eroded much of this consent as they introduced neoliberal reforms, the bread subsidy is one consent-building policy that these subsequent regimes sustained.

43 Officials often cite the five-piaster price per loaf, unchanged since 1989, as evidence of their efforts to maintain the bread subsidy even in the face of other expenditure cuts. Yet as I discuss further in chapters 1 and 4, the government has curtailed the program through other means, including reducing the size of the loaf and limiting who is eligible to receive this bread. In August 2021, during the opening of a food production plant, President al-Sisi said that he thought it was time to increase the price of the five-piaster loaf. Despite the flurry of media coverage that this statement generated, as of December 2021 there has been no change. When the Minister of Supply gave a press conference in October 2021 to announce an increase in the price of vegetable oil—the second raise in a year—he allayed fears of any imminent change in bread prices, saying that it would take some time for the government to research and decide a new price for subsidized bread (Omar Fahmy, 2021, "Egypt's Sisi Calls for First Bread Price Rise in Decades," Reuters, August 3; Sarah El Safty, 2021, "Egypt's New Price for Bread Will 'Take Time,' Supply Minister Says," Reuters, October 28).

44 I use pseudonyms for my research site and participants. While the respectful way of addressing someone who is older, particularly in rural areas or in more working-class urban neighborhoods, is in relation to their oldest child (addressing, for example, the mother or father of Ayman as Om Ayman or Abu Ayman), for simplicity's sake, I use first name pseudonyms. For consistency I also omit titles, although the respectful way of addressing experts is with their title and first name (for example, addressing a woman with a PhD, or one trained as an engineer, as Dr. or Engineer Nagwa).

45 This speaks to a broader body of work that has sought new methodological approaches to address the unequal relations of gender, race, and class that shape ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Berry et al. 2017).

46 The bulk of my research for this book took place after President al-Sisi came to power. Many critics have highlighted the authoritarian nature of Sisi's regime, its failure to bring about an improvement in most Egyptians' quality of life, and the unfulfilled dreams of the 2011 revolution. Such critiques are not central themes of this book, however, for two reasons. The first is because they did not feature prominently in my data, perhaps because subsidized bread—and the wheat procurement required to sustain it—is one of the few forms of social support that Sisi's government has not rolled back significantly. The second reason relates to the current political moment and risks associated with open political critique (for more on this, see Malström 2019). The political climate no doubt shaped the perspectives that people were willing to share with me, particularly those with whom I do not have longstanding relationships. Moreover, I am reluctant to write about the few occasions when people did openly criticize the regime in our conversations, given the risk this could pose to them, were they to be identified, and to me, since I hope to continue working in Egypt.

47 My research approach of combining short-term field visits with other sources of data exemplifies the "patchwork ethnography" that Günel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020) call for in recognition of the fact that researchers' lives and personal and professional commitments inevitably shape their ethnographic practice. This methodological approach was contingent on a research budget that could cover multiple airfares to Egypt. I was fortunate to receive generous support from the American Council of Learned Societies, the George A. and Eliza Gardner Howard Foundation, and the University of South Carolina.

48 For a vivid account of the political challenges of conducting fieldwork in Egypt in recent years, see Malström 2019.

49 Readers familiar with Cairo might think of Maʿadi as an upscale neighborhood, popular with expatriates and affluent Cairenes. It is a neighborhood that has tree-lined streets with large villas, expensive apartment blocks with swimming pools, as well as a commercial district dominated by the kinds of Western coffee shops, bars, and interior design stores that characterize wealthy parts of the city. Yet the nature of the neighborhood changes rapidly toward the west, over the train tracks, and north beyond the main commercial district. These more working-class neighborhoods, which are also technically part of Maʿadi district, are where Mariam and I conducted our research.

50 The newspapers we selected were *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Badil*, *Al-Tahrir*, *Al-Wafd*, *Al-Youm al-Sabiʿ*, *Al-Masry al-Youm*, and *Rosa el-Youssef*.

51 For wheat, we searched under qamh (wheat). For bread, we searched under ʿaish (the colloquial term for bread), khubz (bread), and al-khubz al-mudaʿam (subsidized bread). We also searched under al-amn al-ghidhaʾi (food security) and al-iktifaʾ al-dhati (self-sufficiency). In addition to our focused study of the period 2015–18, we did some limited searches of coverage from 2019 and 2020 to check for emerging themes and see if the patterns we had noted from the earlier period were still evident.