

# Capitalism: life on the streets

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Cairo's street vendors are a nuisance, crowding the pavement, blocking pedestrians and disturbing local residents. Sometimes, their feuds break out into open warfare: A clash between two rival families of vendors on Al-Moski Street last year left two dead and 28 wounded.

That battle led the Cairo governorate to crack down. Today, unlicensed vendors are being rounded up, their goods and profits confiscated. Even owners of small, semi-legal shops are being pushed out, offered the chance to "go legit" by purchasing shops in new zones such as Obour Industrial City. Cairo's governor says vendors have a right to make a living, but he wants the streets cleaned up.

Few street vendors or small shop owners qualify for job-creation programs, let alone small-business loans. They make their living on the margins of the business community, buying on credit from small factories and dodgy importers and fighting for market share — often with knives and brass knuckles — on the streets, unlicensed and playing a game of cat and mouse with the police.



## The Dilemma

Mohamed Harb has a dilemma: The very visibility that makes his a prime selling spot in El-Sabteyya, near Ramses Square, also guarantees he will be one of the first to be hit when the police come calling.

"At any moment in time, the authorities can come and ruin my work, taking away all that I've spent so long building up," he says, "But if I move to another [less visible] place, I won't earn as much as I do today."

Harb, 32, moved to Cairo from Sohag as a child. He works six days a week selling hand tools from the back of his Suzuki micro-truck, taking Sundays off. He moves LE 150-200 worth of Chinese- and Korean-made tools a day; each 14-hour shift nets him LE 25 pounds in profit to support a family of six.

It's a respectable trade, Harb says, although he admits he fears the police because he lacks a vendor's license, as do most small retailers at the El-Sabteyya tool and machinery market.

That's not all he lacks: "I have no social or medical insurance," says Harb, who has been selling since age 15.

"I haven't been able to put money aside for the future. I want to open a shop one day, where I can sell tools with less worry."







## The Teacher

Ahmed Ali, 24, wants nothing more than to be a teacher, but he's spent most of his days since graduating from Sohag University's Higher Institute of the Arabic Language selling bananas on consignment out of a Suzuki van. Ramses Square is a favorite haunt, but he travels around downtown in search of a market.

Ali says he works 14-hour days selling bananas because it's more profitable than the alternatives.

"I'm doing this because there are no vacancies at all

as an Arabic teacher," he claims. "I've tried jobs as a salesman, painter and security guard, which are more respectable than selling fruit. But the average income [in those jobs] is around LE 150- 200 per month, and I can earn more than that with bananas."

Ali says he sells 500-600 kilograms of Kalubeyya bananas a day at LE 1.50 per kilo, netting LE 20 daily from the wholesaler. "For now, I'm satisfied with selling bananas, but one day I hope to find a job that involves teaching Arabic."

## The Veteran

He's been selling sunglasses for only three years now, but Mohamed El-Digwy, 52, is a veteran of downtown streets: He's been selling on sidewalks and in alleys since age 10. If you can name it, he's tried to sell it.

"Most of the glasses are from China," he says, "They're the best quality and I have a good selection. It is mainly young students who buy from me."

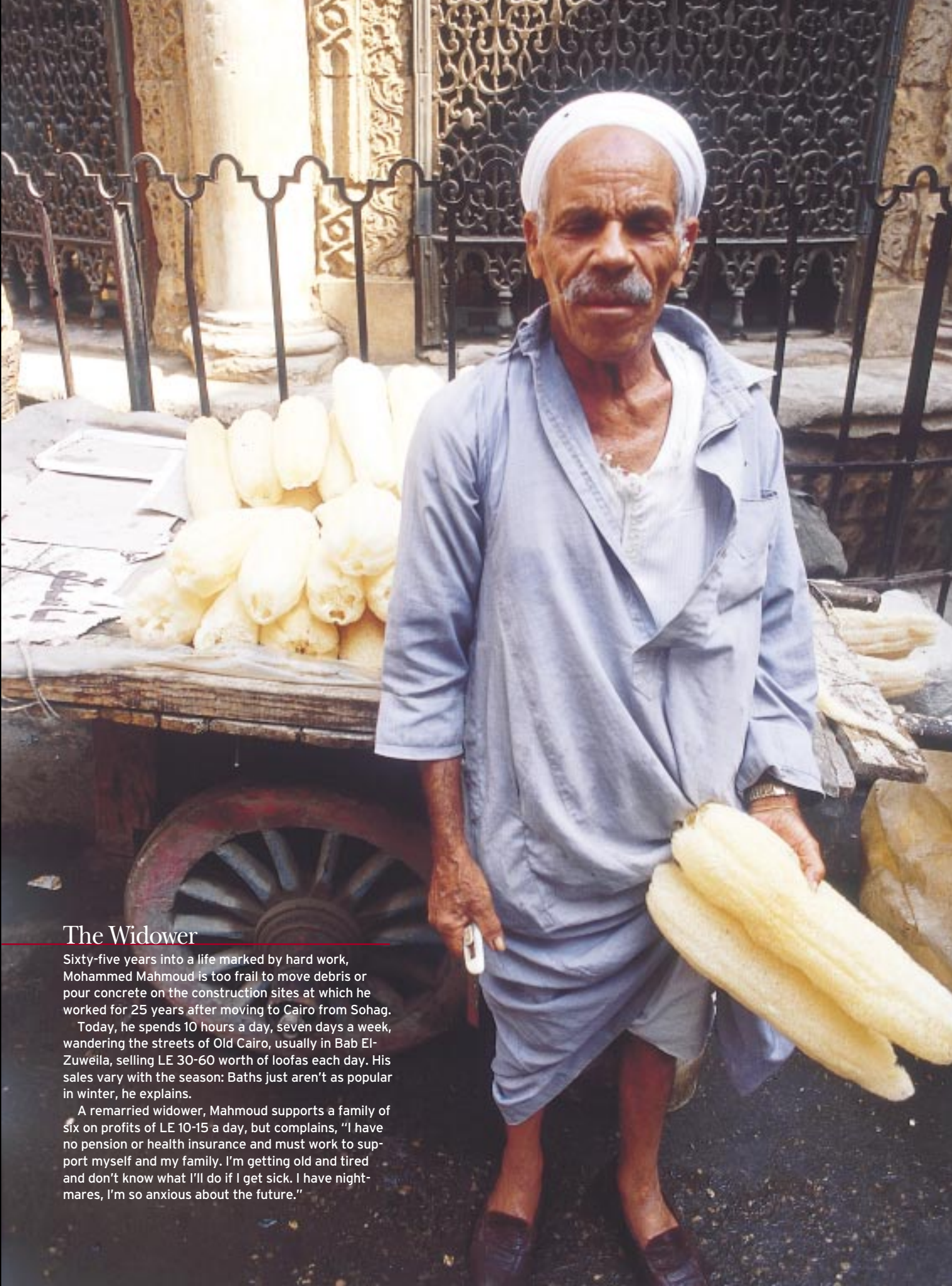
El-Digwy is far more unique than his knock-off wares: He's among the minority of Cairo street vendors who maintain a membership in the Vendors' Syndicate. A member since 1973, he complains that the LE 12 annual fee is too high and says the syndicate is "useless and doesn't support vendors," but he still makes certain he renews his membership each year: His certificate protects him against police crackdowns on illegal sidewalk vendors in Ataba, where he prefers to sell.

Working a 12-13 hour shift Monday through Saturday and a half day on Sunday, El-Digwy says, "I'm not sure what my average income is, but in the high season I can earn around LE 20 a day."

Married with eight children aged 13-25 and already a grandfather, El-Digwy says his biggest worries are "about not having social insurance and a pension."







## The Widower

Sixty-five years into a life marked by hard work, Mohammed Mahmoud is too frail to move debris or pour concrete on the construction sites at which he worked for 25 years after moving to Cairo from Sohag.

Today, he spends 10 hours a day, seven days a week, wandering the streets of Old Cairo, usually in Bab El-Zuweila, selling LE 30-60 worth of loofas each day. His sales vary with the season: Baths just aren't as popular in winter, he explains.

A remarried widower, Mahmoud supports a family of six on profits of LE 10-15 a day, but complains, "I have no pension or health insurance and must work to support myself and my family. I'm getting old and tired and don't know what I'll do if I get sick. I have nightmares, I'm so anxious about the future."



## The Last Of His Breed

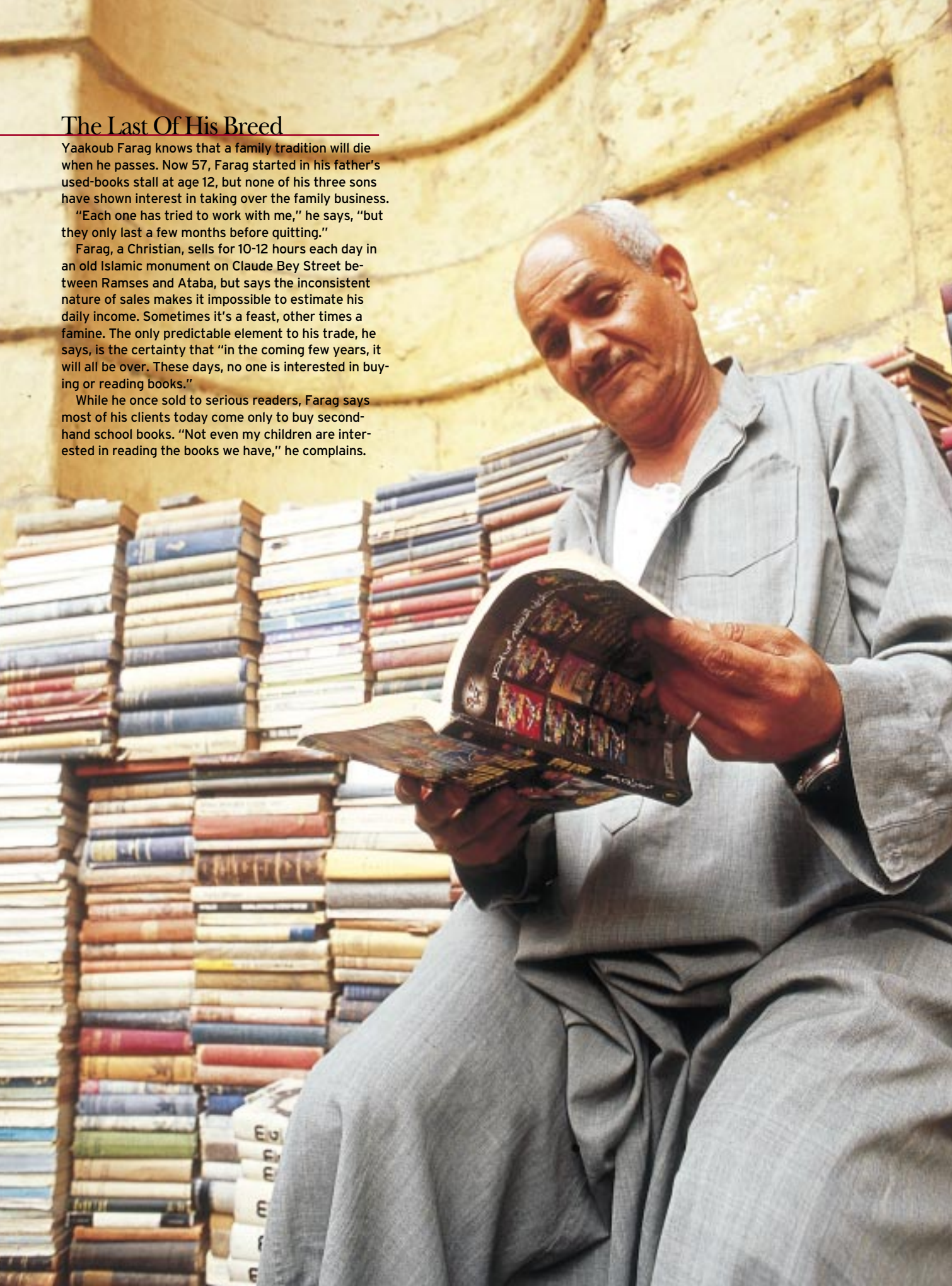
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Yaakoub Farag knows that a family tradition will die when he passes. Now 57, Farag started in his father's used-books stall at age 12, but none of his three sons have shown interest in taking over the family business.

"Each one has tried to work with me," he says, "but they only last a few months before quitting."

Farag, a Christian, sells for 10-12 hours each day in an old Islamic monument on Claude Bey Street between Ramses and Ataba, but says the inconsistent nature of sales makes it impossible to estimate his daily income. Sometimes it's a feast, other times a famine. The only predictable element to his trade, he says, is the certainty that "in the coming few years, it will all be over. These days, no one is interested in buying or reading books."

While he once sold to serious readers, Farag says most of his clients today come only to buy second-hand school books. "Not even my children are interested in reading the books we have," he complains.







## The Cobbler

After 50 years in the business, Zaki Seidhom is still passionate about shoes, even if he's now repairing them instead of making them in his 2-meter-by-2-meter shop in Bab El-Louk. Seidhom started learning his trade from his father at the age of 8 and still works 14 hours a day, six days a week to support a family of six.

He's determined to put his sons and daughters through university, but says it's a challenge on profits of about LE 30 per day.

"My earnings are very low compared to what my family demands," says Seidhom, 58. "I wish I could apply for a loan from a bank or an association to develop and improve my workshop. I could get new equipment to fix all kinds of shoes and even to make new ones," he says, explaining that a lack of capital prevents him from buying the raw materials he needs to produce custom-made shoes.

"It's just a dream. I can tell this will never happen."





## The Commuter

Mohamed Abdel Khalek is comfortable with his lot in life. A tameya seller on Cairo's streets since age 16, Abdel Khalek, now 43, nets an average income of about LE 30 every eight-hour day he works.

He wakes early in El-Kanater in Kalubra Governorate at around 5 a.m. to catch a microbus to Cairo 25 kilometers to the south. At work before 6 a.m. to catch the breakfast trade in Fagela, Abdel Khalek generally finishes up between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. and puts in a half day on Fridays. Married with five children, three of whom are in school, he graduated with a secondary school certificate (industrial) in 1979.



## The Realist

Born in Assiut, Ahmed Ali moved to Cairo with his family 12 years ago when his father migrated in search of a better paying job. At age 20, Ali graduated with a secondary school certificate (industrial) in 2001, and has been searching for steady work ever since.

"Lots of guys my age are in the same situation," he says, explaining that it's unrealistic to expect to land a decent job quickly in today's economy.

In the meantime, Ali haunts the streets of Giza – "I won't cross the bridge to downtown; it's too dangerous" – selling nuts at LE 0.50 per bag.

"I sell mainly to students during the day," he says, "and to people relaxing at cafes during the night. I work 10-12 hours a day and earn LE 4-5 pounds, depending on my luck. My wish is to find a job where I can earn a regular income – something a little more respectable than selling nuts in the street."



## The Contented Man

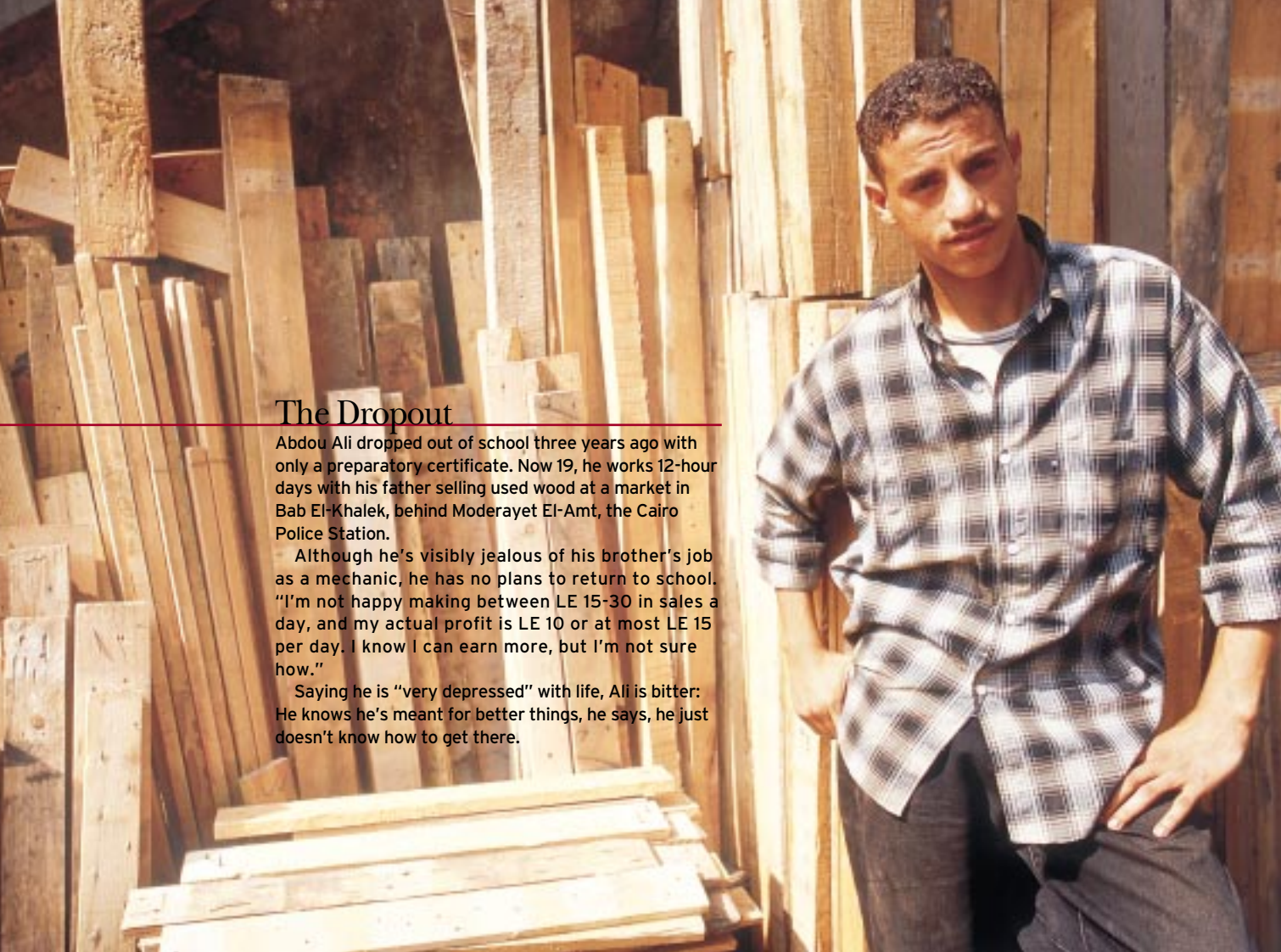
"I followed in my father's footsteps, becoming a foot ironer in 1956," says 57-year-old Cairo native Mohey Abdel Ghany, a father of three who is now a *makwagi* only in the late afternoons and evenings. During the work day, Abdel Ghany (pictured at front of both photos) earns LE 200 a month as a labor supervisor at the Ministry of Land Use and Irrigation.

While he's at work for the state, Abdel Ghany's tiny shop in Old Cairo's El-Zawia El-Hamra neighborhood is run by his partner. The two men work slightly overlapping 11-hour shifts, taking turns ironing baladi dresses and galabeyyas. They split the shop's daily earnings of LE 40 each night at closing time.

Abdel Ghany is a rarity among those working on Cairo's streets, a man who is equally content with his life, family and job, saying he wishes only that his health remains strong.







## The Dropout

Abdou Ali dropped out of school three years ago with only a preparatory certificate. Now 19, he works 12-hour days with his father selling used wood at a market in Bab El-Khalek, behind Moderayet El-Amt, the Cairo Police Station.

Although he's visibly jealous of his brother's job as a mechanic, he has no plans to return to school. "I'm not happy making between LE 15-30 in sales a day, and my actual profit is LE 10 or at most LE 15 per day. I know I can earn more, but I'm not sure how."

Saying he is "very depressed" with life, Ali is bitter: He knows he's meant for better things, he says, he just doesn't know how to get there.

## The Farmer

Tahta, in Sohag, Upper Egypt, will always be home for Dabaa Abou Zeid. Tahta is where he lives with his wife and four children, and Tahta is where this 45-year-old farmer hopes to end his days.

But seven years ago, Abu Zeid came to Cairo in search of new opportunities. He first tried his hand at construction but, finding the work too irregular, turned to selling juices and syrups on the street.

Throughout the six-month summer, Abou Zeid flits like a bee between the twin flowers of Ramses and Ataba in search of sun-baked crowds thirsty for 10-piaster glasses of tumr hendi, karkadey and other favorites. He still ekes a few pounds out of the ground back home in Tahta, where he returns for winter, but says he makes enough in the summer months to tide himself and his family over until the next summer season.

Asked how much he pulls in each day, Abou Zeid is cagey, saying simply, "It is a gift from Allah."





