



Mostafa Wafa was standing outside his house one evening when he saw a scene that changed his life. A group of elementary school-age children were walking up the street carrying sticks and knives, coming from one of the fights that break out daily in the public schools and in the streets.

“They know me, so they came up and said ‘Hi, Uncle Mostafa.’ I said ‘Ey da? What is that?’ And they told me ‘we beat them up because they hurt my little brother, so we went and punished them.’ And his little brother had a cut across his face, by his eye. Oh my God, I thought, this has to stop.”

Mostafa was inspired to start Mish Madrasa (literally “Not a School”), a grassroots group of volunteers that aims to keep children off the streets after school, and to provide them with better instruction in Arabic, French, English, and basic math and sciences. On a Saturday night, a group of about 10 students is learning the French alphabet. Ahmed covers his mouth, jumping up and down in his seat, to keep from blurting out the answer in excitement. Noura, one of the two girls there that night, is focused on her writing and asks Shahinde, the tutor, to check her work.

Mostafa, a 24 year old Cairo University graduate, was born and raised in Saft el Laban, one of Cairo’s vast, informal building zones called ashwayyat - literally “haphazard” in Arabic. It’s an area of towering, self-built concrete housing, bisected by a highway overpass. The roads are unpaved and power cuts can last 12 hours a day in the summer. Among the other problems affecting Cairo’s slums, educating Egypt’s large youth population has become a staggering challenge. It is estimated that about 25 percent of Egyptians are illiterate, with the rate being higher for women at about 35 percent.

“The circumstances in the public schools are totally not appropriate for a good education. I see that because I live

here,” Mostafa explains. “I live in this slum and we have three public schools to serve between 300,000 to 400,000 people. So you can imagine, one classroom has 120 students at least. The students do not concentrate at all, and they don’t even sit on seats. They cannot even read and write and they have been in the school for six years.”

Mostafa recounted a meeting he had with a father who was planning to take his son out of school. “I told him, no, it’s not his fault - he’s good, he’s smart and he’s doing well with us. It’s just that no adult has ever sat with him or spoken with him.”

Egypt’s upper classes send their children to private international schools, while the middle class might pay for private tutors or take advantage of an NGO program in their area. In Saft el Laban, however, there are no NGOs and very few can afford tutoring outside of the public schools. Here, the only alternative to public school is religious instruction and tutoring provided by a Salafi group, a strict, puritanical branch of Islamism prominent in Egypt.

For Mostafa, this balance is indicative of Egyptian society as a whole. “Society knows two main players - Islamists and the regime, that’s it. And I think, as you see, protesting is not the solution anymore at all. So what is a solution? A solution is to work and to build, to prepare our own road,” Mostafa says.

Mish Madrasa had an initial goal of reaching 25 children, and they hit the goal almost immediately. Since then, they’ve become known in the community and more and more parents are bringing their kids.

“We want them to think critically, not just to be with us, or with Islamists, or with the regime. Whatever you will be, just think,” he says. “Our aim is just to be alternative.”