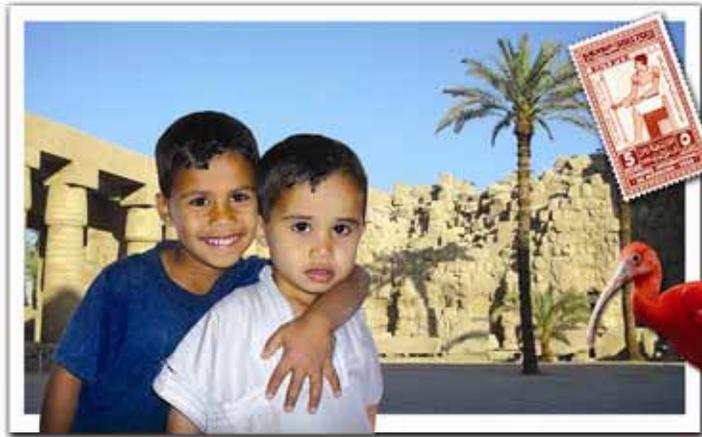


# EGYPT in Perspective

An Orientation Guide



Curriculum Development Division  
Educational Technology Department  
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DEFENSE LANGUAGE INSTITUTE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CENTER



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## A Brief Profile of Egypt

### Introduction

After winding through 6,000 years of history, Egypt (*el-Misr*) has emerged into the modern world at the center of a global network. One of the first Middle Eastern countries to open up to the West, this former British colony has been buffeted by competing political forces in the modern era. One example is Egypt's 1956 nationalization of its Suez Canal, leading to war with England, Israel, and France, threats of Soviet intervention, and U.S. involvement. International issues aside, Egypt faces serious challenges at home. This U.S. ally and leading Arab nation is going through a domestic struggle while trying to build stability against promises of constitutional reform. A more democratic government, adapted to Egypt's unique political and social conditions, is a stated goal of Egypt's current president.



### Egypt in Facts and Figures<sup>1</sup>

#### Country Name:

*conventional long form:* Arab Republic of Egypt

*conventional short form:* Egypt

*local short form:* Misr

**Capital:** Cairo

**Area:** about the size of Texas and New Mexico combined

*total:* 1,001,450 sq km (622,272 sq mi)

*land:* 995,450 sq km (618,544 sq mi)

*water:* 6,000 sq km ( 3,728 sq mi)

#### Ethnic Groups:

Egyptian 98%, Berber, Nubian, Bedouin, and Beja 1%, Greek, Armenian, other European (primarily Italian and French) 1%

**Religions:** Muslim (mostly Sunni) 90%, Coptic 9%, other Christian 1%

**Languages:** Arabic (official), English and French widely understood by educated classes

**Population:** 78,887,007

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<sup>1</sup> Information in the Facts and Figures section is courtesy of the CIA World Factbook, updated 8 Feb 2007. All figures are 2006 estimates unless otherwise noted.  
<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/print/eg.html>

**Age Structure:** 0-14 years: 32.6% (male 13,172,641/female 12,548,346)  
15-64 years: 62.9% (male 25,102,754/female 24,519,698)  
65 years and over: 4.5% (male 1,510,280/female 2,033,288)

**Infant Mortality Rate:**

*male:* 32.04 deaths/1,000 live births  
*female:* 30.58 deaths/1,000 live births

**Life Expectancy at Birth:**

*total population:* 71.29 years

**Total Fertility Rate:** 2.83 children born/woman

**Literacy:** (Definition: age 15 and over can read and write)

*total population:* 57.7%  
*male:* 68.3%  
*female:* 46.9% (2003 est.)

**Administrative Divisions:**

26 governorates (*muhafazat*, singular - *muhafazah*); Ad Daqahliyah, Al Bahr al Ahmar, Al Buhayrah, Al Fayyum, Al Gharbiyah, Al Iskandariyah, Al Isma'iliyah, Al Jizah, Al Minufiyah, Al Minya, Al Qahirah, Al Qalyubiyah, Al Wadi al Jadid, As Suways, Ash Sharqiyah, Aswan, Asyut, Bani Suwayf, Bur Sa'id, Dumyat, Janub Sina', Kafr ash Shaykh, Matruh, Qina, Shamal Sina', Suhaj

**Independence:** 28 February 1922 (from UK)

**National Holiday:** Revolution Day, 23 July (1952)

**Constitution:** 11 September 1971; amended 22 May 1980, 25 May 2005 and 26 March 2007

**Legal System:** based upon English common law, Islamic law, and Napoleonic codes

**Suffrage:** 18 years of age; universal and compulsory

**Executive Branch:**

*chief of state:* President Mohammed Hosni Mubarak (since 14 October 1981)  
*head of government:* Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif (since 9 July 2004)  
*cabinet:* Cabinet appointed by the president  
*elections:* president elected by popular vote for six-year term (no term limits); last election 7 September 2005; next election scheduled for 2011

**Legislative Branch:**

bicameral system consists of the People's Assembly, or Majlis al-Sha'b (454 seats: 444 elected by popular vote, ten appointed by the president; members serve five-year terms),

and the Advisory Council, or Majlis al-Shura, which functions only in a consultative role.

*elections:* People's Assembly—three-phase voting—last held 7 and 20 November, 1 December 2005; (next to be held November-December 2010)

*election results:* People's Assembly—seats by party—NDP 311, NWP 6, Tagammu 2, Tomorrow Party 1, independents 112 (twelve seats to be determined by rerun elections, ten seats appointed by president)

**Judicial Branch:** Supreme Constitutional Court

**Political Parties:**

National Democratic Party or NDP [Mohammed Hosni Mubarak (governing party)]; National Progressive Unionist Grouping or Tagammu; New Wafd Party or NWP; Tomorrow Party

Political pressure groups: Despite Egypt's constitutional ban against religious-based parties, the illegal Muslim Brotherhood remains Hosni Mubarak's potentially most significant political opposition. For his first two terms, Mubarak tolerated limited political activity by the Brotherhood. Since then, however, he has moved to block its influence. Trade unions and professional associations are sanctioned.



**International Organization Participation:** ABEDA, ACCT, AfDB, AFESD, AMF, AU, BSEC (observer), CAEU, COMESA, EBRD, FAO, G-15, G-24, G-77, IAEA, IBRD, ICAO, ICC, ICCt (signatory), ICRM, IDA, IDB, IFAD, IFC, IFRCs, IHO, ILO, IMF, IMO, Interpol, IOC, IOM, IPU, ISO, ITU, LAS, MIGA, MINURSO, MONUC, NAM, OAPEC, OAS (observer), OIC, OIF, ONUB, OSCE (partner), PCA, UN, UNESCO, IG, UNRWA, UNWTO, UPU, WCO, WFTU, WHO, WIPO, WMO, WTO.

**Diplomatic Representation in the U.S.:**

*chief of mission:* Ambassador Nabil FAHMY

*chancery:* 3521 International Court NW, Washington, DC 20008. *telephone:* [1] (202) 895-5400.

**Diplomatic Representation from the U.S.:**

*chief of mission:* Ambassador Francis J. RICCIARDONE, Jr.

*embassy:* 8 Kamal El Din Salah St., Garden City, Cairo. *telephone:* [20] (2) 797-3300

**Military Branches:** Army, Navy, Air Force, Air Defense Command

**Transnational Issues:**

Disputes, international: Both Egypt and Sudan claim rights to administer the two triangular areas that extend north and south of the 1899 Treaty boundary along the 22nd Parallel. They have both, however, withdrawn their military presence. Since the October 2004 attack on Taba and other Egyptian resort towns on the Red Sea, Egypt vigilantly monitors the Sinai and its borders with Israel and the Gaza Strip. Regarding refugees, Egypt does not offer domestic asylum to some 70,000 self-identified Palestinians.

Refugees and displaced persons: *refugees (country of origin)*: 100,000 (Iraq); 70,255 (Palestinian Territories); 13,446 (Sudan) (2006)

**Illicit Drugs:**

Egypt is a transit point for Southeast and Southwest Asian heroin and opium moving to Africa, Europe, and the U.S. It is also a transit stop for Nigerian couriers. Because of the lax enforcement of financial regulations, there is concern about money-laundering activities.

# Geography

## Egypt's Neighborhood

Egypt sits atop the African continent, in the northeastern corner. To its south lies Sudan; to its west, Libya; and to its north, the Mediterranean Sea. Much of Egypt's eastern boundary is the Red Sea, running northward into the Gulf of Suez. At the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, the Suez Canal cuts through Egypt and provides the shortest sea link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. East of the Suez Canal is Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, considered to be part of the Asian continent. Israel lies east of the Sinai Peninsula, and bordering the southeast edge of the Sinai is the Gulf of Aqaba, ending at a point where Egypt and Israel meet.

Ancient Egypt developed into two regional cultures. Upper Egypt referred to the southern part of the country going towards Africa. The boundaries were originally between Memphis and Aswan, near Nubia's border in southern Egypt. Today Upper Egypt refers to the smaller area approximately between Qena Bend and Aswan.<sup>2</sup> Lower Egypt is in the northern part of the country between Memphis and the Nile Delta. In contrast to Upper Egypt, Lower Egypt (*ta-mehu*, or "water-filled land")<sup>3</sup> is densely populated. Because of intense sea trade and interaction with people in countries outside of Egypt, cities developed faster here than in the south.

## Geographic Divisions

About 95% desert, only 3.5% of Egypt's land surface is settled.<sup>4</sup> Almost all of this is along the Nile River, which bisects Egypt north to south.

The Nile River Valley and Delta is one of Egypt's four main regions. The Nile River enters Egypt at the Sudanese border and crosses 1,600 km (994 mi) of the country.<sup>5</sup> It provides water for cultivation and supports 99% of Egypt's population.<sup>6</sup> At Cairo, the Nile begins spreading into a delta, fanning out and emptying into the Mediterranean Sea 160 km (99 mi) to the north. At its widest base, the Nile Delta stretches across 250 km (155 mi).<sup>7</sup>



Courtesy of Wikipedia  
Fertile Nile Valley

West of the Nile River in Egypt is another main region, the huge Western Desert, or Libyan Desert. Covering about two thirds of Egypt's land area (approximately 700,000 sq km, or 434,960 sq mi), the Western Desert is considered a frontier region by the

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<sup>2</sup> Rough Guides. *The Rough Guide to Egypt*. Richardson, Dan. 2003. New York: Rough Guides.

<sup>3</sup> Facts on File, Inc. *Empire of Ancient Egypt*. Christensen, Wendy. 2005. New York.

<sup>4</sup> Think Quest. Ancient Egypt. 2000. <http://library.thinkquest.org/J001769/geography.html>

<sup>5</sup> Information Technology Associates. ITA. Egypt Nile Valley and Delta. 10 November 2004. [http://www.photius.com/countries/egypt/geography/egypt\\_geography\\_nile\\_valley\\_and\\_delt~9.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/egypt/geography/egypt_geography_nile_valley_and_delt~9.html)

<sup>6</sup> Information Technology Associates. ITA. Egypt Natural Regions. 10 November 2004. [http://www.photius.com/countries/egypt/geography/egypt\\_geography\\_natural\\_regions.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/egypt/geography/egypt_geography_natural_regions.html)

<sup>7</sup> Athena Publications, Inc. Athena Review Image Archive. 2003. <http://www.athenapub.com/rivnile1.htm>

government since large parts of it are uninhabitable.<sup>8</sup> One of the most arid regions on earth, the Western Desert receives rain every five to ten years. It is marked by seven depressions (basins), six of them oases with fresh water provided by the Nile or groundwater sources. These areas support small permanent settlements and limited agriculture. The seventh depression, Qattara, is mostly below sea level and covered with salt marshes, salt lakes, and badlands. West of Qattara and near the Libyan border is the much smaller Siwa Oases.

East of the Nile is the Eastern Desert, or Arabian Desert, a third region. Unlike its cousin to the west, the Eastern Desert is fairly mountainous. It is also a much smaller region, about 220,000 sq km (136,701 sq mi). Its hills extend to elevations of 1,900 meters (6,233 ft), running north and south from the border with Sudan to the Nile Delta. A rugged mountain chain, known as the Red Sea Hills, snakes eastward from the Nile Valley to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Suez. There are almost no permanent settlements in this entire isolated region. Oil is one of its very few natural resources.

A fourth region, the Sinai Peninsula, lies east of the Red Sea and Suez Canal. This northeastern section of Egypt covers around 61,100 sq km (37,965 sq mi).<sup>9</sup> Created by continental drift, the Sinai is largely covered with granite mountains and rocks that are red, green, and blue. The Red Sea Hills continue from Egypt's Eastern Desert into the southern Sinai. This range includes Mount Catherine (*Jebel Katrinah*), the country's highest peak at 2,642 meters (8,668 ft). At the northern part of this region is a flat coastal plain extending from the Suez Canal into Israel and the Gaza Strip.

## **Climate**

Egypt, one of the world's hottest and sunniest countries, has two seasons. There are mild winters from November to April and hot, dry summers the rest of the year. In coastal regions, the climate is moderate, with an average low winter temperature of 14°C (57°F), and an average high summer temperature of 30°C (86°F). In inland areas (desert), temperatures fluctuate much more. Here, summer temperatures vary from 7°C (44°F) at night to 43°C (109°F) in the daytime. Winter temperatures in the desert range from 0°C (32°F) at night to 18°C (64°F) in daytime.<sup>10</sup>

Rainfall is light and occurs mainly along the coast. In most areas, Egypt receives less than a meager 80 mm (3 in) of annual rain. The wettest area is around Alexandria, with about 200 mm (8 in) of annual rainfall. In Cairo and the south, the weather becomes suddenly very dry. Cairo receives only slightly over 1 cm (0.39 in) of rainfall annually, although humidity is high. South of Cairo, there is very little rainfall at all, with some areas going years without rain. These extreme dry spells may be followed by heavy rainfall and damaging flash floods.

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<sup>8</sup> Information Technology Associates. ITA. Egypt Western Desert. 10 November 2004.

[http://www.photius.com/countries/egypt/geography/egypt\\_geography\\_western\\_desert.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/egypt/geography/egypt_geography_western_desert.html)

<sup>9</sup> Library of Congress Country Studies. Egypt Sinai Peninsula. December 1990. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+eg0063\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+eg0063))

<sup>10</sup> Tour Egypt. Egypt Climate and Weather. 2007. <http://touregypt.net/climate.htm>

## Rivers

The Nile is Egypt's one major river and supports almost all of its agriculture. The longest river in the world, the Nile covers 6,695 km (4,160 mi) in its entirety, 1,600 km of that distance in Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Herodotus described Egypt as a "gift of the Nile" because the Nile River's predictable annual floods assured agricultural productivity.<sup>12</sup> And in a land where 96% of the country is parched desert, agricultural fertility was highly valued.

Cutting south to north between two deserts, the Nile River sustained Egypt as a great civilization for 5,000 years. To ancient Egyptians the fecund Nile Valley was known as *kemet*, home to rich, dark alluvium that supported life and civilization. The silt was laden with volcanic minerals and organic materials, creating a rich fertilizer. Arid, empty desert wastes surrounded the river on both sides.

The Nile originates in the high lakes of Ethiopia and Uganda. Its river journeys begin in the form of the White Nile (out of Uganda) and Blue Nile (out of Ethiopia). At Khartoum in Sudan, these tributaries merge into one river, the Nile. It passes through six cataracts, shallow areas of rapids that historically blocked navigation except during the summer floods. The Nile then flows south to north through Egypt and empties into the Mediterranean Sea at the Nile Delta, between Cairo and Alexandria. For at least 5,000 years the Nile Delta has been farmed, and it remains under intense cultivation today.

## Major Cities

### Cairo

Cairo (*el-Qahira*), the administrative capital of Egypt, is one of the largest urban areas in the world. In 2006, an estimated 16 million people, or 20 percent of all Egyptians, lived in Greater Cairo.<sup>13</sup> This urban agglomeration extends along both sides of the Nile from Hulwan in the south to Shubra el Khaymah in the north.

A major commercial hub in the Arabic world for over 1,000 years, Cairo has been a trading center for goods shipped to Europe from Africa and India. It was for many years a center for the production of sugar and textiles.

This role diminished when a new maritime route to China and India around the Cape of Good Hope was discovered by Europeans, allowing traders to bypass Cairo. For the next three centuries, Cairo remained a commercial and administrative center but stagnated economically. Then, during the 19th century, Cairo was revitalized by industry, a rising cotton trade, and the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869.



<sup>11</sup> Yahoo! Education. Eyclopedia: Nile. 2006.

<http://education.yahoo.com/reference/encyclopedia/entry/Nile>

<sup>12</sup> Herodotus was a Greek historian.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Dept. of State. Background Note: Egypt. March 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5309.htm>

Cairo grew rapidly in the 20th century, especially after World War II and the industrial development that followed, leading people to the cities in search of jobs. Because of the city's growth, urban services have been strained. In the 1980s, Cairo's population increased by approximately 300,000 per year. Many people resorted to living in makeshift huts or in cemeteries due to the housing shortage. Public services such as transportation, water resources, and trash collection have been seriously overburdened.

Cairo (meaning "victorious" in Arabic) is full of cultural sites such as temples, churches, museums, an opera house, and over 600 Islamic monuments. This cosmopolitan city is marked by Arab, European, and African influences, and its medieval markets coexist alongside the most modern commercial enterprises. The city of Giza, considered part of Greater Cairo, is home to the famous Giza Pyramids and to Cairo University. Cairo is a highly popular tourist destination, mainly due to its proximity to many of Egypt's archeological sites.

### *Alexandria*

Egypt's second-largest city lies on the Mediterranean coastline, just west of the Nile River Delta. Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great over 2,300 years ago (331 BCE) and has been an important port ever since.<sup>14</sup> Alexandria's sea trade with Europe declined between the 16th to 18th centuries, after the trade route around the Cape of Good Horn was discovered. However, trade and export of goods to Europe were revived in the nineteenth century, and along with maritime expansion came population growth. Between 1821 and the end of the century, Alexandria's population grew from 12,500 to 320,000. Today it is around six million.<sup>15</sup>

In the ancient world, Alexandria was known to be the center of learning and culture. There are some who regard this city as the birthplace of Western science.<sup>16</sup> It was here that the rules of geometry were discovered by Euclid and the earth's diameter was measured by Eratosthenes.

Alexandria remains an important harbor today. Its industrial base includes oil refineries, textile mills, chemical and metal plants, and food processing facilities.

### *Port Said*

Located on the northern tip of the Suez Canal, Port Said has been a main port since the late 19th century. It was founded in 1859 by the builders of the Suez Canal as a camp for men who worked on the Canal. Since then, it has grown to a population of about 400,000. Port Said today is a fueling area for ships and a construction site for canal maintenance.

During the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars, Port Said was bombed by the Israelis, leading to the closure of the harbor to shipping. The city has, however, recovered. Port Said was rebuilt after the war, and the government supported a tax-free industrial zone.

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<sup>14</sup> BCE = Before the Common Era (corresponds to B.C.=Before Christ)

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Dept. of State. Background Note: Egypt. March 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5309.htm>

<sup>16</sup> BBC News. "Library of Alexandria discovered." 12 May 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/3707641.stm>

Industries include computer manufacturing and salt production from seawater. Port Said has electrical plants and railway service. It had a fishing industry largely based on sardines, but it declined as a result of the Aswan High Dam construction, which disrupted the flow of nutrients from the Nile into the Mediterranean Sea. This cut off the food source for sardines, which have since almost disappeared.

### *Suez*

Opposite Port Said, Suez is at the southern terminus of the Suez Canal, where the Gulf of Suez meets its northernmost point. The city of Suez has served as a commercial port since the 7th century. Today it is one of Egypt's largest ports, vital as both a refueling station and holding area for ships traveling through the Canal. Oil is stored and refined here and conveyed by pipelines to Alexandria and Cairo. Suez is a manufacturing center as well for petroleum products, fertilizers, and paper. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 led to an infrastructure supporting the transit of ships through the canal, which in turn underwrote the development of Suez into a modern city. Suez is linked by rail to Cairo (134 km, or 83 miles to the west).

The Suez Canal was closed during periods that followed the Arab-Israeli Wars. During the October War of 1973, almost 80 percent of the town of Suez was destroyed.<sup>17</sup> When the Canal reopened in 1975, Suez became a tax-free industrial zone.

### *Aswan*

Located in southern Egypt on the first cataract (rapids) of the Nile River, Aswan has for many years been a center of commerce. In ancient times, it was an ivory market and trading gateway. Here, caravans set forth on their long journeys going south to Nubia and Central Africa. Aswan became an industrial center after 1960 when hydroelectric production began in the region. More recent industries include a fertilizer plant and mining operations for hematite and iron ore. The Aswan High Dam is south of the city.

Among the driest cities in the world, Aswan lies on the east bank of the Nile and is also a famous recreational area. Owing to its climate and location, it has been a winter resort for travelers since the early 19th century.

Many British vacationed here in the winter during colonial times, and it is here that British writer Agatha Christie wrote *Death on the Nile*, her best-selling novel. Today visitors sail in *feluccas*, fish on the Nile, and visit the many historical sites in the area, including Predynastic ruins on Elephantine Island.



© David Haberlah  
Aswan City

### *Luxor*

The name Luxor is from *El-Uqsar*, meaning “the palaces” in Arabic. This name may refer to Luxor's location where it sits amidst the ruins of Thebes. Luxor actually comprises three areas: the city of Luxor, on the Nile's west bank, surrounding Thebes,

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<sup>17</sup> APA Publications. *Egypt. Insight Compact Guide*. 2003. Singapore.

and Karnak, slightly to the north, across the river. The area's architectural remains suggest that people have been living here for about 6,000 years.

Located 675 km (419 mi) south of Cairo, Luxor was an administrative center in antiquity and is also an old tourist center. From the Dynasties of the Roman and Greek periods, travelers visited Luxor to view the temples and tombs of kings and queens. The largest surviving ancient monuments in the Nile valley are here.

On the Nile's west bank, across from Luxor, is Thebes, the capital of Egypt from around 2000 to 1075 BCE (Middle and New Kingdoms). From their military campaigns in Asia and Africa, Egyptian armies brought wealth back to Egypt and much of it was used for the upkeep of Thebes and its priesthood.

The Theban Necropolis is dry desert, where the fertile Nile flood plain meets the arid Western Desert. Just past this border between growth and barrenness, Thebes became a huge burial ground for kings and queens. Also buried here are priests, nobles, royal children, and tomb builders.

### **Environmental Issues<sup>18</sup>**

Partly because of its unusual geography, Egypt faces daunting environmental challenges. First, the amount of arable land is severely limited. Of Egypt's entire population, around 97% live in the Nile Valley and Delta, overburdening the land and river.<sup>19</sup> Egypt is almost entirely desert and has to depend heavily on the Nile River for water resources. This fact, when combined with a rapidly growing population, has led to the overdependence on the Nile River as well as loss of agricultural land to urbanization. Sandstorms and desertification are other factors that contribute to the loss of agricultural land.

Oil pollution off the coasts threatens beaches and marine habitats. Water pollution, another environmental problem, results from industrial waste and untreated sewage. Water pollution is also a byproduct of pesticide use from the many chemicals used to manage crop growth.

The Aswan High Dam has been a mixed blessing for the country. Built on the Nile River between 1960 and 1970, the Dam provides Egypt with hydroelectric power and enables planned irrigation, which underlies agricultural stability. However, the Aswan High Dam blocks nutrient flow to the Nile River Delta. This in turn has decreased certain fish populations which rely on minerals from the silt. Moreover, the dam causes soil erosion, and poor drainage of newly irrigated lands leads to saturation and increased salination of

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<sup>18</sup> Many details in this section are taken from the CIA World Factbook, Egypt, Geography, 15 March 2007. <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/print/eg.html>

<sup>19</sup> International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Rural Poverty Portal. Rural Poverty in Egypt. 7 March 2007. <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/english/regions/africa/egy/index.htm>

soils downstream. Over half of the already-limited farmland in Egypt has been negatively affected by salination and is now rated medium to poor soil.<sup>20</sup>

### Natural Hazards

Egypt suffers from hazards associated with its desert environment. Periodic droughts occur, sometimes followed by flash floods. Ferocious sandstorms rage in the desert, rearranging dunes and blocking the vision of anyone caught in such a storm. Swirling clouds of dust that can be captured on satellite imagery blow over Egypt and northern Africa.

A hot wind, *khamsin*, blows wildly across Africa's north coast, including Egypt, in the spring.<sup>21</sup> It usually arrives in April but it may be as early as March or as late as May. The winds reach up to 140 kph (87 mph) or more, carrying dirt and sand from the desert. Such sandstorms can cause rapid temperature increases of up to 20°C (68°F) within a two-hour period. In addition, they may blow for days, causing illness in people and animals and damage to crops and buildings.



Egypt is also in a region with a history of high-magnitude earthquakes. The most recent occurred between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Nile River in November 2006. This region is an active seismic zone and earthquakes have been reported here as early as 1068 CE.<sup>22</sup> A larger earthquake measuring 7.1 on the Richter Scale struck near the same area in November 1995 and was felt from Sudan in the south to Lebanon and Syria in the north<sup>23</sup>. Some cities reported heavy damage, mainly due to the poor quality of construction along with inadequate building materials and maintenance. Some of the earthquakes in Egypt have resulted in widespread death and injury.

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<sup>20</sup> About: Geography. Nile River. "Aswan High Dam Controls World's Longest River." c2007. <http://geography.about.com/od/specificplacesofinterest/a/nile.htm>

<sup>21</sup> This wind is known in Europe as *scirocco*. Source: Tour Egypt. Egypt Climate and Weather. 2007. <http://touregypt.net/climate.htm>

<sup>22</sup> Because the earth's crust in the Gulf of Aqaba region is thinner than anywhere else in the world, it is at risk of seismic activity. Such activity could even be triggered by human activity, such as construction of a canal being studied to link the Red and Dead seas. This warning was issued by Ahmed Ali Fadel, chairman of the Egyptian Suez Canal Authority. Reported in The Register; Sherriff, Lucy; "Canal could cause earthquakes, Egypt warns." 27 July 2005. [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/07/27/earthquakes\\_canal/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/07/27/earthquakes_canal/)

<sup>23</sup> Earthquake Engineering Research Institute. 2003. <http://www.eeri.org/lfe/egypt.html>

## History

### **Egypt's Span of History<sup>24</sup>**

Egypt's entire ancient history included 31 to 34 dynasties, one of the longest-lasting civilizations in world history. Vast periods of time known as "kingdoms" encompassed many dynasties and spanned centuries. First was the Old Kingdom between approximately 2625 and 2130 BCE.<sup>25</sup> This was the earliest age, that of the pyramids. The next period was the Middle Kingdom, which lasted until around 1630 BCE. The last period was the New Kingdom, lasting until 1075 BCE. This was the age of great pharaonic conquests.<sup>26</sup>

### **Before the Kingdoms, Dynasties, and Pharaohs**

The Predynastic Period, before the era of kings, queens, and pharaohs, began between 8000 and 5000 BCE. At this time, nomads were moving through Upper and Lower Egypt from central Africa, Asia, and the west.<sup>27</sup> Settlement began in the Nile Valley, where the rich silt deposited yearly on the valley floor supported land cultivation. Agriculture and towns began to take form in the sixth millennium BCE. It was during the late Predynastic Period that hieroglyphs (writing symbols) emerged.

### **Unification of Upper and Lower Egypt**

Loosely formed confederations known as Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt were feuding by the fourth millennium BCE. Among the causes was a lack of resources in the dry, harsh desert of Upper Egypt, known as the Red Land. In contrast, Lower Egypt was known as the Black Land of the Delta, so called because of its fertile, dark soil that readily support agriculture. Trade in the Delta region was more active since agricultural produce was available on a regular basis, and acquiring goods through sea trade with neighboring regions was also possible. The population of Upper Egypt did not have this base for survival and instead had to rely on receiving a supply of goods from Lower Egypt (the Nile Delta area). Thus, Upper Egypt became aggressive toward its rival's richer resources. Territorial encroachments and competition between the two independent regions led to warfare.

Upper and Lower Egypt were finally united under Upper Egyptian King Narmer<sup>28</sup> in 3100 BCE.<sup>29</sup> King Narmer's strong central rule in this first Egyptian dynasty was a harbinger of the bureaucratic government to follow. The country's economic and political

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<sup>24</sup> To understand Egypt's early history, it helps to first have a general understanding of terms such as "dynasties" and "kingdoms." The term "dynasty" refers to periods of rule in which a succession of kings or pharaohs stemming from the same lineage held power. The dynasties, in turn, are grouped into broad periods of history, such as Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and New Kingdom.

<sup>25</sup> All dates are approximate and not universally agreed upon. Further, this breakdown into Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms overlooks the Intermediate Periods which followed each kingdom. During the Intermediate Periods of history, there was no unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under one king.

<sup>26</sup> Oxford University Press. *Ancient Egypt*. Ed. David P. Silverman. 1997. New York.

<sup>27</sup> Upper Egypt refers to the southern part of the country, and Lower Egypt refers to the northern region.

<sup>28</sup> King Narmer is also identified as King Menes, although historical records of this early period are not entirely clear.

<sup>29</sup> Facts on File, Inc. *Empire of Ancient Egypt*. Christensen, Wendy. 2005. New York.

institutions became subject to the authority of a god-king with the emergence of a centralized government. The central government became a bureaucracy that employed state officials, soldiers, public workers, and others who served the growing state. During this Early Dynastic Period, civil servants and artisans created the foundations of pharaonic civilization and its traditions of art and learning.<sup>30</sup> Memphis was established as the capital of the unified country. The population of Egypt at this time was around one million.

### **The Old Kingdom**

The Old Kingdom (2625–2130 BCE) evolved through a period of grand construction projects followed by the decline of the unified state. A solid upper class aligned with a religion that sought unity with the gods after death was reflected in the building of pyramids, tombs for kings and pharaohs. These huge structures were designed to protect the king's body for eternity, and the cost of building them was considerable. Such expenses weighed heavily on the peasant population, whose number had increased to around two million by the end of the Old Kingdom. Common people rebelled against the royal building projects, and centralized power weakened as powerful local rulers splintered Egypt into feudal provinces independent of the king. These political conditions, combined with climate changes that led to low Nile floods, resulted in crop failures and famine.

### **The Middle Kingdom**

During the Middle Kingdom (1980–1630 BCE), ruling officials made reforms leading to the restoration of centralized power to their hands. Government bureaucracy became larger and more integrated in the service of the state. Egypt's Twelfth Dynasty (1938–1759 BCE), which began with King Amenemhet I, was considered remarkably stable. Each of the dynasty's eight kings ruled an average of 22 years. During the entire Middle Kingdom, peace and a thriving trade supported the emergence of Egypt's first middle class.

This time of prosperity gave way to instability and chaos in the Second Intermediate Period. Egyptian rulers withdrew garrisons from southern forts, which were then occupied by the Nubian state of Kush. Foreigners from the east (the Hyksos) seized the throne and allied with the Kushite kingdom against Egypt.<sup>31</sup> Agriculture also suffered when unstable Nile floods led to cyclic crop failure and famine.

### **The New Kingdom and Imperial Egypt**

Egypt's New Kingdom (1539–1075 BCE) led the country into its age of imperialism. The early rulers set out to expand. And they did, pushing south into Nubia, where they destroyed the Kushite Kingdom and acquired a large province. They also expanded to the Euphrates River in Asia, conquered wealthy cities, and achieved international prestige for all their conquests.

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<sup>30</sup> Library of Congress Country Studies. Ancient Egypt: The Predynastic Period and the First and Second Dynasties, 6000–2686 B.C. December 1990. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+EG0013\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+EG0013))

<sup>31</sup> Oxford University Press. *Ancient Egypt*. Ed. David P. Silverman. 1997. New York.

This was a time of great, powerful kings including one of the most famous, Amenophis IV (later Akhenaten). He is famous for consolidating his own power by changing the official religion and replacing the numerous gods with a single one, the sun god Aten. Akhenaten's queen was Nefertiti, famous for her beauty, her artwork, and her influence in promoting the new religion. It was only through Nefertiti and her husband that the Egyptian people had access to Aten, which made these monarchs extremely powerful. This power, however, had been gained at the expense of the priesthood they had overruled. The cult of Aten that they established did not stand, due to opposition from the priests and other rulers whose power Akhenaten had diminished. King Tutankhamun later reestablished the cult of Amon and the polytheistic gods whom Akhenaten had overthrown.



© Arkady I. Turyan  
Nefertiti

### **Decline of Imperial Egypt**

The New Kingdom was followed by the Third Intermediate Period (1075–656 BCE) which saw the empire end. Egypt was almost bankrupt by 1000 BCE. The country fragmented into small fiefdoms, constantly fighting each other. Royal tombs were looted and the ruling classes became increasingly corrupt. Nubia took advantage of Egypt's internal weakness and seized the throne, ruling for over 100 years. Egypt was dominated by other invaders including Libyans, Persians, Greeks, and Assyrians from Mesopotamia.

### **Alexander the Great and the Ptolemaic Period**

In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great drove the Persians out of Egypt. Seen by Egyptians as a liberator, he was crowned pharaoh. He founded the great city of Alexandria, which became the cultural and economic center of the known world.

This period between 323 and 30 BCE marked the end of ancient Egypt as a political entity. Ptolemy, one of Alexander's generals, took over Egypt after Alexander's death. Egyptian and Hellenic Greek culture fused productively, and the dynasty that Ptolemy founded ruled fairly successfully for three centuries and held out against Rome's growing power.

### **Roman Rule**

Under Roman rule, between 31 BCE and 640 CE, came the final decline of ancient Egyptian culture. The Romans established trading posts throughout Egypt and demanded that Egyptian farmers provide them a steady supply of grain and produce. To subdue the population, the Romans tried to placate people by retaining local traditions and Egyptian architectural styles of construction. At the same time, they destroyed the native culture and persecuted the population through levying oppressive taxes and demanding compliance with their laws. The native Egyptian religion gradually disappeared, along with the spoken language, which eventually merged into Coptic. Hieroglyphic writing also disappeared during this period, along with the knowledge of how to decipher it. The Greek alphabet became the basis of writing.

## **The Arab Conquest**

The Arab prophet Muhammad founded Islam in the 7th century CE and unified the feudal tribes of Arabia around the new religion. Islam began expanding rapidly into other countries and in 641 CE, an army led by Amr Ibn el-As arrived from the Arabian Desert and conquered Egypt. The army's encampment, Fustat, was the first capital of Muslim Egypt and later became Cairo. From that time forward, the historical capitals of Egypt (Memphis, Thebes, and Alexandria) declined. Their temples and monuments fell into ruin and became quarries mined for buildings in the new Islamic regime.<sup>32</sup>

The Arab invasion occurred at a time when Egyptians were resentful of their Byzantine rulers. Thus, Egyptians were more willing to accept the new language and religion of their conquerors. The Arabic language became increasingly popular. Sunni Islam gradually replaced the old pagan gods and coexisted alongside the Coptic (Christian) religion as well. It was not until the 13th century, however, that Egypt attained a Muslim majority.

## **Salah el-Din**

The Christian armies of the West went to war against Islam, trying to reclaim sites named in the Bible. Once the Crusades reached Egypt, they were driven back by a warrior dynasty and General Salah el-Din (Saladin). Saladin restored Sunni rule in Egypt and established a new dynasty, the Ayyubids (1171–1250 CE). During his rule, he circled Cairo with a defensive wall and built the Citadel, which still stands today. Egypt became a center for theological studies and experienced cultural growth and prosperity in this dynasty.

## **Mamluk Expansion and Ottoman Rule**

For the next few centuries, Egypt was ruled by the Mamluks, a militaristic group who had originally been Turkish slaves, followed by the Turkish Ottomans. Under the Mamluks' ruthless leadership, Egypt conquered Syria and Palestine and controlled rich Mediterranean trade in partnership with Venice. In the 15th century, however, their power weakened. Vasco da Gama's discovery of a sea route around the Cape of Good Hope meant European merchants could now bypass Cairo on their voyages. This resulted in less wealth for Egypt and a decline in its commercial and political power. This void was filled by the Ottomans, a Turkish dynasty that ruled over Egypt's decline between 1517 and 1805. The Ottomans sent revenues and taxes back to Constantinople, the Turkish capital, leaving Egypt impoverished. As the Ottoman Empire itself went into decline, its hold over Egypt weakened. Ottoman rule was followed by a brief period of French rule.

## **European Conquest**

In 1798, Napoleon invaded Egypt, competing with developing British interests in the country. His army fought to gain control of Cairo. Unfortunately for him, England's

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<sup>32</sup> Lonely Planet. *Egypt*. 2002. Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd.

Admiral Horatio Nelson sank the French fleet at Abu Qir. As the result of an Anglo-Ottoman alliance, the French were forced to retreat. Although their time in Egypt was short, the French introduced into Egypt an educational influence that divided the population and lasted through two centuries of British colonialism. Many among the elite Egyptian power structure today deem it prestigious to acquire fluency in French as well as in English. Egypt's judicial system today is also partly based on French law, the Napoleonic Code.

### **The Dawn of Modern Egypt**

Mohammed Ali Pasha, an opportunistic Ottoman officer considered the founder of modern Egypt, stepped into the power vacuum that was left in the wake of the French. He modernized Egypt and created an institutional state structure. His government built canals, introduced public education, and reshaped the military after the French model. Ali also introduced the lucrative cotton industry to Egypt. His heirs continued reforms, establishing a railway system and one of the world's first postal and telegraph systems. It was also during this time of political expansion that tourists began discovering Egypt and its ancient treasures.



Courtesy of Wikipedia  
Muhammad Ali Pascha

### **Cotton and Great Britain**

Ali's most consequential project was planting long-staple cotton and ordering farmers to cultivate this valuable crop. He owned the cotton and made a fortune on it by buying it from farmers, marking up the price, and selling it to manufacturers. Ali's introduction of cotton as a mainstay of the economy had enormous long-term repercussions for future trade and relations with Great Britain and the U.S.

Many historians in fact believe it was primarily Egypt's cotton industry that led to Great Britain's eventual control of Egypt. Following the Industrial Revolution, Great Britain needed raw cotton to supply its markets with finished fabric. After America's decline in the cotton market after the Civil War, Egypt's growing cotton industry boomed as it became vital to Britain as a supplier. The British could then spin the raw cotton and sell it back to its colonies, including Egypt, as manufactured goods. Great Britain became more deeply invested in the Egyptian economy, advancing to its Egyptian business partners high-interest loans that the borrowers could not pay back. The Egyptians needed money to develop the booming cotton industry and undertake expensive modernization projects. Debt recovery accompanied by financial reform was the convenient excuse the British gave for their occupation of Egypt in 1882. In fact, the British simply repossessed Egypt and turned it into a colony that would make them rich.

### **The Suez Canal**

The Suez Canal gave the British further vested interest in Egypt by providing them a strategic shipping channel. Built between 1859 and 1869 by a French-owned company using Egyptian forced labor, the canal turned out to be a powerful political pawn. By linking the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, this vital passage eliminated the need to

circumnavigate Africa. It gave Great Britain a direct shipping link to its colonies in India and the Far East. After 1875, the Suez Canal came under British financial control.

By agreement, the canal was to remain open to marine traffic of all nations in war or peace. However, such usage has at times been denied. In World War II, for instance, Great Britain controlled the canal and closed it to German shipping, and Egypt later blocked its use to Israel for a few years. Because of its strategic importance, the Suez Canal has also been subject to attacks. Both the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 closed the canal to shipping in the aftermath of war. Throughout its history, the Suez Canal has indeed served the interests of other nations as much as it has served those of Egypt.

### **British Colonialism and Egyptian Nationalism**

The occupying British were committed to ensuring control over trade and the continued use of the strategic Suez Canal. They ruled Egypt indirectly, using their tested policy of divide and conquer. For instance, they allowed Mohammed Ali's heirs to remain on the throne and used other local rulers and officials as intermediaries for British rule. This had the effect of dividing and weakening the population by setting their interests against each other. Indirect rule, however, could not hide British control of the legal system, schools, army, and economy. Britain's rigid colonial regime and its policies of control in every aspect of life planted the seeds of a nationalist movement. The positive things associated with British rule could not offset the people's desire to control their own destiny. It is true that the British modernized the country and instituted reforms such as abolishing Nile tolls, which had a positive economic effect. They expanded the Egyptian infrastructure, built canals, railway and telegraph lines, and improved the ports. Still, the economic benefit mainly accrued to the British overlords and the Egyptian landowners ruling in their name. The common people and majority of Egyptians did not benefit from British colonialism.



Courtesy of Wikipedia  
The Suez Canal

A nationalist movement known as Pan-Arabism that originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries gave impetus to rebellion against British rule. As literacy increased in the Middle East, political views became more widely shared and discussed. The Arab world began moving toward political unification and renewed interest in a caliphate form of government.<sup>33</sup> Pan-Arabism found expression in various nationalist groups, some radical and some moderate. One example was the nationalist Wafd Party, whose leader, Saad Zaghlou, was elected prime minister for a period of 10 months in 1924. His demands for Egyptian independence led to his persecution by the British, and he is still considered a national hero in Egypt today.

### **Pan-Arabism and the Muslim Brotherhood**

One of the Pan-Arabist offshoots was the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, which began in 1928. Its founder was Hasan al-Banna, an elementary school teacher. The

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<sup>33</sup> Caliphate refers to a theocratic ruler with spiritual and temporal authority.

group's philosophy was created by Sayyed El-Qutb, later executed by Egyptian President Nasser.<sup>34</sup> The Brotherhood mixed religion with politics, charitable institutions, and education, promoting social cohesion around Islamic rule.<sup>35</sup> Its integrated social approach of providing avenues of assistance to the common people made it popular and the organization grew quickly. In 1948, the official political arm of the Brotherhood, Hizb Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimun, was legalized but limited strictly to a role as a religious organization.

After World War II, the nationalist Pan-Arabist movement found expression in other groups, some of which still exist today. These include the United Arab Emirates and also the Arab League, whose headquarters are in Cairo. The League was opposed to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, and when the state of Israel was created in 1948, League countries joined to attack it. Yet another sign of Egyptian nationalism was the Pan-Arabist United Arab Republic (UAR), a union of Egypt and Syria, with Nasser as president. This new unified government abolished Egyptian and Syrian citizenship and considered the combined territory to be an Arab homeland. In 1961, Syria withdrew from the UAR.

### **Movement Toward Independence**

Several events took place that revealed Egypt's move toward independence. In 1922, after World War I ended, Egyptians achieved partial independence as a parliamentary monarchy with a constitution. Britain, however, had installed King Fu'ad, a weak monarch whom they were able to closely control, to make sure he upheld British interests. Britain also kept responsibility for defending the Suez Canal. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty signed in 1936, requiring Britain to withdraw all troops from Egypt, yet allowed for two additional decades of British control of this strategically important waterway. In reaction to continued British occupation, Egyptian officer Gamal Abdul Nasser formed the Committee of the Free Officers' Movement within the army. They began plotting to overthrow the pro-British government, now headed by King Fu'ad's successor, King Faruq.

Things came to a head in 1952. On 26 September, "Black Saturday," anti-British riots broke out in Cairo. At least 30 people were killed and hundreds injured.<sup>36</sup> British-owned businesses and shops were torched. In a drive to set a nationalist direction, Nasser and his army officers seized power and deposed King Faruq. Egypt was declared a republic in 1953. The following year Nasser became prime minister and the British left Egypt. Thus, the revolution Nasser had launched on Pan-Arabist grounds succeeded in its initial phase.

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<sup>34</sup> Sayyed el-Qutb (1906-1966) was and remains radical Islam's intellectual leader. His vision of Islam was that of a theocratic state which in substance resurrected the seventh-century Islamic Caliphate, strictly following the Islamic code of Sharia. His philosophy is set out in several books he wrote, including *In the Shade of the Qur'an*. Osama bin Laden was one of Qutb's students when Qutb was Professor of Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia. The Al Qaeda organization bases its theory of an Islamist theocracy on the writings of el-Qutb.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Banna believed that Islam is much more than religion, it is a way of living. His ideas were grounded in the tenets of the non-traditional Sunni sect of Wahhabism, or political Islam, known today as Islamism.

<sup>36</sup> Thinkquest. "Nationalism- Post-WWI: Free Officer Movement." 2005.

<http://library.thinkquest.org/04oct/01218/textonly/nationalism/freeofficermovement.html>

Nasser was a popular leader in Egypt but his autocratic ways gained him some enemies. Abdul Munim Abdul Rauf, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, tried to assassinate Nasser in 1954 (one of four attempts) but failed. Rauf and five other members were put to death, 4,000 were arrested, and thousands fled to Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.<sup>37</sup>

### **Nasser and Nationalization of the Suez Canal**

Nasser's relations with the West turned unexpectedly sour over his plans to finance a dam that could control Nile floods and increase the generation of electrical power. When Britain, the U.S., and the World Bank withdrew loans they had promised for construction, Nasser became angry. Their reasons for backing out included Nasser's economic ties with the Soviet Union, which threatened the Western bloc's regional control. To retaliate for the loss of funding, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. By this act of standing up to British imperial pressure, Nasser became the symbolic leader of Arab nationalism. He was also supported by the Soviet Union and its allies. Britain and France, however, were angered and maneuvered with Israel to attack Egypt and reestablish British control. Great Britain bombed and destroyed the Egyptian Air Force, and British, French, and Israeli forces invaded.



Courtesy of Wikipedia  
Nasser and Khrushchev

The U.S. opposed Soviet intervention and was also angered at not being informed of the planned invasion. Thus, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles took Egypt's side at this critical moment. In response, England and France withdrew troops, and Israel removed its troops from Sinai. The UN sent troops to restore peace, and they remained in Egypt until 1967. Egypt reopened the Suez Canal after the war to all ships except those of Israel, and Nasser nationalized Britain's and France's remaining assets in Egypt.

### **Anwar Sadat Leads Peace with Israel**

In 1967, Israel responded to ongoing hostility and in a surprise attack destroyed Egypt's air force. Six days later, Israel had control of the entire Sinai Peninsula.<sup>38</sup> This was a humiliating defeat for Egypt and a blow to Arab nationalism. The Suez Canal remained closed for eight years, and Israel now commanded control of the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

Anwar Sadat, president after Nasser's death in 1970, promoted a fundamental shift toward peace with Israel, believing it key to Egypt's development. He saw that endless war with Israel could only damage Egypt's economy, stability, and growth as a nation. After Egyptian forces attacked Israeli occupation forces in Sinai in 1973, Sadat began to negotiate for peace. In the 1979 Camp David accords promoted by the U.S. government and signed in Washington, D.C., Israel agreed to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. In return, Egypt recognized Israel's right to exist as a nation. This negotiation for a separate

<sup>37</sup> Federation of American Scientists. FAS. Intelligence Resource Program. "Muslim Brothers." January 2002. <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/mb.htm>

<sup>38</sup> This 1967 war is known as the Six-Day War.

peace with Israel was seen by the Arab world as a betrayal because it weakened their collective power to confront Israel. Sadat paid with his life. In 1981, he was shot and killed by four soldiers, members of an Islamist group.

Hosni Mubarak, a former air force general, succeeded Sadat as president in 1981 and remains in office today. Under his leadership, Egypt's peace with Israel has held and at the same time Mubarak has consolidated his status as a leader of the Arab world. In 1990, Arab League Headquarters were returned to Cairo.<sup>39</sup>

### **Violent Opposition to the Government**

Egypt's relative calm during the first decade of Mubarak's rule was followed by political turmoil. A population explosion in the 1980s led to joblessness and lowered status of living conditions. On top of this, the government increasingly blocked any opposition to its policies. Radical Islamists turned to force to change society. They made frequent attempts to kill the president and members of his cabinet, and they also began to attack tourism, one of the major sources of revenue, to weaken the state. Several attacks took place, the most well known being the killing of 58 tourists in Luxor in 1997. The Mubarak regime reacted with repression and mass arrests, trying to stabilize the country.

### **Recent Events**

The government has reacted to internal pressures, including attacks against tourists, in an attempt to bring down the state. Terrorists attacked and killed tourists in 2004, 2005, and 2006. In efforts to crack down on anti-government activities in general, the Egyptian government has curtailed democratic freedoms. Bloggers who criticize the president or the government have been arrested.<sup>40</sup> Abdel Kareem Soliman was sentenced to four years in prison in 2007 for insulting the president and Islam and inciting sedition in a blog. He is the first person to stand trial in Egypt for expressing his views online.<sup>41</sup>

In response to ongoing demands for political reform, the government changed its constitution in 2005 to allow more activity by opposition parties. This plan to liberalize backfired, however, resulting in huge electoral gains for the Muslim Brotherhood. Although the Mubarak regime kept a ban on religious parties because they could deepen sectarian divisions, the Brotherhood avoided this restriction by running as independents. They won a record 20 percent of seats in the 2005 election.<sup>42</sup> The fact that President Mubarak's National Democratic Party won over 70 percent of seats did not allay their shock over the Brotherhood's electoral gains.

President Mubarak won his fifth consecutive term in 2005, but there is growing concern over the increasing power of the Muslim Brotherhood. On 15 February 2007, security

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<sup>39</sup> When Sadat recognized Israel in 1979, the Arab League headquarters were removed to Tunis in protest.

<sup>40</sup> BBC News. "Egypt arrests another blog critic." 20 November 2006.

[http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/61647](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/61647)

<sup>41</sup> BBC News. "Egypt bloggers fear state curbs." Saleh, Heba. 22 February 2007.

[http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/638661](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/638661)

<sup>42</sup> BBC News. "Timeline: Egypt." 22 January 2007. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/790978.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/790978.stm)

forces arrested 80 of its members. The charge was the possession of anti-government literature and belonging to an illegal group. Others have been arrested to face charges of terrorism and money laundering. The Brotherhood responded to threats of being excluded from the political process by announcing its plans to register as a legal political party.

In 2007, the Egyptian Parliament approved changes to the constitution, and on 27 March 2007, controversial amendments were voted on and approved. The constitution as amended strengthens police powers and removes judicial supervision of elections. It also prohibits all political activity based on religion, barring the Muslim Brotherhood from its intended legal status as a political party.

### **Timeline**

7000 BCE - Settlement of Nile Valley begins.

**3000 BCE - Narmer, first pharaoh, unites the two kingdoms, Upper and Lower Egypt. Hieroglyphics appear.**

2700 BCE - Pyramid construction begins.

1540 BCE - Egypt becomes an empire during the age of the great pharaohs.

525 BCE - Persians conquer and rule Egypt.

332 BCE - Alexander the Great, a Macedonian, conquers Egypt and founds Alexandria. The Ptolemies rule after his death.

30 BCE - Rome rules Egypt and Christianity spreads.

**642 CE - Arabs conquer Egypt and introduce Islam.**

969 - Cairo is established as the capital.

1517 - Egypt becomes a province of the Ottoman Empire.

1798 - Napoleon Bonaparte's forces invade and are driven out by the British and Turks in 1801.

**1859-69 - The Suez Canal is built.**

**1882 - British troops occupy and control Egypt.**

1922 - Egypt gains independence as a parliamentary monarchy under King Fu'ad I.

1928 - The Muslim Brotherhood is founded by Hasan al-Banna.

**1948 - Egypt joins with Jordan and Iraq to attack the new state of Israel, which defeats them.**

1952 - Scores of people are killed and injured during anti-British riots in Cairo.

1952, 23 July - Nasser and other dissidents depose the king in the July 23 Revolution.

1953, June - Egypt is declared a republic.

1954 - British forces leave Egypt.

1956, July - President Nasser nationalizes the Suez Canal to help fund the Aswan High Dam.

1956, October - Britain, France, and Israel respond to nationalization by invading Egypt.

1958 - The United Arab Republic (UAR) is formed when Egypt and Syria unite. Syria withdraws in 1961.

1967, May – Egypt orders UN peacekeepers out of Sinai and announces blockade of Israeli shipping in Gulf of Aqaba.

**1967, June - Israel captures the Sinai, Golan Heights, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and West Bank in the Six-Day War.**

1970 - High Aswan Dam is completed.

1970 - Nasser dies and Anwar al-Sadat succeeds him.

1971 - Egypt is renamed the Arab Republic of Egypt and a new constitution is introduced.

1973, Oct. - Egypt invades the Israeli-occupied Sinai Peninsula to reclaim its territory.

**1979 - The Camp David Accords for peace with Israel are signed. Egypt is condemned and banished from the Arab League.**

1981, Oct. - President Anwar el-Sadat is assassinated by fundamentalists. Hosni Mubarak becomes president.

1982 - Israel returns the Sinai to Egypt.

1989 - Egypt rejoins the Arab League.

1992 - Muslim fundamentalists begin attacks against politicians, tourists, and journalists.

1997 - Fifty-eight tourists in Luxor are shot and killed by fundamentalists who oppose the government.

2000, Dec. - Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon plan a pipeline to carry natural gas from Egypt under the Mediterranean to Tripoli.

2004, Oct. - Bomb attacks against Israeli tourists on Sinai kill 34 people.

2004, Nov. - Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's funeral is held in Cairo.

2005, July - Bomb attacks kill more than 50 people at the Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Sheikh.

2005, Sept. - President Hosni Mubarak is reelected for a fifth consecutive term.

**2005, Dec. - Muslim Brotherhood supporters run as independents to win a record 20% of seats in Parliament.**

2006, Apr. - Bomb attacks kill over 20 at the Red Sea resort of Dahab.

2006, Nov. - The Int'l Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports that Egypt is one of six Arab countries developing domestic nuclear programs for energy production.

2006-7 - Police arrest hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members on charges of anti-government activity.

2006-7 - Security forces begin to arrest bloggers for criticizing the government online.

## Economy

### Historic Overview of the Egyptian Economy

The Egyptian economy has historically been centralized around and based on agriculture, mainly cotton. Agricultural production, however, has been limited by the small amount of arable land (less than 5% of the total area) and has not kept pace with the growing population. In addition, peasants' lives and their land have been traditionally controlled by powerful commercial families of the ruling class. Attempted land reform has failed to redress this imbalance, and most peasants remain landless and poor. Although industrialization in Egypt started in the 19th century, the economy remained dependent on agriculture until the mid-20th century. At that time, hydrocarbon products began to play a more important role.



In recent years, Egypt's economy has become more decentralized and market-oriented, and foreign investment has increased. The Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ) established by agreement between the U.S., Egypt, and Israel in December 2004 hold economic promise for Egypt's economy. At the same time, state-run industries and a bloated public sector continue to block growth, and wages for government jobs are low. Poverty and unemployment are rampant, especially in Upper Egypt. Revenues for 2006 are estimated at USD 21.32 billion, versus expenditures of USD 31.83 billion, revealing the economic imbalance.<sup>43</sup> The country's main sources of hard currency for 2006 were tourism, hydrocarbon exports, remittances from Egyptian workers abroad, foreign aid, and Suez Canal tolls.

### Standard of Living

Egypt's high birth rate has made great demands on the country's economy, resources, and social services. Although economic reforms have been in effect for two decades, Egypt remains plagued by low standards of living and poverty due to the ever-increasing population. The sluggish economy that emerged after the mid-1980s has not yet achieved the growth needed to reduce unemployment, which was around 15–20% in 2006 according to unofficial estimates.<sup>44</sup> (Official unemployment for 2006 is estimated at 10.3%.)<sup>45</sup> Although the GDP grew about 5% per year in 2005-06, many people (20% of the population) are estimated to be living below the poverty line. The government has had to continue to subsidize basic necessities. People have migrated to the cities from rural areas, trying to find jobs and higher wages. However, the cities cannot absorb them all. In large cities such as Cairo, squatters live in mud huts or the demolished remains of

<sup>43</sup> CIA World Factbook. Egypt. Economy. 2006. Updated 15 March 2007.  
<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/eg.html#Econ>

<sup>44</sup> Energy Information Administration (eia). Egypt. Background. July 2006.  
<http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Egypt/Background.html>

<sup>45</sup> CIA World Factbook. Egypt. Economy. 2006. Updated 15 March, 2007.  
<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/eg.html#Econ>

buildings or even in cemeteries. Public transportation and public services such as trash, water, and sewage systems are inadequate.

In rural Egypt, the economy is based on agriculture and poverty is extreme because of the limited availability of agricultural land. About 70% of Egypt's poor people live in rural areas, mostly in Upper Egypt where access to sanitation and safe water are scarce.<sup>46</sup>

### **Agriculture**

Increasingly serious problems impact agriculture, and food output does not meet the population's needs. Food shortages are growing. Nearly all of Egypt's agricultural production takes place in the Nile Valley and Delta, and farming land in this area is being lost to soil salinity, erosion, and urbanization. Cooperatives help farmers by distributing fertilizers, seeds, and farm implements. Further, to boost production, agriculture (with the exception of cotton and sugar production) has been privatized and deregulated to increase efficiency. Privatization is seen by the government as a way to encourage competition and innovation, as well as improve products and services. To establish privatization in the agricultural sector, pricing controls, the crop quota structure, and government control of crop rotation were removed. Resulting gains in production have been reduced, however, by the huge population growth that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century. Also, the amount of land available for cultivation is shrinking and land quality is decreasing. Since the mid 1980s, the country has had to import around half of the food it needs.

The important agricultural sector employs more than 40% of the population and provides a 16% share of the GDP.<sup>47</sup> Field crops such as cotton, wheat, corn, rice, broad beans, and millet contribute about three fourths of the total agricultural production. The remainder comes from fruits, vegetables, and livestock products.

### **Land Reform**

Because arable land is so scarce, land prices are high and the government has attempted land redistribution. President Nasser was considered a hero to the peasant class when he instituted land reform in 1952 to correct an imbalance in land ownership. Before that time, 70% of all arable land had been owned by 1% of the population.<sup>48</sup> Nasser's reforms limited the acreage that large landowners could own and compensated them for land seized by the government. Seized lands were then redistributed in small plots to peasants. In exchange for the land, peasants were required to join agricultural cooperatives where they could obtain credit, fertilizer, and seed. Although this shifted political power from wealthy landowners into the hands of many enterprising villagers, most of the rural population remained landless. Furthermore, population increases continued to erode any gains made through land distribution.

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<sup>46</sup> United Nations. International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Rural Poverty Portal. Rural Poverty in Egypt. 7 March 2007. <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/english/regions/africa/egy/index.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Water Conservation and Use in Agriculture. WCA infoNET. Egypt. "Irrigated Agriculture in Egypt – notes of an external observer." Wolff, P. 2006. <http://193.43.36.27/servlet/CDSServlet>

<sup>48</sup> Northfield Mount Hermon School. Dept. of History and Social Science. History of the Middle East Database. "Land Reform in Nasser's Egypt." Thornton, Ted. 21 February 2007. [http://www.nmhschool.org/tthornton/land\\_reform\\_under\\_nasser.php](http://www.nmhschool.org/tthornton/land_reform_under_nasser.php)

## Cotton

Commercial cotton production was introduced into the Egyptian economy in 1822 by King Mohammed Ali. His monopoly of all phases of its growth and sale sponsored his royal treasury. After the Civil War curtailed U.S. production of cotton, the European cotton mills became major consumers of Egyptian cotton. Thus began a process that would make the country's economy dependent on a single crop. It even created a reason for European interests to colonize Egypt and take control of the economy. Indeed, the importance of cotton in Egypt's growth and development cannot be overstated. By creating demand for borrowing to expand the cotton industry, cotton introduced a system of credit to Egypt. Such borrowing at high interest rates left Egypt vulnerable, beholden to European banks.



Cotton is a major export product for Egypt today, constituting approximately one third of the world's total.<sup>49</sup> In the last decade, the Egyptian government promoted the decentralization of the industry and privatized many public sector gins and weaving mills. This has resulted in greater competition and has caused cotton prices to be brought into line with world market prices. At the same time, the industry is facing stiff competition from Asia. It has benefited from the Qualified Industrial Zones established in 2004, as they have strengthened Egypt's export market to the U.S., particularly in the textile industry.

## Industry

Before the 1930s, there was little industrialization in Egypt due to the tariff restrictions Great Britain had imposed on the country. After that, the cotton industry remained the medium by which capital was accumulated by rival business groups. Local investors working with bankers, landowners, and representatives of foreign capital began branching out, investing in textiles, building materials, and food processing. The post-Nasser state of the 1950s, however, failed to supply incentives for investors to develop industry and restricted such investments to top state leadership.

After 1952, the industrial base in Egypt increased when the state, which managed economic expansion, moved to develop the petroleum, construction, and service sectors. Growth was slow due to the heavily centralized economy. Government access remained privileged and there were shortages of investment capital. This persisted for decades, and industry developed unevenly.

In 1991 and again in 2005, the cabinet oversaw economic reforms, including moves to privatize state-owned businesses. Heavy industry, however, is still owned by the

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<sup>49</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Egypt. Agriculture and fishing. The economy. 2007. <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-43479/Egypt>

government and controlled by the public sector, which is constrained by debt. Egypt's growth rate for industrial production for 2006 (est.) was 5.1%.<sup>50</sup> Main industries, in addition to hydrocarbons, include textiles, tourism, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, food processing, and construction.

## **Banking**

After the Suez Canal was nationalized, foreign banks refused to provide financing for Egypt's cotton crop. This led to the nationalization of Egypt's financial institutions into four large banks: the National Bank of Egypt, the Bank of Cairo, the Bank of Alexandria, and the Bank Misr, all owned by the Central Bank. This started to change in 1974, when private and foreign banks were allowed to operate. Gains did not materialize, however, and during the 1970s and 1980s, public savings dropped because of the growth of foreign debt, the high cost of subsidies, and military expenditures. This period was also marked by banking corruption, embezzlement, and currency smuggling.

Islamic speculation companies that started operating in 1984 grew quickly and seemed to hold investment potential by offering high returns to depositors. The government, however, accused them of black-market trading and pyramid schemes using fictitious corporations. Such companies found the government restricting their activities in the late 1980s. Banking reform was needed, but it was not until 2004 that systematic reform and privatization policies began, following plans that had been adopted earlier.

Many investors opposed privatizing banks because they feared economic instability could result from poor transparency and unstable regulations. They also believed the public sector's strong dominance could lead to undue influence over markets, a kind of unfair leveling of the playing field. Supporters of privatization believed that it would lead to better and more transparent management from decision makers who would not be tied to past practices. Supporters also believed that privatization would have the positive effect of involving the private sector in economic reform policies without a hidden agenda.

Today in Egypt, banking laws have been changed to support privatization with mixed results. In general, some improvements have taken place. Unified Banking Law No. 88/2003, for instance, has encouraged acquisitions and mergers and enhanced business competition. This new law also abolishes the previous distinction between business, commercial, and specialized banks.<sup>51</sup> In 2002, the Anti-Money Laundering Law was passed to prohibit all illegal financial practices including trade in terrorism, narcotics, kidnapping, and arms trafficking. Banking liberalization has led to greater competition in that the "initial privatization of large banks has removed some of the extensive ownership links between banks—one likely cause of uncompetitive banking."<sup>52</sup> Benefits of reform

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<sup>50</sup> CIA World Factbook. Egypt. Economy. 2006. Updated 15 March 2007.  
<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/eg.html#Econ>

<sup>51</sup> American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt. Banking Sector Developments in Egypt. July 2005.  
<http://www.amcham.org.eg/BSAC/StudiesSeries/Report47.asp>

<sup>52</sup> Social Science Research Network. Competition and Privatization Of the Egyptian Banking. Deabes, Tossou Nabil. January 2006. [http://papers.ssrn.com/so13/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=970017](http://papers.ssrn.com/so13/papers.cfm?abstract_id=970017)

that have begun to appear include capital flows into the economy, inflation control, and increased stock market activity. Also, the country has experienced an increase in retail banking and e-banking.

### **Trade and History of Government Control<sup>53</sup>**

In 1952, 76% of investment in Egypt was accounted for by the private sector. By the end of the next few decades, however, the tables had turned, and the government then accounted for 80–90% of all investment.<sup>54</sup> In 1961, most companies in all economic sectors came under state regulation, and by the early 1970s, all but small-scale agriculture and businesses were owned by the state. In 1973, a new policy began when Sadat encouraged limited private investment, trying to stimulate economic growth. The state monopoly over imports, exports, and pricing continued until 1976, however, when the private sector gained the right to trade in most goods. (Cotton remained an exception to this policy.) This shift led to limited economic growth.

Bureaucratic regulations continued to block business development and foreign investment remained small. Under President Mubarak, investment incentives were more strongly promoted. It was not until the 1990s, however, that the Egyptian government began systematically encouraging foreign investment. Still, economic dependence on imports continues. To strengthen its trade potential, Egypt's private sector needs to be more involved in foreign trade policy discussions, according to the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development. A stronger public-private partnership could enable the country to better defend its trade rights with the World Trade Organization (WTO), especially over disputed matters.<sup>55</sup>



In December 2004, the Egyptian government signed a free trade agreement with the United States and Israel to create QIZs in Egypt. Under this agreement, products manufactured in these zones and containing a minimum percentage of Israeli content are given duty-free access to U.S. markets.<sup>56</sup> The QIZs were designed to expand not only Egypt's textile industry, based on cotton production. They have also opened export opportunities for sectors such as furniture, processed foods, leather goods, and information technology. Results reported in early 2007 show that the QIZ export market

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<sup>53</sup> Unless otherwise noted, statistics in this section are from the following source: CIA World Factbook. Egypt. Economy. 2006. Updated 15 March, 2007.

<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/eg.html#Econ>

<sup>54</sup> Privatization Coordination Support Unit, Carana Corp under USAID Coordinating and Monitoring Services Project. Special Study. The Results and Impacts of Egypt's Privatization Program. August 2002. <http://www.aucegypt.edu/src/wsite1/Pdfs/Results%20and%20Impacts%20of%20Privatization%20in%20Egypt.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development. ICTSD. "Egypt National Dialogue on WTO Dispute Settlement: Exploring Strategies to Enhance Egypt's Participation in WTO Dispute Settlement." 15-16 April 2007. <http://www.ictsd.org/about/index.htm>

<sup>56</sup> The Egyptian manufactured products must include at least 11% Israeli components, to stimulate trade between Egypt and Israel.

has grown substantially and foreign investment is rising, and Egypt is better able to compete globally.<sup>57</sup> The industrial zones are expected to continue to provide more jobs, open Egypt's private sector for exports, and attract foreign investment. Opportunities they provide for exports also challenge private businesses to improve the quality of their products to be more competitive in U.S. markets.

In 2006, Egypt exported goods worth USD 24.22 billion (est.). Roughly 40% of those earnings come from the export of petroleum products.<sup>58</sup> Other export commodities include cotton, chemicals, textiles, and metal products. Cotton and cotton products alone account for 23% of Egypt's exports. The largest export partners are the U.S., which receives 13% of all goods, and Italy, which receives 9.3%. Other export partners are Spain, Syria, France, Germany, and Saudi Arabia.

Egypt imported commodities worth USD 35.86 billion (est.) in 2006, including machinery and equipment, wood products, foodstuffs, and fuels. Major suppliers are the EU (Germany, France, and Italy combined supply about 19%), the U.S. (10.6%), and China.

### **Energy**<sup>59</sup>

Energy, including crude oil, petroleum products, and natural gas, has played an important role in Egypt's economy. In the early 1990s, world oil prices collapsed and Egypt negotiated support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Improved economic stability was regained in part by higher oil prices. Although net exports of petroleum products have declined in recent years, rising prices on world markets tended to push oil revenues upward. In January 2005, Egypt also began to export liquefied natural gas, and this added to its revenue from hydrocarbons.

Four main areas supply the nation's oil: the Sinai Peninsula, Western Desert, Eastern Desert, and Gulf of Suez (approximately 50%). Exploration is being continued in new areas with plans to reverse recent annual declines in output. Egypt's total oil reserves are estimated at 3.7 billion barrels (2006), which is 0.3% of the world's total.

### **Tourism**

Tourism is one of Egypt's five largest sources of revenue, directly accounting for approximately five percent of Egypt's GDP in a normal year.<sup>60</sup> In a volatile region like the Middle East, however, tourism can be a risky business. After the attack on tourists in Luxor in 1997, and the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S., the tourism industry suffered a decline. It also dropped in 2004 and 2005, after terrorist attacks against resorts in the

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<sup>57</sup> The Century Foundation. "Trade for Peace with Israel' Falls Short." Wells, Madeleine. 28 March 2007. <http://www.tcf.org/print.asp?type=NC&pubid=1541>

<sup>58</sup> Microsoft Encarta. Egypt. Foreign Trade. 2007. [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761557408\\_8/Egypt.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761557408_8/Egypt.html)

<sup>59</sup> Many facts in this section are from: Energy Information Administration (eia). Egypt. Background. July 2006. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Egypt/Background.html>

<sup>60</sup> Energy Information Administration (eia). Egypt. Background. July 2006. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Egypt/Background.html>

Sinai Peninsula. So far, however, the decline has not been as severe as was feared.<sup>61</sup> Tourism has recovered and is close to pre-September 2001 levels. The Egyptian government is promoting international investment in this area of the economy.

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<sup>61</sup> U.S. Dept. of State. Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. Background Note: Egypt. March 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5309.htm#econ>

## Society

### Ethnic Groups and Languages

Egypt's population is fairly homogeneous, with around 98% being Arabic speakers. Other ethnic groups include Berbers, Nubians, Bedouins, and Beja (1%), and a small number of Europeans such as Greek, Armenian, French, and Italian. Berbers, a non-Arab pre-Islamic people, live mainly in the Western Desert around Siwa Oasis. The Bedouin nomads are found in the deserts and the Sinai Peninsula. Many of them, such as the Alagat tribe, remain traditional nomads who care for herds of camels and goats. Others, like the Hamada tribe, live settled lives and work as miners. The Nubian people are a major ethnic group that has resettled along the Nile in Upper (southern) Egypt after being dislocated by the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Until the days of the Ottoman Turks, Nubians were captured and used as slaves for domestic labor or military service. Today they hold a generally low status in Egypt, working in mainly unskilled jobs when they migrate to cities.



Egypt's official language is Arabic. Literary Arabic is used for writing and a vernacular form, called the Egyptian Arabic dialect, is commonly spoken. Among educated classes of people, English and French are widely understood. The Nubians are the largest of the linguistic minorities. They speak two Nubian languages, Kenuz and Mahas, related to the languages of the Sudan. Other linguistic minorities include Berber speakers in Siwa and a small number of Beja east of Aswan.

### Religion

Egypt's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, although only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are officially recognized. Religion is widely practiced throughout the country amid rising political polarization expressed through religious fundamentalism. The majority of people are Muslim, mostly Sunni, representing 90% of the population. Another nine percent are Coptic, which is the indigenous Christian church of Egypt. Approximately 1% are Christians who derive from churches such as Catholic, Protestant, or Levantine (Maronite or Greek Orthodox). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Jews emigrating from Europe found religious tolerance in Egypt's ancient Jewish community. Since that time, however, this group has experienced discrimination and has shrunk to a very small number.

Islam was introduced to Egypt in 642 and eventually replaced the polytheistic religion of the ancient Egyptians. Islam dominates throughout the country. It is a religion that requires one live one's life in accordance with the laws of Allah (God) as set forth in the Qur'an (Koran). It was founded by the Arab prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE. After Muhammad died, Muslims, unable to agree upon his successor, split into two sects: The Sunnis favored electing religious leaders, and the Shi'a preferred naming religious leaders from descendants of Muhammad's family.

Mainstream Islamic religious practice in Egypt emphasizes Islam's core beliefs and the conduct of one's daily life in accord with God's will. However, there are alternate forms of Islamic worship. In rural areas, folk beliefs are strong, often passed by through oral tradition. Folk practices include belief in saints. People visit shrines where saints are buried, in order to seek cures or intercession for problems such as crop failure. Such shrines are located in every village. These shrines are also popular in cities, and foremost among such places in Cairo are those associated with the Prophet Muhammad's family. Associations of Sufi brotherhoods form another powerful folk tradition. These groups lead participants through ritual dancing to attain ecstatic religious states and mystical union with God. Around one hundred Sufi associations exist with an estimated six million members (close to one third of the adult male population). Some of the original Sufi mystics and poets were women.

Coptic Christians are counted among the most influential people in Egypt, and they are also among the poorest. Repression of their religion by militant Islamists has increased in recent years. Although Egypt's government is officially secular, the government paradoxically recognizes Islam as the official religion. Copts, being the largest religious minority, are not equally accommodated. They have survived as a strong religious group in Egypt since the first century, however, and have resisted attempts to marginalize their religion. Responding to international criticism for giving in to Islamist pressure to deny building permits for Coptic churches, the Mubarak government relented. It recently approved the building of a new Coptic church, the largest in Egypt.

### **Celebrations and Holidays**

Holidays and festivals in Egypt are mainly Coptic or Islamic religious celebrations that can be attended by the entire population. Public holidays include the *Eid el-Adha* on 1 January, a four-day sacrificial feast honoring the pilgrimage to Mecca. Another important holiday is *Moulid an-Nabi*, the Prophet's birthday, during which streets are lighted and people celebrate with food. In 2003, the government established Coptic Christmas Day (7 January) as a national holiday. Only Coptic businesses close on this day. Political holidays include Sinai Liberation Day on 25 April, celebrating Israel's 1982 return of the Sinai, and National Day on 23 July. Also called Revolution Day, this holiday celebrates the 1952 nationalist revolution led by Nasser. It should be noted that according to the Islamic calendar, holidays fall between ten and twelve days earlier each year.

Ramadan, which falls on the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, is a month-long celebration in which Muslim adults are obligated to fast during daylight hours. Only the infirm and young are exempted from this long fast. Ramadan commemorates the time when Allah revealed the Koran to Muhammad and is celebrated not only in Egypt but throughout the Islamic world. It is followed by the *Eid el-Fitr*, a three-day Islamic feast in which participants are rewarded for finishing the long and tiring fast of Ramadan. One of the three celebratory days of *Eid el-Fitr* is celebrated as a public holiday.

### **Traditional Dress**

Access to international trade routes in Egypt encouraged the use of unique fabrics from around the world to create a variety of regional styles. The Siwa region near the Libyan

border, for example, is known for silver ornaments and a distinctive “sunburst” design of embroidery traditionally used on shawls and costumes such as wedding dresses. Another original style of dress is found in the Sinai, where heavily embroidered cotton dresses are worn in the north, and dresses are often unadorned or decorated with beads in the south. Modern veils that are popular in this area are decorated with plastic beads imported from China rather than the traditional elaborate beadwork of earlier years.

Dress styles in rural areas tend to be functional. For instance, among peasants (*fellahin*), a man typically dresses in a long robe (*galabayya*) made of wool in winter and cotton in summer. He often protects his head from the heat or cold with a scarf wound like a turban. A married woman in this environment traditionally wears a brightly colored housedress covered with a black outer layer. She covers her hair with a long veil that often sweeps the ground. Both sexes wear robes which cover the entire body, but the looseness of the robes allows a cooling circulation of air. The black robes of the women heat up slightly quicker than those of the men, although they maintain close to the same temperature. Bedouin dress for the harsh desert climate by wearing robes that absorb the sun's heat while allowing breezes to circulate. Men wind a cloth around their head and neck to inhibit loss of moisture, as such loss could lead to heat stroke. The cloth also acts as a shield against harsh sand blowing in the air.



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Traditional and modern dress

In cities, traditional styles of dress exist alongside the modern. The modern Islamic dress (*hijab*)<sup>62</sup> is still popular among white collar workers and students and has spread to the working class. It has also been adopted by many immigrants as it helps them to avoid harassment in the streets. Women of all classes often wear long black veils and men wear flowing robes. Alternately, some people choose to wear chic or modern Western clothing, such as casual jeans and tennis shoes. There can be a risk associated with the casual, Western look, however. Although an enveloping head garment is often replaced by a scarf tucked under the collar, and the face veil (*niqab*) is more rare than in the early 1990s, women still tend to dress more conservatively. Islamists have vocally and openly opposed the Western style of dress, and unveiled women in public are sometimes harassed.

## Cuisine

Eating customs in Egypt have roots in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Palestine, and Egypt's own agricultural past. Dishes such as *fuul* (mashed fava beans) are very popular. In stark contrast, people also order out at fast food franchises in the modern urban business districts. Customary food for the poor in Egypt consists of grains and vegetables due to economic necessity. Even a teacher's salary seldom allows the purchase of meat. The diets of well-to-do people, on the other hand, include quality meats on a more regular basis.

Popular traditional foods include *fuul*, which is very inexpensive and available both in restaurants and at outdoor food stands. It is commonly eaten with pita bread (*aysh*

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<sup>62</sup> The term *hijab* means to cover or conceal.

*balladi*). Other popular traditional foods include *falafel* (also known as *ta'amiyya*), made out of mashed beans mixed with spices and fried. A combination of these foods comprise breakfast, lunch, and dinner for many Egyptians. Specialty restaurants are common in the cities, serving *shawarma*, skewered strips of lamb or chicken stuffed into pita bread, and *fiteer*, a kind of pizza. Two of the most popular main meals are *kofta* (ground meat) and *kebab* (grilled lamb or chicken). In accordance with Muslim restrictions, pork is not eaten. As for deserts, sugar tends to dominate the flavor. A popular desert is *kunafa*, thin strands of pastry arranged on top of a soft cheese or cream base and eaten at feasts, including those that end Ramadan.

In villages, women bake unleavened bread (*aysh*) in clay ovens. They also make sun bread (*aysh shams*) which is set in the sun to rise before baking. A typical main meal consists of rice, vegetables, and *fuul*. If meat is available for special occasions, villagers will prepare *fattah*, layers of meat, bread, and rice seasoned with garlic and vinegar with nuts and yogurt for garnish. Rather than using eating utensils, they scoop up food with small pieces of bread dipped into the serving bowls.

## **Arts**

Because ancient Egyptian civilization was highly religious, much of the art of that early period centers on gods, goddesses, and pharaohs, divine in nature. Paintings have survived because of the dry climate. They often depict the afterlife of the deceased or the journey through the underworld. The funerary text known as the *Book of the Dead* was buried with entombed persons to introduce them to the afterlife. Writers from ancient times also created imaginative stories with characters or plots intended to entertain the living, and wrote treatises on medicine, math, astronomy, or agriculture.

### *Literature*

A strong literary tradition exists in Egypt, with short stories first appearing in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Egyptian writers have experimented with the novel form, and drama and poetry have a broad and sophisticated audience as well. In 1988, Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz was the first Arab to win the Nobel Prize for literature. His classic work, *Midaq Alley*, brought international attention to discrepancies between rich and poor and other aspects of life in urban Cairo. Other famous writers are Taha Husayn, who wrote an autobiography called *Al-Ayyam*; Tawfig al-Hakim, author of *The Return of the Spirit*, and Yusuf Yudris, a master of the Arabic short story form.

### *Music and Dance*

Egypt's musical and dance traditions have endured through the years. Lutes, harps, and stringed instruments are still used much as they were in ancient times. Classical music is popular, as are folk songs celebrating traditions or the different seasons. Dancing is always part of celebrations and weddings. Traditions from other countries have combined with those of Egypt. For instance, it was Russian influence combined with Egyptian tradition that led to the development of the Cairo Ballet Company.

One of Egypt's most famous daughters is the legendary Umm Kalthoum, the most prominent singer in the Arab world in the 20th century. With a musical style based in

traditional classical Arab music, Umm Kalthoum often donated the proceeds of her concerts to the Egyptian government or to charities. Admired by President Nasser and often entertained by heads of state, she identified with Egyptian commoners and village life. She was a spokesperson for Arab culture and a supporter of nationalism after the 1952 revolution. Even though Umm Kalthoum died over 25 years ago (1975), she still has a mythic status among young and old in Egypt and in Arab countries.

## Gender Issues

In the late 20th century, Egyptian women made some gains in areas of education and professional employment. The constitution of 1956 established equal rights for women in the public sphere, extending to women the right to vote and the right to hold public office. Women in Egypt have been elected to public office or appointed to important government positions, and women are in top leadership positions in the massive television industry. However, family law in Egypt reinforces women's unequal status, and increasing religious conservatism is making the situation worse.



Women's rights were weakened when the Sadat government amended the Egyptian Constitution in 1980 and made *Shari'a*<sup>63</sup> the primary source of legislation in Egypt. Although the Egyptian Constitution guarantees equal rights for all citizens, the *Shari'a* provision undercuts those rights by denying equality to women in areas of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The debate about women's issues also includes the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), censorship that limits the printed discussion of gender issues, and discriminatory laws that affect land ownership and travel rights. A woman, for instance, cannot obtain a passport without written consent from her husband, who may reverse his consent at any time. A backlash has arisen against women's rights advocates who oppose these laws and practices; they are often accused of being pro-Western and anti-Islamic.

Although many oppose it, female genital mutilation (FGM)<sup>64</sup> is still widely practiced in Egypt. The majority of girls subjected to FGM are from modest-to-low socioeconomic background, often from rural areas. And for most girls from poor families, the only way to secure their futures is through marriage. A girl who is not circumcised will have difficulty finding a partner and will face a future of almost certain poverty. In a study published in 1985, almost eight out of ten Egyptian women reported having undergone genital mutilation.<sup>65</sup> Other estimates, however, place the figure lower, at 50-60 percent.

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<sup>63</sup> *Shari'a* means the "correct path" in Arabic and specifically applies to conduct that conforms to the teachings and practice of Islam. It is the term used for the Islamic legal code as set forth in the Koran.

<sup>64</sup> FGM involves removal of female genitalia with a sharp instrument and is typically practiced on girls before the onset of menstruation.

<sup>65</sup> "Epidemiology of Female Sexual Castration in Cairo, Egypt." Badawi, Mohamed. Presented at the First International Symposium on Circumcision, Anaheim, California. 1-2 March 1989.

<http://www.nocirc.org/symposia/first/badawi.html>

Efforts are ongoing to ban FGM. UNICEF has partnered with Egyptian NGOs to end this practice by educating the public about the great harm it causes women while serving no practical purpose. In 1994, a task force headed by the National NGO Commission for Population and Development was formed to research, mobilize, and support advocacy groups in the fight against FGM. Ironically, however, members of this NGO failed to support a ban on FGM in government hospitals and clinics. Their logic was that women are better served by having FGM done in hospitals, as opposed to having it done by barbers or midwives. In 1996, FGM was finally banned in government hospitals and clinics, but the practice remains widespread. It is believed to have originated in pre-Islamic society which dominated Egyptian culture for thousands of years, giving rise to traditions that remain active today.

The status of women has also been affected by the ongoing struggle between the government and Islamists, who support issues such as veiling and oppose personal freedoms for women. In addition, economic developments have affected women's issues. The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in Egypt, which enjoys support from a new elite made prosperous by privatization policies, has been more open to reforming the role of women. The NDP reformed divorce laws in 2000, making it easier for women to initiate divorce. At the same time, an increase in poverty and financial strain due to inflation and other factors weaken women's ability to enforce their rights or to live independently.

## **Egypt: A Perspective**

### **U.S.–Egyptian Relations<sup>66</sup>**

The U.S.–Egypt relationship is strategic and mutually beneficial. Anwar Sadat and his government's support of the peace process with Israel has led Egypt into stronger relations with the U.S.. For several years, U.S. administrations have invested in Egypt, viewing it as a moderating influence in a volatile region, a voice that can persuade other Arab nations to be part of the peace process. After Israel, Egypt is the largest recipient of U.S. aid, having received an annual average of more than USD2 billion in economic and military assistance since 1979. Ongoing U.S. goals for Egypt include greater democratization and stronger free trade that will be promoted through the region. Through expanded commerce, the U.S. sees the possibility of securing greater stability along with securing its own presence in the area. Not least, a stable relationship with Egypt will continue to sustain the March 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, which is so important for settlement of the Palestinian issue. It is in both Egypt's and the United States' interest to achieve peace throughout the region.

Egypt has been a strong U.S. ally. In recent years it has cooperated with the U.S. intelligence service in providing information related to Afghanistan. The Egyptian government is also helping to train Iraqi security forces, although it opposed the 2003 U.S. military intervention in Iraq and has refused to send troops to Iraq.

Relations are less strong in the area of human rights. The U.S. government has been encouraging Egypt to move more toward democracy and political reform. Egypt has a weak human rights record and has taken repressive measures in recent years against Egyptian scholars, feminists, and human rights activists. In the area of democratic reform, however, there is a lack of agreement between the two governments. Egypt's efforts to democratize have been partly complicated by internal conditions, such as ongoing Islamist attacks on the government.

### **Looking Forward**

President Mubarak's attempts to bring the opposition under control either through accommodation or through intensified repression have not met with success. Furthermore, deteriorating economic conditions and government corruption in Egypt do not bode well for the future, in that Egyptians are likely to seek redress in radical forms. When institutional politics fail, resulting in high unemployment and weakening public services, people might be pushed to sympathize with extreme positions, such as those advocated by Islamist groups. Also, if Egypt were to hold free and democratic elections, there is a likely chance that radical groups would gain power through the ballot box. This fear has led President Mubarak to the unfortunate course of suppressing and controlling elections.

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<sup>66</sup> Many points in this section are taken from: CRS Report for Congress. Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress. Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations. Sharp, Jeremy M., Middle East Policy Analyst. Updated 14 June 2006. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>