



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Covering an area of 386,662 square miles (1,001,450 square kilometers), Egypt is just larger than the states of Texas and New Mexico combined. Most of Egypt is dry and arid desert, spotted with small, inhabited oases. Part of the Sahara Desert (also called the Western Desert) is in southwestern Egypt. The Nile River, Africa's longest river, runs north through Egypt into the Mediterranean Sea, providing a fertile delta area and the lifeblood for the country.

Before the Aswan Dam was built in southeastern Egypt, the Nile Delta and the surrounding valleys were subject to seasonal flooding. Although the dam is credited with triggering Egypt's modern industrialization, generating significant electrical power, and allowing for more predictable crop planting by regulating water flow, it has also caused environmental problems. Because the valuable silt that used to wash in with the floods each year is now trapped behind the dam, Egypt's soils have been depleted and must rely heavily on fertilizers.

Days are long, with an average of about 12 hours of sunlight in the summer and 8 to 10 hours in the winter. Summers are hot and humid, with daily high temperatures reaching 108°F (42°C) in some areas. Winters are moderate, with lows near 40°F (4°C). Annual rainfall ranges from virtually nothing in the desert to about 8 inches in the Nile Delta. In the spring, the *Khamasiin* (a hot, driving, dusty wind) blows.

History

The earliest recorded Egyptian dynasty united the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt around 3000 BC. Today's Egyptians are proud of the Pharaonic heritage that followed. In 525 BC, Egypt came under Persian control. Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BC brought Greek rule and culture to Egypt. One of the first nations visited by Christian missionaries, the apostle Mark is generally believed to have brought Christianity to Egypt in AD 57. Egypt became Christianized within three centuries and followed a Coptic patriarch. Egypt came under the rule of the Roman Empire in AD 31. Because of doctrinal differences between Coptic Christians and the Romans, Egypt's Copts often faced religious persecution. The Muslim invasion, in AD 642, brought a new, albeit more tolerant, invader to power.

By the eighth century, Egypt had become largely Muslim. For centuries, it was ruled by successive dynasties, including the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century. France's Napoleon invaded in 1798, but Egypt was still associated with the Ottoman Empire until World War I.

France and Britain vied for influence over Egypt throughout the 19th century, during which time Viceroy Muhammad Ali successfully governed and reformed Egypt (1805–48). France and Britain exerted increasing control over Egyptian affairs after the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, and Britain made Egypt a protectorate in 1914. Although given official independence in 1922, the Egyptians regard 1952 as the beginning of their real independence. In that year, a military coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the British-supported monarchy and brought Muhammad Najib to power as the first president of Egypt. In

1953, Egypt was declared a republic. Nasser ousted Najib in 1954, replacing him as president. Nasser became an influential leader and statesman and was responsible for a number of reforms, including land reform, universal education, nationalization of major industries and banks, and Egyptian leadership of the Arab world. He governed until his death in 1970.

During Nasser's tenure, Egypt fought two wars that involved Israel (1956 and 1967) and lost the Sinai Peninsula in 1967. Upon Nasser's death, Anwar al-Sadat became president. His government orchestrated a war (1973) in which Egypt regained a foothold in the Sinai. Sadat liberalized economic policy and signed a peace treaty with Israel (1979) that returned the Sinai to Egypt. In 1981, Sadat was assassinated by Muslim extremists who disagreed with his policies. He was succeeded by then vice president Hosni Mubarak.

Fundamentalists, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, began pressing in 1991 for an Islamic state that would shun Western art, music, literature, and values. They have pressed the secular government to restrict freedom of expression, liberal education, and secular law. In the past, they have made assassination attempts and committed violent acts against Coptic Christians, Western tourists, and government installations. However, the group now formally rejects the use of violence and has become a part of the democratic government, although members of its party are officially banned under a law prohibiting religion-based political parties.

Egypt is recognized as a leader among Arab nations, politically, culturally, and economically. Egypt was the first Arab nation to sign a peace treaty with Israel (1979). President Mubarak has taken an active role in the peace process with Israel. He also has reached out to former enemies, such as Sudan and Iran, to improve regional stability, though relations with Iran remain tense. Domestically, his government has reduced inflation, liberalized trade restrictions, moved to privatize state companies, deregulated some industries, and implemented other reforms that have led to economic growth. Mubarak was reelected to a fifth presidential term in September 2005. His government continues to steer a middle road that maintains Egypt's traditions while adapting to modernity.

Tensions between Muslims and Coptic Christians have increased in recent years. In 2010, clashes erupted in the southern Egyptian city of Nag Hammadi. A number of people were killed and homes and businesses were burned before security forces restored order.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Egypt's population of 80.47 million is growing by 2 percent annually. The vast majority (99.6 percent) is Egyptian. The rest of the population is composed of Nubians (who live in southern Egypt), Bedouin nomads, Greeks, Italians, and Syro-Lebanese; Berbers inhabit the Siwa Oasis in the Western Desert. Nearly all Egyptians live on the arable land along the

Nile River because the rest of the country is mostly desert. Cairo, the capital, has nearly 7 million inhabitants within the city and millions more living in the surrounding areas. An exact count is impossible due to migrants, informal residents (as many as 5 million), and other factors.

Language

Arabic is the official language. Written Arabic differs from the dialects spoken in daily life throughout the country. A variety of Arabic dialects are spoken in Egypt. Cairene Arabic is spoken in Cairo and the surrounding areas. Speakers of different dialects are able to understand one another without much difficulty. Egyptians are enormously proud of their rich language. Wordplays, jokes, clichés, and riddles are an integral part of Egyptian culture. Arabic is the language of instruction in schools. English is also a part of the national curriculum.

Religion

Around 90 percent of all Egyptians are Muslims. Most of these are Sunni Muslims. Islamic theology is rooted deeply in the minds, hearts, and behavior of the people. Islamic scripture, the *Qur'an*, is considered the final, complete word of *Allah* (God). Muslims accept and revere all major Judeo-Christian prophets from Adam to Jesus, but they proclaim Muhammad to be the last and greatest prophet.

Although Egypt is officially a secular state, Islamic principles guide the nation's laws, business relations, and social customs. Islam also permeates daily life through dress and dietary codes, frequent prayers, and constant references to *Allah's* will or blessings. Muslims are obliged to pray five times daily, always facing Makkah, Saudi Arabia. On Friday, the Islamic day of worship, men gather in the mosque to offer *Jum'ah* (the Friday midday prayer) and to hear a sermon; women pray at home or in a separate part of the mosque. During the rest of the week, prayers may be performed elsewhere (at home, at work, or even in public places).

Coptic Christians, whose religion dates back to the first century AD, are Egypt's largest religious minority, making up 9 percent of the population. Although they make up a sizable portion of the population, Coptic Christians hold very few positions in the government and have little influence in running the country. Clashes between Muslims and Coptic Christians are uncommon but do occur occasionally. The Coptic Orthodox Church has strong ties to the Eastern Orthodox Church, and churches are built facing the east. The most important day of worship is Sunday, and services may last as long as four hours.

General Attitudes

Egyptians generally prefer a relaxed and patient life, characterized by the phrase *Ma'alesh*, meaning roughly "Don't worry" or "Never mind." This term is used to dismiss concerns or conflicts that are inevitable or not serious. Both business and leisure activities are governed by the concept of *In sha'allah* (If *Allah* wills), which dominates all aspects of Muslim life. Patience also influences life, as the people view events in an expanded time frame.

Egyptians are expressive and emotional. They are known

for their sense of humor, which has helped them endure difficult living conditions with great composure. Part of Egyptian humor is a love for jokes and sarcasm. Egyptians often identify with community groups to the point that personal needs become secondary to those of the group. Generosity is an integral part of this sense of community.

Society is engaged in a serious debate; both secularists and Islamists are battling for the hearts of Egyptians. Secularists desire Egypt to remain a secular state in which multiculturalism, a free press, and diversity can flourish. The Islamists see greater devotion to Islamic principles in schools, government, and the arts as the answer to Egypt's problems with poverty, government corruption, and other social ills. Both sides of the debate have strong followings throughout the country.

Personal Appearance

Both traditional attire and the latest Western fashions are common in urban areas. Business representatives usually wear business suits. Trends toward more conservative Islamic practices have led many women to return to stricter observance of Islamic dress codes. Rural people generally dress in traditional attire. Most rural women cover the hair and body (except the face and hands) completely when in public. Rural men often wear the *gallabeyya* (a long, dress-like robe). The *gallebeyya* coupled with a beard can be a sign of religious faith. However, beards are common among men of all religions and ethnicities. Many rural men also wear a head covering similar to a turban, called an *emma*. Visitors to a mosque remove their shoes before entering, and they must wear clothing that covers the entire body.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Warmth in personal relations is important to Egyptians, and greetings are often elaborate. Because social classes play a key role in society, phrases used for greetings depend largely on the differences between the individuals' social classes. Generally, however, friends of the same sex shake hands and kiss on the right and left cheeks. If the greeting comes after a long absence, the kisses may be repeated more than once and even end with a kiss on the forehead. Close relatives may greet members of the opposite sex with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, particularly if they have not seen each other for a long time.

A man greets a woman with a handshake if the woman extends her hand first. Otherwise, the greeting is verbal. The person declining to shake hands slightly bows the head and places the right hand over the heart. One does not use another's first name unless invited to do so. Good friends exchange first names in informal settings. A title is added to the first name in formal settings. To thank someone for a compliment, one responds with an equally respectful compliment on the same subject or wishes *Allah's* blessings.

Gestures

Physical distance between members of the same sex is closer

than in the United States and much farther apart between members of the opposite sex. In fact, good friends of the same sex may walk arm in arm in public. Yet, except for married or engaged couples who walk arm in arm, a man does not touch a woman in public. It is impolite for the bottom of one's foot to point at another person; therefore, one does not prop the feet on a table or chair in the presence of others. Walking in front of a praying person is also considered impolite.

Visiting

Because personal relationships with friends and relatives are so vital, visiting is one of the most important pastimes in Egypt. Married children often visit parents on Fridays and holidays. It is common for guests to take a gift to the host. Gifts usually reflect the guest's social and financial position in relation to the host as well as the closeness of the relationship. Guests typically are modest about the gift's significance and try to leave it behind without saying a word. However, the host may choose to open the gift, especially if it is food (sweets or fruit), and express his or her gratitude. One passes and receives gifts with either both hands or only the right hand, not the left. Alcohol, prohibited by Islam, is not given as a gift to Muslims. Business visits usually begin with light conversation over coffee or tea to establish trust and confidence.

Eating

Egyptians prepare elaborate and expensive meals when they have guests. Sometimes a person will not eat everything on the plate because leftover food is a symbol of abundance and a compliment to the host for providing so well. In restaurants, food is left as a sign of wealth (indicating one can afford to leave food behind). Egyptians eat finger food with the right hand. When they use Western utensils (mostly in large urban areas), they eat in the continental style, with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Families are extremely important in Egypt. One of the highest complements in Egypt is to describe someone as coming from a good family or having respectable parents. Such comments may refer mainly to wealth, reputation, religious piety, and education. While in previous generations larger families were the norm throughout the country, today family size has decreased in urbanized areas. Urban families have an average of two to three children, while families in rural areas may have as many as six or seven children.

Males generally exert most of the control in family decisions, although this is changing in more Westernized circles. In most homes, a young woman is protected by her brothers and may even be accompanied by them in public. Traditionally, a man's honor is based on how well he protects the women in his care. In rural areas, a young woman may discontinue her schooling when she comes of age either because her family cannot afford to continue her schooling or because education for women is not valued. Today, women

often work outside the home. Many are the primary breadwinners for their families, and women often outnumber men at the university level. Still, women with children generally do not work outside the home and nearly always perform the household chores and child-rearing duties unless the family can afford household help. For the vast majority of society, working outside the home is considered more of a burden for women than a privilege. In the workplace, women generally hold lower positions than men and are rarely found in upper managerial roles, though women hold several high positions in the Egyptian government.

Traditionally, extended families, including families of brothers and sisters, lived under the same roof. However, increased urbanization is changing this tradition toward a home with only a nuclear family. Still, extended families maintain close ties, and cousins of the same sex are often as close as siblings, while those of the opposite sex may even marry. It is common for relatives to gather on weekends and to spend many religious occasions together, particularly during the month of *Ramadan*. Rest homes are extremely rare, and children (especially the oldest son) expect to support their parents in old age.

Parents often play a key role in planning the future of their children; their influence ranges from the choice of profession to the selection of a mate. Egyptians value this support as a source of emotional security. However, family intrusiveness may at times prove stressful for young adults, particularly for young couples. It is uncommon for young men or women to move outside the family home before marriage, regardless of age. One exception is young men who move to larger cities in search of better opportunities. In many instances, particularly in rural areas, a newly married couple may move in with the husband's parents.

Housing

In urban areas, apartments are the norm for both wealthy and poor, with apartment buildings ranging from a few floors to more than ten storeys high. Except for the most upscale apartment buildings, the exteriors are generally very plain. Though these buildings may be unappealing on the outside, the interiors are almost always well maintained. Wealthy families may occupy an entire floor or half of a floor in an apartment building. Nearly every building has a doorman or a security guard who lives in a few small rooms on the main floor of the building. European-style homes and apartment buildings can still be found in some parts of Cairo, vestiges of Egypt's colonial past. Many Egyptians who move to urban areas seeking work still consider their home to be the neighborhood or village where they were raised, and most return home to visit family on holidays or as often as they can. Increasingly, the urban elite (especially younger married couples) are moving to new, elegant villas in gated communities on the outskirts of Egypt's largest cities, particularly Cairo. While Egypt's urban centers have long been too dense for lawns and swimming pools, these growing communities are modeled after North American suburbs.

Wood is scarce and expensive in Egypt, so most buildings are constructed of concrete or red brick. Many buildings in poorer neighborhoods are built somewhat haphazardly, using

whatever materials are available, and many are structurally unstable.

Upper- and middle-class Egyptians decorate their homes with classical European-style furniture, religious art, calligraphy, and family portraits. Decorations tend to be colorful, and furniture often takes up much of the room. Poorer households tend to be furnished simply and practically. Egyptian women are proud of their homes and work very hard to keep them clean and welcoming. Egyptian cities are densely populated, and new urban migrants are increasingly living in unsafe shanty towns. Some of the poorest migrants have created homes in the huge cemeteries surrounding Cairo. Whole communities of cemetery dwellers have risen up, with entire families illegally inhabiting old tombs. In rural areas, most homes tend to be built as close to each other as possible, thereby freeing up the land for growing crops. Families usually start with a fairly basic home, which they plan to add on to as funds become available and family size increases. Wealthy rural Egyptians own large homes surrounded by vast tracts of land.

Dating and Marriage

Though attitudes are changing in Westernized circles, dating is not considered socially acceptable. However, in reality, dating is fairly widespread and is depicted by the Egyptian media as the norm. Casual dating is uncommon, and intimate interactions (i.e., phone calls, hand holding, or flirting) between men and women are generally seen as serious consideration of marriage. Public displays of affection are frowned upon, even between married couples.

Virtually all young men and women expect to marry and have families. Traditionally, marriages were arranged between heads of families, often with little input from the couple involved. Now, individuals have more say in the process. Most young people are able to accept or reject a match after meeting the potential mate, and there are more ways for couples to meet on their own. In some cases, particularly in rural areas, the couple will often have grown up together as extended family, as it is common for cousins to marry. Parents or other relatives may also play matchmaker, arranging possible marriages. A growing number of couples meet through friends or at their universities. Many couples who meet and even date without their parents' knowledge will be given parental support when they wish to become engaged.

Once an engagement is established, the couple may talk on the telephone or visit while accompanied by family. Moral purity is highly valued in a woman and is usually a key requirement in the marriage contract. A woman and her family will always be on guard to protect the woman's reputation, which may be marred, for example, by being seen holding hands with a man or staying out late.

A Muslim engagement begins with the *Arayet al-Fatah*, in which verses of the *Qur'an* are read and the couple declares that they intend to marry. After the ceremony, couples are allowed more freedom to communicate, so couples commonly use the time between the *Arayet al-Fatah* and the actual wedding to get to know one another. It is common for engagements to be called off, and there is little stigma associated with a broken engagement. The marriage

ceremony (*katb ketab*) takes place in the bride's home or at a mosque and is performed by a *shaykh* (priest). After the ceremony, a reception with dancing or some sort of performance is held. In more religious circles, men and women may celebrate separately.

A growing trend is the controversial *'urfi* marriage. Though not legal marriages, *'urfi* marriages are generally seen as temporary measures for couples who cannot yet afford the financial burden of marriage or couples who wish to bypass legal marriage altogether. The marriage generally takes place without the knowledge of the couple's family. Partners in an *'urfi* marriage have none of the rights and protections associated with a legal marriage, such as financial obligations to children and provisions in the case of divorce.

Coptic Christian couples often meet at church or through matchmakers. Engagements begin with the *fat-het khayr* (good start), after which the couple wears rings to indicate their engagement. The first formal step in the relationship is a private family ceremony (called *Nus Eklil*) declaring the couple's intention to marry. Finally, the *Eklil* finalizes the marriage with a wedding celebration that begins in a church and ends with a festive reception at the bride's home or at a rented wedding hall. While Egyptian Muslims often wait several months or even years between the engagement and marriage, Coptic Christians generally have short engagements.

Egypt has one of the highest divorce rates in the Arab world. A family-reform law enacted in 2000 allows women more freedom to initiate divorce. Previously, it was extremely difficult for women to get a divorce on any grounds. Obtaining a divorce remains nearly impossible for Coptic men and women.

Life Cycle

After a woman gives birth, she often depends on her mother for support. This may involve staying at her mother's home, or the mother may come to live with her daughter for a period of time to help with the new baby. Seven days after a baby's birth, Egyptians hold a *sobou'*, a celebration dating back to ancient Egyptian rituals. During the celebration, the mother places her baby in a sieve decorated with candy and ribbons. Guests place their gifts for the baby in the sieve. Guests often drink thick, sweet drinks to represent a rich, sweet life for the baby. Traditional families may bang a mortar and pestle near the baby to symbolize warding away of evil spirits and to accustom the baby to the sounds of life.

The vast majority of baby names are based on religion, though some babies are named after a grandparent (whose name is usually a religious one). Muslim boys are frequently named after the prophet Muhammad, including variations on the name, such as Ahmed, Mostafa, or Mahmoud. Other male names are based on high-ranking peers of the Prophet (Ali or Omar) or religious virtues such as generosity (Kareem) or justice (Adel). Copts often give their children Biblical names, such as Hana (the Arabic equivalent of John), Botros (Peter), or Mekhaael (Michael). There is more variation in girls' names, though they are also frequently rooted in religion.

Many adolescent milestones revolve around education. Most families place strong value on education, and students

are encouraged to do well in school. Celebrations are held for students that do well on the al-thanawiyya al-'amma exam, which is taken the last year of high school and determines which university the student will attend. Similar celebrations are held when a child graduates, gets a job, or has other successes.

When Muslims die, they are wrapped in a white shroud and, as required by Islamic tradition, buried within 24 hours. Family members are generally buried near one another. The burial ceremony is brief and involves the recitation of *Qur'anic* verses and special prayers. After the burial, a professional *Qur'an* reciter reads *Qur'anic* verses for several hours. Attendees need not know the deceased personally, and many people go to funerals of people they do not know in order to support coworkers, friends, or family. After the funeral, family and friends gather at a relative's home for three straight days to mourn and read the complete *Qur'an*. Black coffee is served to represent the bitterness of death.

Coptic Christians attend funeral services at a church, where a eulogy is read. Afterwards, the deceased is buried in a cemetery.

Diet

Egyptians commonly eat rice, bread, fish, lamb, chicken, turkey, and stuffed vegetables. *Tahina* (sesame-seed paste), tomatoes, and cucumbers are also eaten with meals. The *Qur'an* prohibits the consumption of pork and alcohol. Traditional foods include flat Egyptian bread (*aish*) and fava beans prepared as *fūl* or *ta'miyya*. Meat is expensive and eaten only occasionally by lower class Egyptians. Bread is inexpensive and eaten with every meal.

Recreation

Soccer is the national sport. Much of the country feels invested in the rivalry between Egypt's top two teams: Ahly and Zamalek. Matches are enjoyed, mostly by men, in rowdy stadiums and in *'ahwas* (inexpensive coffee shops), where crowds often spill out into the sidewalks on game days. Children and young men can be seen playing soccer in the streets. Many wealthy and middle-class families belong to sporting clubs that offer tennis, judo, swimming, and even horseback riding. Clubs range from expensive and elite to more basic and affordable. Membership in a club brings with it social opportunities, and people may be active members of the same club for their entire lives.

Many urban Egyptians enjoy going to the movies; a wide variety of Egyptian and foreign films are shown. Across the Middle East, Egypt is well-known for its dedication to cultural arts—evident in its cinema and television programming. Many people enjoy watching television. Talk shows and dramatic mini-series are the most popular programs.

While wealthy men socialize in private clubs, men of all classes go to coffee shops (*'ahwa*) to relax with friends over tea, coffee, or *shisha* (a water pipe through which tobacco is smoked) while watching television or playing table games such as cards, backgammon, and dominoes. Many coffee shops cater to specific groups or professions (barbers, plumbers, etc.). A growing trend among the younger

upper-middle class is frequenting more modern coffee shops (referred to using the English words) that offer more expensive fare as well as internet access. Women mostly socialize in the home and in public places, such as work, the market, or the mall. For those who live near the Nile, boat rides are popular and often accompanied by loud music and dancing. People also enjoy taking walks and sitting outside in the evening, when temperatures drop.

Those who can afford it enjoy vacationing on the coast of the Red Sea or the Mediterranean Sea. Because many workers in the bigger cities, particularly Cairo, are originally from elsewhere, vacation time for many is generally spent returning home to visit family.

The Arts

Egypt continues to be a cultural hub for the Arab world and an important influence abroad, though many Egyptians worry that their status as a cultural hub is declining. Music, dance, literature (oral and written), film, and traditional crafts are highly developed and draw on eclectic influences. Revered singers such as Umm Kalthum and Abd al-Halim Hafiz blend a poetry of longing and emotion in a traditional style; such songs may extend for hours. Copts, Nubians, Sufis, Bedouins, and others have their own styles and instruments. Young people enjoy pop and *shaabi*—both of which blend Western and Arabic music. Belly dancing and its music are deeply rooted in Egyptian culture and are performed at weddings and other events.

Egyptians have always loved poetry. Genres such as the short story and novel emerged following a literary renaissance in the early 1900s. Contemporary writers, such as 1988 Nobel Prize-winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz, continue Egypt's rich literary tradition. Artisans practice traditional crafts such as carpet weaving, calligraphy, metalwork, glasswork, and woodwork. Egypt is a major producer of Arabic-language films and television shows.

Holidays

The Western (Gregorian) calendar is used for all business and government purposes, but the lunar calendar is used to calculate the dates of Muslim holidays. The lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the Western calendar year, so the Gregorian dates for holidays differ from year to year.

During the month of *Ramadan*, Muslims go without food or drink from sunrise to sundown and eat only in the early morning and evening. Many Egyptians wake up before dawn for *suhur* (a pre-dawn meal), while others simply eat a late-night meal before going to sleep. *Ramadan* is a festive time of year, marked by frequent visits to family and friends, increased prayer attendance for special services, and even special television programs. Free meals, called *Mawaed al-Rahman* ("meals from God the Merciful"), are hosted by wealthy Muslims, and bags of food are given to the poor. *Eid al-Fitr* is a three-day feast held at the end of *Ramadan*. Another major religious holiday is *Eid al-Adha* (Feast of the Sacrifice), which commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. *Eid al-Adha* takes place on the 10th day of *Dhul-Hijjah* (the month of the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia). Families gather to perform early morning

prayers in the streets. Many Muslims also choose to donate money to the poor (*zakat*) at this time. Celebrations for the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*al-Mawlid al-nabawi*) are generally more festive than solemn. It is customary to exchange certain types of nut-based sweets on this day and to buy dolls for young girls.

National holidays include the Lunar New Year, Labor Day (1 May), Anniversary of the Revolution (23 July), and Armed Forces Day (6 Oct.), the latter two of which are commemorated with military celebrations and fireworks.

Coptic Christians celebrate Christmas on 7 January. More important than Christmas is Easter, for which many Copts attend Mass. Religious Copts do not eat any animal products in the weeks before Easter, Christmas, and other holidays.

Sham al-Nassī (the Monday after Easter) marks the beginning of spring and is often commemorated outside at parks or by the river. People dye eggs and picnic on eggs, meats, and pungent, cured fish. This holiday is said to date back to the time of the pharaohs, preceding both Islam and Christianity. It is one of Egypt's few historical, non-religious holidays.

SOCIETY

Government

The Arab Republic of Egypt is divided into 29 governorates. The president (currently Hosni Mubarak) is Egypt's head of state. The prime minister (currently Ahmed Nazif) is head of government. The president serves terms of six years and appoints the prime minister. The legislative branch consists of a 518-seat People's Assembly and a 264-seat *Shura* Council. Because the *Shura* Council acts as a consultative body, the People's Assembly is the primary legislature. Ten representatives in the People's Assembly are appointed by the president; the remaining 508 are elected to five-year terms. Sixty-four seats are reserved for women. In the *Shura* Council, 176 members are elected to six-year terms and 88 are appointed by the president. Citizens are required to vote at age 18. Mubarak's party (the National Democratic Party) dominates the People's Assembly, but some opposition parties and independents also hold seats. Because religion-based political parties are banned, members of religious parties (the most significant being the Muslim Brotherhood) run as independents.

Economy

During Nasser's presidency, Egypt's economy was highly centralized and strictly regulated. Since Nasser's death in 1970, the economy has become more open and the government has launched various reform programs aimed at attracting foreign investment and encouraging growth. Today, about 14 percent of Egyptians are employed in agricultural pursuits, such as growing corn, wheat, cotton, rice, barley, and fruit. Nearly all farming takes place in the fertile Nile River Delta and Nile Valley. Egypt also produces cheese and dairy products. Tourism is a key industry, though threats and acts of violence have occasionally shaken tourist confidence. Other major industries include food processing, textiles,

chemicals, cement, petroleum, and metals. Egypt exports cotton, petroleum, yarn, and textiles. Important natural resources are oil, natural gas, lead, and other minerals. The Suez Canal is a vital source of income. With economic reform, Egypt has lowered inflation and improved the climate for international investment. Still, large sections of the population remain impoverished. Women earn only one-fourth of the nation's income. The currency is the Egyptian *pound* (EGP).

Transportation and Communications

In urban areas, people travel by car, bus, and taxi. Cairo has a modern, efficient subway, the first in the Middle East. Unfortunately, with such a large population, Cairo's transportation system is still overburdened. The Nile River is used for transporting goods and people as well as for recreational tours, though less so than in the past. Egyptians often travel between cities by train, bus, and even taxi. There is also a domestic airline. In both urban and rural areas, some still travel by donkey, horse, or camel. Mobile phone access is widely available, and it's considered unusual not to have a mobile phone. Internet access is growing. There are five main television stations and seven radio networks.

Education

The government subsidizes free education through the university level, although students still incur related fees (uniforms, tutoring, etc.) that may be prohibitive for some. Children may also need to work to help support their families rather than going to school. In 1962, Nasser abolished fees for state-run institutions and guaranteed employment to all university graduates, although today the wait for a guaranteed position may be years long. These policies have significantly increased the number of students and college graduates. But they have also strained resources (physical facilities, textbooks, equipment, and teachers) already in short supply. Many college graduates are unable to find work outside the government, which is currently the nation's largest employer. Commonly, men (even those working in government) have to learn a trade to supplement their family's income.

Schooling is compulsory between the ages of six and fifteen, although this is not strictly enforced. Most children complete primary school. Slightly more boys are enrolled than girls, though there are initiatives in place to reduce the gap. Of those who finish primary school, most continue on to secondary school, although the gap between male and female attendance widens. Literacy rates for women are far below those for men, with only 58 percent of women able read, compared to 75 percent of men.

Rural areas lack sufficient numbers of schools, teachers, and supplies. The building of more schools has opened some educational opportunities to the poor. Most Egyptians attend public schools, which are often overcrowded. The curriculum is based on memorization, exams, and strict discipline. National exams are taken twice a year. Students prepare for months before the exams, and families often hire private tutors. The results determine how students will advance in their schooling. The first year that students are tested, the results determine whether a student will attend a technical

secondary school (which teaches students a trade) or a general secondary school (which prepares students to attend a university). In general secondary schools, the final three years of testing determine which university a student can attend.

Universities are located in most urban centers, and nearly half of all students are women. The government's promise of employment after graduation has prompted a rush toward higher education. Competition is fierce for spots in the top public universities and for those wishing to study the most prestigious subjects: medicine and engineering. Students are generally more interested in attending universities than vocational schools, but the result has been an overabundance of graduates with degrees and very few related jobs to be had.

Health

Egypt has many excellent doctors, but medical facilities are limited, especially in rural areas. Typhoid, bilharzia, hepatitis, and other diseases are prevalent in Egypt. A UN program sends doctors and volunteers into villages for one-week clinics (medical caravans) to provide hygiene education (such as how to brush teeth), examine children, dispense medicine, give shots, administer first aid, and teach family planning. The government has expanded this program by establishing a hospital in every small city. Private hospitals for the wealthy are equipped with the latest medical technology.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Egypt, 3521 International Court NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 895-5400; web site www.egyptembassy.net. Egyptian Tourist Authority, 630 Fifth Avenue, Suite 2305, New York, NY 10111; phone (212) 332-2570; web site www.egypt.travel.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	80,471,869 (rank=16)
Area, sq. mi.	386,662 (rank=31)
Area, sq. km.	1,001,450

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	101 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	108 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$5,900
Adult literacy rate	83% (male); 59% (female)
Infant mortality rate	26 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	70 (male); 75 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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