



Technology Integration Division

May 2007



DEFENSE LANGUAGE INSTITUTE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CENTER

EGYPTIAN CULTURAL ORIENTATION

Table of Contents

<u>A BRIEF PROFILE OF EGYPT</u>	5
INTRODUCTION	5
GEOGRAPHY	5
MAJOR CITIES	10
HISTORY	12
GOVERNMENT	16
MEDIA	16
ECONOMY	17
ETHNIC GROUPS AND LANGUAGES	18
<u>RELIGION</u>	21
<u>TRADITIONS</u>	27
GREETINGS	27
HOSPITALITY	28
DRESS CODES	29
CUISINE	30
NON-RELIGIOUS CELEBRATIONS	31
SOCIAL EVENTS	31
WEDDINGS	31
FUNERALS	33
DO'S AND DON'TS	35
<u>URBAN LIFE</u>	36
URBANIZATION ISSUES	36
URBAN SOCIETY	37
EDUCATION	37
HEALTH CARE AND SANITATION	38
TRANSPORTATION AND TRAFFIC	40
DAILY LIFE	42
DINING OUT	43
MARKETPLACE	44
CRIME AND DEMONSTRATIONS	46
<u>RURAL LIFE</u>	47
RURAL ECONOMY	47
RURAL LIFESTYLE	48
GENDER ROLES IN RURAL AREAS	49
HOUSING AND LAND USE	49
WHO'S IN CHARGE?	50

HEALTH AND SANITATION	50
RURAL EDUCATION	51
RURAL TRANSPORTATION	52
LAND MINES	52
BORDER CROSSINGS AND CHECKPOINTS	53
<u>FAMILY LIFE</u>	<u>55</u>
THE EGYPTIAN HOUSEHOLD	55
STATUS OF WOMEN	56
MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE	58
NAMING CONVENTIONS	59

A Brief Profile of Egypt

Introduction

Egypt has a major role in Middle Eastern geopolitics. Connecting Africa to the Asian continent and bordering Israel, Sudan, and Libya, this nation is in a unique geographical position. It is the interchange point between the Mediterranean and Red Sea and controls the Suez Canal through which much of the world's oil is shipped. Through its border on the Mediterranean Sea, Egypt (*el-Misr*) has historically traded and exchanged knowledge and ideas with Europe and beyond. In a larger context, this diverse country is a crossroads of major political and cultural currents in the world today. It is one of the first Middle Eastern countries to open up to the West. A U.S. ally and a stabilizing force for U.S. policy in the Middle East, Egypt is at the same time struggling with serious economic and political challenges within its own borders.



Geography

Area

Located in northeastern Africa, Egypt occupies a total surface area of 1,001,450 sq km (622,272 sq mi). About 95% of that land is arid desert. The remaining 5% is the narrow valley of the Nile River, which bisects the country in a north-south direction. Living on only 3.5% of Egypt's land surface,¹ almost all Egyptians have settled in the Nile Valley and Delta.

Egypt is bounded to the north by the Mediterranean Sea and to the south by Sudan. Libya lies to the west. Egypt's eastern coastline borders the Red Sea, which extends into the Gulf of Suez. East of the Suez Canal is the triangular outcrop of land known as Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. On its eastern side, the Sinai shares a border with Israel and continues south along the Gulf of Aqaba.

Egypt is demarcated by five regions. The first two are the highly populated Nile River Valley and Delta.² The Nile River cuts through Egypt from south to north, its trenchlike valley bordered by cliffs as far north as Cairo. Here, 160 km (99 mi) south of the Mediterranean coast, the Nile spreads into a broad, alluvial delta. Seven branches of the river once flowed through the Nile Delta, but now there are only two, the Rosetta Branch to the west and the Damietta Branch to the east.

A third region, the Eastern Desert (Arabian Desert), lies east of the Nile River. This dry, uninhabited land covers about 220,000 sq km (136,701 sq mi) and is dissected by wadis (dry riverbeds), rising to mountains near the Red Sea. Humidity is higher in the southern part of this desert, where a few shrubs and trees are found growing in the valleys.

¹ Think Quest. "Ancient Egypt." 2000. <http://library.thinkquest.org/J001769/geography.html>

² Some sources consider the Nile River Valley and Delta as one region.

Centuries ago, the Eastern Desert was mined for its rich supply of ore and rocks, including gold, limestone, sandstone, granite, and calcite.

West of the Nile is another region known as the Western Desert, or Libyan Desert. It covers about two-thirds of Egypt's land area (ca. 700,000 sq km, or 434,960 sq mi).³ One of the most arid regions on earth, it is mostly uninhabited. Its few permanent settlements are found in the six oases which dot the area. Egypt's fifth region is the Sinai Peninsula, east of the Gulf of Suez and the Suez Canal. This triangular area covers around 61,100 sq km (37,965 sq mi)⁴ and borders Israel on its east. Its southeastern shoreline borders the Gulf of Aqaba and its western shoreline merges into the Gulf of Suez. The Sinai is covered with dry, rocky hills, concentrated in the south.

Egypt historically was divided into Upper Egypt, the southern part of the country from Aswan to Sudan, and Lower Egypt, from Aswan north to the Nile Delta. This split goes back to antiquity, when one culture developed in the north and another in the south.

Climate

Egypt is hot, sunny, and dry for most of the year. An exception to this is the northern region, which can be cool in December, January, and February. Average low temperatures in winter are 14° C (57° F), with high temperatures in summer around 30° C (86° F). The desert interior also has two seasons, but temperatures are more extreme. Summer temperatures in the interior vary from 7° C (44° F) at night to a hot 43° C (109° F) in the daytime. Winter temperatures in the desert fall as low as 0° C (32° F) at night.⁵ What little rain there is falls mostly along the Mediterranean coast. Alexandria receives about 200 mm (8 in) of annual rainfall, and inland, Cairo receives a little over 1 cm (.39 in) annually. Farther inland, the climate is even drier.

Bodies of Water

Nile River

To the Nile River, it is said, Egypt owes "its essence, its culture and its life."⁶ The longest river in the world, the Nile supports almost all of Egypt's agriculture and population. The Greek historian Herodotus described Egypt as a "gift of the Nile" because the river's annual floods assured that the barren land would be transformed and yield agricultural productivity.⁷ Annually, the river brought rich silt from the monsoon-swept Ethiopian highlands. Each July, the waters of the Nile began to rise, reaching flood level by the end of August. About two months later the flood receded, leaving behind its deposit of silt as well as new streams and lagoons supporting fish and wildlife. This cyclic bond between the Nile and the Egyptian people defined Egypt as a great civilization for over five millennia. To ancient Egyptians the dry desert areas surrounding the Nile represented

³ Information Technology Associates. ITA. "Egypt Western Desert." Nov. 2004. http://www.photius.com/countries/egypt/geography/egypt_geography_western_desert.html

⁴ 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))

⁵ Tour Egypt. "Egypt Climate and Weather." 2007. <http://touregypt.net/climate.htm>

⁶ "Egypt: Gift of the Nile." Robert Morkot, Ed. 1989. Chicago: Passport Books.

⁷ Herodotus was a Greek historian.

chaos, ruled by the god Seth. The Nile River transformed the earth, annually producing rebirth by spreading life-giving waters and silt over the dry, sun-blasted wasteland.

The Nile covers 6,695 km (4,160 mi) in its entirety, 1,600 km of that distance in Egypt.⁸ Its long journey begins in Uganda and Ethiopia where it is known respectively as the White Nile and the Blue Nile. In Sudan, these two tributaries merge into one river. Between the Sudan and Aswan in Egypt, the river passes through six cataracts. These shallow rapids historically blocked navigation on the Nile except during its summer floods. Flowing south to north, the river fans out into the Nile Delta at Cairo and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. Farmed for at least 5,000 years, the Nile Delta is one of the world's most intensely cultivated regions.

Lake Nasser

Lake Nasser, Egypt's insurance policy against drought, is 550 km (342 mi) in length and 35 km (22 mi) across at its widest point. This vast reservoir was created when the Aswan High Dam was constructed on the Nile River between 1960 and 1970. About 17% of Lake Nasser is in Sudan, and water is distributed by agreement between the two countries.



Construction of this monumental structure was controversial. When the World Bank hesitated to finance the dam, the U.S. and Great Britain backed out of the project. The Soviet Union provided much of the funding, taking advantage of the political opportunity to increase its influence in Africa. Finally, Egypt arranged its own funding when it nationalized the Suez Canal to help pay for the dam's construction.

The Aswan High Dam has brought much benefit to the country. It protects increasing numbers of people who live along the river against yearly flood while providing water for agriculture. The water supply in the Lake Nasser reservoir helped Egypt survive a drought that caused famine in Tanzania and Ethiopia from 1979 to 1987. The dam has expanded the amount of land available for cultivation. Not least, it supplies Egypt with about half of its needed electricity.

On the negative side, the High Dam flooded much of Nubia, displacing approximately 90,000 people. It has also disrupted the environment in other ways. Silt that had annually fertilized the Nile floodplain is now held inside the reservoir, decreasing its storage capacity. To replace the natural silt, farmers are now using artificial fertilizers which pollute the river and delta. The trapping of nutrients behind the dam has caused the fishing industry in the Mediterranean to decline, as nutrients needed by fish populations no longer make their way down the river. The delta itself, no longer renewed by sand and silt from the river, has eroded and lost much of its fertility. Finally, poor drainage practices cause the cultivated land along the river to be saturated, increasing salinity and damaging the soil.

⁸ Yahoo! Education. Encyclopedia: "Nile." 2006.
<http://education.yahoo.com/reference/encyclopedia/entry/Nile>

Suez Canal

The Suez Canal is one of the world's most heavily used shipping channels. It runs 166 km (103 mi) in a north-south direction between the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea. Constructed by the French-owned Suez Canal Co. using forced Egyptian labor, the Suez Canal was the largest public-works project in Egypt since the building of the pyramids. Before it opened in 1869, goods were often transported by offloading them from ships and carrying them overland between the two waterways. Construction of the canal eliminated the need for such difficult, labor-intensive arrangements.

After 1875, the canal came under British control until Egypt nationalized it in 1956. This act led to attack from Britain, France, and Israel and closure of the canal. The Suez Canal was also closed by the Six-Day War in 1967 and remained closed until 1975. Because of its strategic importance, the Suez Canal is protected by international treaty. The U.S. Dept. of Energy identifies it as a “geographic chokepoint” or passageway that is essential to international oil trade and is also vulnerable to accident or attack.⁹ Around 7.5% of the world's current oil trade is transported through the Suez Canal, which meets the Mediterranean at the Egyptian town of Port Said.¹⁰

Mediterranean Sea

Forming Egypt's northern boundary, the Mediterranean Sea is the world's largest inland sea. It lies between the continents of Europe and Africa, connected to the Atlantic Ocean on the west by the Strait of Gibraltar. On its east lies the westernmost point of the Asian continent. It is connected to the Red Sea by the Suez Canal and to the Black Sea by the Turkish Straits.

To the Romans, the Mediterranean was known as *mare nostrum* (“our sea”), but it was shared as a trade route by many emerging civilizations including Egypt. Its name derives from the Latin *medius* (“center”) and *terra* (“world”), meaning that the cultures on its shores considered it the center of the world. More than a means for peaceful trading and cultural exchange, the Mediterranean also served as a route for war and colonization among the cultures that surrounded it. Today it continues to elevate the importance of the region for its access to the world's most strategic passageways.

Red Sea

Located between the continents of Africa and Asia, the Red Sea is an extension of the Indian Ocean. Its western coast borders Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt. At its northern end, the Red Sea narrows into the Gulf of Suez on the western side of the Sinai and the Gulf of Aqaba on the eastern side. Yemen and Saudi Arabia lie on the Red Sea's eastern coastline. To connect to the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea passes through the Gulf of Aden.



⁹ Answers.com. Encyclopedia of Espionage, Intelligence, and Security. “Suez Canal.” 2004. <http://www.answers.com/topic/suez-canal>

¹⁰ BBC News. “Suez: End of empire.” Reynolds, Paul. 24 July 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/5199392.stm

This body of water serves vital functions. Its ocean traffic includes oil tankers, cargo ships, ocean liners, and fishing boats. It also provides household and industrial water for cities on its banks. Since the Red Sea is extremely salty, numerous desalination plants operate in the area, purifying the water for drinking. Several Egyptian resorts are located on the Red Sea in the Sinai Peninsula and along the country's eastern shoreline. Shipping ports are located on the Red Sea, including Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, Mukalla in Yemen, and Suez at the entrance of the Suez Canal in Egypt.

Topography

The Sahara Desert covers most of Egypt. North of Aswan it is usually called the Western Desert (Libyan Desert) west of the Nile, and the Eastern Desert (Arabian Desert) east of the Nile. Inaccessible in many areas, the Western Desert is marked by seven low-lying basins. Six of these are fresh water oases, fed by the Nile or by groundwater. The six areas are able to support small settlements and limited agriculture. Among them and close to the Libyan border is Siwa, Egypt's westernmost oasis. Here, surrounded by cliffs, the ancient Temple of Amun was visited by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE. Today the small oasis is an agricultural center for date palms and olive trees, and the small town of Siwa is being developed as a tourist site.

The five other fresh-water oases are Fayyum in the north, Bahriya, Farafira, Dakhila in west central Egypt, and Kharga Oasis in the south. The largest is Kharga, where the irrigated land supports cultivation of dates, citrus fruits, olives, and vegetables. Fayyum Oasis is also agricultural land where the irrigation system makes use of canals that were dug in 1800 BCE.

The seventh basin, Qattara, is below sea level and covered with highly saline lakes, swamps, and marshes. Situated in northwestern Egypt just to the east of Siwa Oasis, Qattara covers a fairly large area of about 23,000 sq km (8,900 sq mi). This inhospitable region is devoid of population except for a small number of Bedouins and their herds.

The Great Sand Sea is the third largest accumulation of sand in the world. Around the size of the state of Oregon, the Great Sand Sea forms a natural barrier between Egypt and Libya to the west. Its southern boundary is the Gilf Kabir Plateau near Egypt's southwestern corner, and its northern edge is at Siwa Oasis.

Far to the east, the mountainous Red Sea Hills rise out of the Eastern Desert and border Egypt's east coast along the Red Sea. The terrain here is extremely dry, covered only sparsely with scrub brush. Some of the mountains in these rocky, desolate hills rise to over 2,187 m (7,000 ft). The highest peak is Mt. Shaiyb el-Banat.

The rugged Sinai Peninsula is scored by wadis and covered with colored rocks and granite mountains. In the southern Sinai, sharply serrated peaks include Mt. Catherine (Gabal Katrina), Egypt's highest mountain at 2,637 m (8,652 ft) elevation. Mt. Sinai (Gabal Musa, also called Mt. Horeb) also lies in this southern region, south of Mt. Catherine. Mt. Sinai and Mt. Catherine are part of a group sometimes known as the Holy Mountains for their religious importance to both Islam and Christianity.

Biodiversity

Egypt has no forests and very few native trees. Minimal plant life is found in its deserts, except for areas where water is present. The oases of the Western Desert support grasses and groves of date palm, olive, and citrus trees. East of the Nile River, the Eastern Desert is mostly devoid of vegetation. However, in the wadis of the Red Sea Hills, thorny shrubs and other small plants can be found as well as tamarisk, acacia, and a leafless tree known as *markh*. The Nile Valley supports profuse foliage, including water plants, grasses, reeds, and date palm groves. Eucalyptus, sycamore, and cypress trees have been introduced into the country and many of these thrive in the Nile Valley. The papyrus of antiquity which used to grow along the Nile River now only grows in cultivated areas.

Of the wild animals inhabiting the country, the mountain sheep is the largest, found in the southern regions of the Western Desert. Other desert animals are the gazelle, desert fox, jackal, mongoose, and wild boar. In the Qattara Depression, a few cheetahs have been spotted. Crocodiles live in the Nile region, now isolated to one area south of the Aswan High Dam. Poisonous snakes are found throughout Egypt and include the cobra and some viper species. A rich bird life includes over 200 species of migrating birds as well as falcons, golden eagles, egrets, and herons.

Major Cities

Cairo

Cairo, Egypt's capital, is an ancient city. The area where it stands has been inhabited from as early as the 4th millennium BCE, evolving through nine distinct cities. Their structural remains lie in the ground beneath Cairo and its environs. Only recently, an ancient sun temple with statues of the pharaoh Ramses II was discovered under a marketplace in a suburb of Cairo. The site was part of the old city of Heliopolis, the center of sun worship during Egypt's Old Kingdom.

The layout of Cairo's old medieval section remains very similar to what it was during the 12th century. In the mid-nineteenth century, plans were made to modernize the city and make it look more European. City planners created a quarter with public gardens, grand squares, tree-lined boulevards, elegant buildings, and an Italian-style opera house. Cairo is expanding outwards and is surrounded by a mix of suburbs and satellite cities complete with housing developments, schools, mosques, and shopping malls.

This commercial and political hub of Egypt is also weighed down by poverty, slums, and overcrowding. The largest city in the Middle East and Africa, Cairo has a growth rate that has overwhelmed public services. Over 350,000 people are born here annually, and many have migrated to the city since WWII, all of which has led to a housing crisis. In an area known as the City of the Dead, up to three million people live as squatters in cemeteries. City services are minimal for the poor, and up to one third of Cairo's residents lack running water and sewers. In addition, infrastructure problems include leaking pipes, destabilizing the ground beneath. As a result, buildings have collapsed under their own weight. The air is polluted and said to be the equivalent of smoking 30 cigarettes a day.

Alexandria

Located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, Egypt's second largest city is only 225 km (140 mi) from Cairo but has a more southern European atmosphere. For almost a thousand years, Alexandria formed a bridge between Europe and Africa, dominating the Mediterranean area culturally and politically. Ptolemy, one of Alexander the Great's generals, invited artists and scholars from all over the world to come to Alexandria and promote learning in the arts and sciences. His dynasty founded the Great Library, where Greek and Egyptian culture and learning were enshrined.



For centuries, Alexandria was the capital of Egypt, but after Islamic rulers made Cairo the capital, Alexandria declined. In the modern era, it became a center of commerce and cosmopolitanism. Its population today is around six million.¹¹ Alexandria is Egypt's largest seaport and an industrial area where petroleum is refined and cotton textiles and other export products are produced.

Aswan

Egypt's southernmost city is rich in history and lore. In ancient times, Aswan was an ivory market and trading gateway from which caravans set forth on their journeys south to Nubia and Central Africa. The area was also believed to be very close to the source of the Nile. At Aswan, the annual Nile flood in Egypt was first sighted, setting in motion a chain of events around planting and agriculture.

Aswan is situated in southern Egypt near the first cataract (rapids) of the Nile River on its east bank. One of the driest cities in the world, it has long been famed as a winter resort and recreational area. After 1960, Aswan became an industrial center when hydroelectric production began in the region from the completion of the Aswan High Dam to the south.

Luxor

The gateway to some of Egypt's largest surviving monuments in the Nile Valley, Luxor sits among the ruins of the ancient city of Thebes, the capital of Egypt through two dynasties. The governors of Thebes at one time ruled the entire country, including an area extending into what is now Libya and Sudan. After its decline Thebes remained Egypt's religious capital for centuries. Ancient Thebans designated the isolated and empty desert region west of the Nile as a huge burial ground, the Theban Necropolis.

Lying on the east bank of the Nile across from the Necropolis, Luxor is today a highly commercialized tourist center and the oldest tourist site in Upper Egypt. From the time of the Roman Empire and earlier, travelers visited Luxor to view the temples and royal tombs of Thebes. Because of the historical value of the ruins, the government has developed Luxor into a major site for Egypt's tourism industry. It is a highly popular destination. Visitors have written about how competing vendors at Luxor pressure tourists to buy souvenirs, excursions, and tickets for admission to the sites.

¹¹ U.S. Dept. of State. "Background Note: Egypt." March 2007. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5309.htm>

Suez

A small village in its early centuries, Suez later became prosperous from the spice trade and from its status as a naval base for the Ottoman Empire. Suez's growth was also supported by commerce from pilgrimages to Mecca. Today, it remains a departure point for pilgrims traveling to the holy city.

Suez is also the southern terminus of the Suez Canal. The opening of the Canal in 1869 led to the need for an infrastructure for ships in transit. This sustained the development of Suez into a modern city. It is now one of Egypt's largest ports, vital as 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. Cairo lies 134 km (83 mi) to the west.

History

Early History

Nomads from central Africa, Asia, and the West began moving through Egypt between 8000 and 5000 BCE. They settled in the Nile Valley, where rich silt deposited from yearly floods supported cultivation of the land. Agriculture, towns, and writing symbols (hieroglyphics) began to take form around the sixth millennium BCE.

By the fourth millennium BCE, the confederations known as Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt were feuding over power and resources.¹² The two regions united in 3100 BCE, leading to the establishment of a government ruled by pharaohs, or god-kings.¹³ Centralized government thus emerged in this country whose geography dictated that civilization and its structures be organized around one source of survival, the Nile River.

In Egypt's Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms (2625–1075 BCE), power ebbed and flowed between rulers and centers of power. Pyramids testifying to the eternal greatness of the entombed Pharaohs were built at state expense using forced labor. Egypt expanded into Nubia and Asia and became an imperial power, and the art and culture of Egypt spread throughout the world. This age saw the rise of the new monotheistic sun-god Aten under the powerful king Akhenaten and his queen Nefertiti. Their reign was followed by a return to the polytheistic gods and their priesthood whom King Akhenaten had briefly overthrown. Altogether, the pharaonic era lasted some thirty centuries before the Greek and Roman empires invaded Egypt.

Imperial Egypt fragmented into small fiefdoms and was conquered by foreign rulers from Nubia, Persia, Greece, Libya, and Assyria. Alexander the Great's rule marked the end of ancient Egypt as a political entity, and native culture declined during subsequent Roman rule that ended in 640 CE.¹⁴ By this time, the indigenous religion had largely disappeared, along with Egypt's spoken language, which eventually merged into Coptic. Hieroglyphic writing also vanished along with the knowledge of how to decipher it.

¹² The harsh southern desert of Upper Egypt was known as the Red Land and the rich delta of Lower Egypt was the Black Land.

¹³ Facts on File, Inc. "Empire of Ancient Egypt." Christensen, Wendy. 2005. New York.

¹⁴ CE means Common Era (corresponds to *Anno Domini*, or A.D., after the birth of Christ)

Islamic Egypt

In the seventh century CE, the Arab prophet Muhammad founded Islam and unified the feudal tribes of Arabia around the new religion. Islam began expanding rapidly into other countries, including Egypt. In 641 CE, an Islamic army arrived and established Islam's first Egyptian capital on a site which would later become Cairo. Arabic became the new language, and Sunni Islam gradually replaced the old pagan gods and co-existed alongside the older Coptic (Christian) religion as well.

From Salah el-Din to the French

Egypt during the Middle Ages entered a period of independence, but it would not last. First, responding to the aggression of the Western Crusades, General Salah el-Din (Saladin) fought back and became a heroic figure. He established a new dynasty in which Egypt experienced cultural growth and prosperity. This, however, was followed by years of devastation. Between 1347 and 1350, Egypt was swept by the bubonic plague (Black Death), and almost 40 percent of the population was killed by this disease.

Egypt's fortunes continued to decline. During Mamluk rule of Egypt in the fifteenth century, Vasco da Gama discovered a sea route around the Cape of Good Hope. At that time, shipping lanes bypassed Egypt completely, reducing the country's trade and influence. Weakened commercially and politically, Egypt was conquered by the Ottoman Turkish Empire, followed by a brief period of French rule beginning in 1798. Entry of the French signaled new competition for Egypt by European powers. An Anglo-Ottoman alliance ended French rule three short years later and ushered in an era of British domination that would shape Egypt into the current era.

Modern Egypt

A power vacuum existed in Egypt after the French left and Mohammed Ali Pasha, an Ottoman officer, stepped in. He modernized Egypt and created an institutional state by allying with peasants and wealthy import-export merchants, and by using effective military power. His government built canals, introduced public education, and reshaped the military after a French model. Most importantly, Ali took control of the lands owned by Mamluk feudal landowners and ordered farmers to cultivate cotton. His introduction of cotton as a mainstay of the economy had enormous long-term repercussions for future trade and relations with Great Britain and the United States.

Cotton and Great Britain

After the Industrial Revolution, Great Britain needed raw cotton to supply its manufacturing needs. When America's cotton production fell after the Civil War, this opened the door for Egypt to become Britain's main supplier of cotton. Britain then manufactured the raw cotton and sold it back to its colonies, becoming ever more invested in the Egyptian economy through high-interest loans. In developing their businesses, leaders of Egyptian industry borrowed more than they could pay back. The British took advantage of the situation and used debt recovery as an excuse for their occupation of Egypt in 1882.

New Shipping Channel: The Suez Canal

Built between 1859 and 1869, the Suez Canal gave the British further vested interest in Egypt by providing them a strategic shipping channel. 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.

British Colonialism and Egyptian Nationalism

The British ruled Egypt by dividing and conquering, a strategy that had worked well for them in the past. They ruled indirectly, through local Egyptian administrators whom they controlled such as King Fu'ad, installed to head a parliamentary monarchy. The British abolished Egypt's Protectorate status and recognized it as an independent state in 1922. Still, they kept control of all communications, defense, the legal system, and the Suez Canal. Their continued interference energized a nationalist movement.

Nationalism in Egypt found expression in Pan-Arabism, which developed in several directions. One of its offshoots was the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 and based on the philosophy of Sayyed el-Qutb,¹⁵ who was later executed by Egyptian President Nasser. The Brotherhood mixed religion and politics with charitable giving and education.¹⁶ This integrated approach of providing social support and assistance to the common people was popular and the organization grew rapidly. Another Pan-Arabist group, the Arab League, opposed the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. When the state of Israel was created in 1948, League countries joined to attack it.

Nasser and Independence

Egyptian officer Gamal Abdul Nasser gained power for himself and his country when he effectively headed a movement to overthrow the pro-British government. The group declared Egypt a Republic in 1953 and proceeded to develop the country into a more modern and powerful nation.

One of Nasser's first major projects was to build a dam that could harness the power of the Nile River, controlling its floods and generating electricity. A storm was set in motion when Britain and the U.S. withdrew funding for construction, protesting an arms deal that Nasser had concluded with the Soviet bloc. In response, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 to secure revenue, which led Great Britain and France to join with Israel in attacking Egypt. The Soviet Union then threatened to intervene in the Suez Crisis on Egypt's side. The U.S. government opposed any such intervention and was also disturbed by Britain's and France's secret war planning. The Americans wanted to block them from

¹⁵ 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 Shari'a. 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.

¹⁶ Hassan el-Banna (the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood) 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.

gaining control in the Middle East and also block growing Soviet influence. For these reasons, the U.S. stood behind Egypt in the war.

Nasser gained immense stature from this chain of events. By standing up to British pressure in the Suez crisis, he became the symbolic leader of Arab nationalism.

Anwar Sadat and Peace with Israel

Ongoing war with Israel was debilitating Egypt. In 1967, Nasser sent forces into the Sinai and blockaded the Tiran Straits, cutting off an Israeli port. Israel responded in a surprise attack and destroyed Egypt's air force.¹⁷ The Suez Canal was to remain closed for eight years, and Israel permanently occupied the Sinai, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and West Bank.



Courtesy of Wikipedia
Anwar Sadat

Anwar Sadat, Nasser's successor, believed that Egypt's recovery and development depended on a shift toward better relations with Israel, and he began negotiating for peace. In the 1979 Camp David accords promoted by the U.S., Israel agreed to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. In return, Egypt recognized Israel's right to exist as a nation. The new accord, however, did not proceed unchallenged. This agreement for a separate 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 has remained at peace with Israel and has also regained prestige in the Arab world. This standing became more visible when Arab League Headquarters were returned to Cairo in 1990.¹⁸

Recent Events

A trend of increasing opposition to the current government has appeared, resulting from dire economic, political, and social conditions. A population explosion in the 1980s led to joblessness and lowered living standards. Radical Islamists made frequent attempts to kill the President and other officials in protest of the secular state and its repressive policies against them. To weaken the government, they also struck at the economy and attacked tourism, one of the state's major sources of revenue. Several attacks took place, the most well known being the killing of 58 tourists in Luxor in 1997.

In efforts to crack down on opposition, the government has severely curtailed democratic processes. Bloggers who criticize the president or the government have been arrested or imprisoned.¹⁹ The government has also repressed voting rights. In 2007 the constitution was amended to strengthen police powers and remove judicial supervision of elections. It

¹⁷ This 1967 war is known as the Six-Day War.

¹⁸ When Sadat recognized Israel in 1979, the Arab League headquarters were removed to Tunis in protest.

¹⁹ 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

also now prohibits all political activity based on religion. And in response to electoral gains made by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2005 elections, the new amendments bar the Brotherhood from becoming a political party.

Government

Egypt is a republic in which the government is officially secular, yet in practice Islam retains status as the official religion. The Egyptian constitution was adopted in 1971 and has since been amended three times, most recently in 2007. Power is highly concentrated in the hands of the president and the National Democratic Party, although several opposition parties are allowed to be part of the political system.

The executive branch of the government consists of the president, who retains authority to appoint a prime minister and cabinet. Voters elect the president for six-year terms, and there are no term limits. The current president, Hosni Mubarak, has served since 1981. The legislative branch consists of the People's Assembly which sits for a five-year term, but it can be dissolved earlier by the president. Of the total 454 seats in the assembly, ten are appointed by the president and 444 are elected by popular vote.

In 2005, the government amended its constitution to allow for more competitive, multi-candidate elections. The result, however, was electoral gains for the Muslim Brotherhood, whose members ran as independents and won 20 percent of the seats.²⁰ Although Mubarak was reelected President and his party received over 70 percent of seats, they were concerned over the Brotherhood's electoral success. It is partly this concern that led to amending the constitution in 2007 to prohibit all religious political activity. Also under the amended constitution, the Brotherhood is blocked from attaining intended status as a political party.

Egypt has a relatively independent Supreme Constitutional Court and the judicial system is primarily based on French legal principles under the Napoleonic Code. Marriage and family law decisions, however, rely more on the involved party's religion and its edicts that apply. Since the majority of Egyptians are Muslim, Shari'a (Islamic Law) is used to settle most family law issues.

Media

The Egyptian Constitution provides rights to free speech, assembly, and freedom of opinion, but a 1976 amendment narrows and weakens those rights. In Egypt today, government censors control the dissemination of news. Certain topics are taboo, such as sexuality, the presidential family, or political violence. Discussions of religion are subject to censorship. The government has removed books from circulation on topics deemed offensive, and has sent people to prison for criticizing religion in writing. In 1995, the Parliament adopted a press law which forbids criticizing state institutions or officials. The penalty is jail time. In 2007, a blogger was sentenced to four years in prison for insulting the president and inciting sedition. As the internet has become more prominent, the government has increasingly blocked opposition websites and monitored e-mail.

²⁰ BBC News. "Timeline: Egypt." 22 January 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/790978.stm

The non-governmental Egyptian Organization for Human Rights has tracked and criticized offenses against free expression in Egypt. In its 2002 report, it cites imprisonment of journalists and government censorship as violations of Egyptian law.²¹ Human Rights Watch reports that the Egyptian government is intimidating students and “stifling academic freedom in universities by censoring course books [and] preventing research into controversial issues.”²² Censorship has had the effect of undermining Egypt’s standing as the Arab world’s cultural and informational center.

Egypt has a wide range of media outlets. In Cairo, eight daily newspapers and various magazines are published. Most political parties have their own newspapers and are accustomed to printing debates over public issues. There are also several TV satellite channels which broadcast cultural, sports, and educational programs to the Middle East, the U.S. East Coast, and Europe. ETV, Egypt’s government-controlled ground-broadcast television, sells programming to the entire Arab world. Egyptian radio stations are also government controlled, although compared to TV they have more broadcast freedom in their news programs and analysis. Radio stations transmit overseas in 33 languages.²³

Egyptians receive satellite stations from Saudi Arabia and Gulf nations, and Western stations such as BBC and CNN. Broadcasts are received in Arabic, English, and French.



© Nir Hussain
Receiving satellite stations

Economy

The Egyptian government has tried in recent years to create policies that will stimulate business competition. An economic reform program was put in place in the early 1990s but it stalled. Again in 2004, the government tried to reform economic policies by lowering taxes, privatizing enterprises, and reducing energy subsidies, all with mixed results. Heavy industry remains in the public sector, and the cotton industry remains highly regulated. However, Egypt’s economy is generally becoming more decentralized and market-oriented and share trading has sharply risen on Egypt’s stock exchange since government privatization. GDP in 2005-06 grew about 5% per year.²⁴

To stimulate Egypt’s trade, the U.S. allows products to be imported tariff-free if they are produced in Qualified Industrial Zones using a percentage of Israeli materials. These trade zones have strengthened Egypt’s export market to the U.S., particularly in the textile industry. They have also opened export opportunities for sectors such as furniture, processed foods, leather goods, and information technology.

²¹ The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights. VI. “The Right to Freedom of Expression.” 2002. <http://eohr.org/annual/wr02/ar8.htm>

²² Guardian Unlimited. “Egypt under fire for censorship.” Whitaker, Brian. 9 June 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1502158,00.html>

²³ 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>

²⁴ CIA World Factbook. Egypt. “Economy.” 15 March 2007. <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/eg.html#Econ>

On the economy's negative side, government intervention, state-run industries, and a bloated public sector continue to block growth. Wages for government jobs are low, and both poverty and unemployment are widespread in Egypt. According to unofficial estimates, unemployment was around 15-20% in 2006.²⁵ Living standards remain low for average Egyptians, who rely on subsidies for basic necessities. The subsidies in turn have contributed to the growing deficit.

The country's main sources of income for 2006 were tourism, hydrocarbon exports, U.S. foreign aid, and Suez Canal tolls, all vulnerable to outside factors. The tourism industry, for instance, has suffered from attacks against tourists in 1997, 2004, and 2005, although it has stabilized.

Until the mid-twentieth century, Egypt's economy depended on agriculture, historically limited by the small amount of arable land (less than 5% of the total area). Farming land in the Nile Valley and Delta is being lost to soil salinity, erosion, and urbanization. This decreased production, when combined with Egypt's increasing population, has caused agriculture to decline. The agricultural sector remains important, employing more than 40% of the population and providing a 16% share of the gross domestic product (GDP).²⁶ Still, since the mid 1980s, the country has had to import around half of the food it needs. Cotton production, on the other hand, has remained strong. Cotton is a major export product, constituting approximately one third of the world total.²⁷ The government regulates cotton production, although it has privatized many gins and weaving mills, increasing competitiveness with world market prices.

A trading network exists for small-scale middlemen who purchase food crops and trade them between rural areas or into the urban areas. Small farmers are not in a position to bargain on price, and they usually accept the trader's offer.

Ethnic Groups and Languages

Arabic-speaking Egyptians are 98 percent of Egypt's population. A small number of Europeans (approx one percent), including Armenians, Greeks, Italians, and French, also live in Egypt. Another one percent of the population consists of ethnic groups such as Bedouins, Nubians, Berbers, and Beja.

Bedouins

²⁵ Energy Information Administration (eia). "Egypt." Background. July 2006.
<http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Egypt/Background.html>

²⁶ 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?status=ND01NjQuNjEzNCY2PWVuJmZPWVvY3VtZW50cyYzNz1pbmZv>

²⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Egypt. Agriculture and Fishing. The Economy. 2007.
<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-43479/Egypt>

Bedouins can be divided into different subcultural groupings. Nomadic Bedouin tribes live 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. Another cultural difference can be seen in the Gebelieh tribe in the Sinai, originally of Balkan descent. Their origins from what is now Yugoslavia set them apart from Egypt's other Bedouin tribes, who originated in Saudi Arabia centuries ago.

In some Bedouin tribes, leaders (Sheikhs) are picked for their wisdom and judgment. In others, such as the Alagat or Hamada tribes, leadership passes from father to eldest son. Today a number of Bedouins in Egypt have settled on farm lands, living in homes instead of tents that can be packed up and moved. Many have adopted modern culture and technology. Until recently, they were obligated to serve in the Egyptian military, which changed their customary ways of interacting with the outside world. Their culture is changing further as inroads are made into the desert.

Bedouin nomads are known for extending hospitality to visitors, based on their respect for the hardship and dangers of the desert. Guests receive shelter, rest, food, and drink. Their presence is also celebrated with festivities such as music and poetry. Musical instruments that the Bedouin play include a type of flute called a *shabbaba* and a one-stringed violin, *rababa*. They also enjoy singing.

Nubians

Another major ethnic group is the Nubians, Africa's oldest civilization. Their culture along the Nile can be traced from 3800 BCE onwards. It is known that they began building pyramid tombs in the fourth century BCE.²⁸ During one period in the first millennium BCE, the powerful Nubian kingdom of Kush controlled all of Egypt. The Nubians' economy was based on agriculture, intensive cultivation of date palms, and export of dates.²⁹ Also traders, they lived along a major commerce route between the Mediterranean and central Africa and traded gold, ivory, spices, pottery, and incense.

Nubians resettled along the Nile in Upper Egypt after being dislocated by the construction of the Aswan High Dam. When the British built the first Aswan Dam in 1902, water flooded the homes and mosques of the Nubians. As the dam was raised three times in the next 75 years, they had to move to escape the rising water. It was the construction of the Aswan High Dam, however, which resulted in the flooding of most of lower Nubia and the ultimate displacement of over 800,000 people.³⁰ There is no way of knowing how many Nubian temples and tombs lie beneath the waters of Lake Aswan. Many of their temples were removed and reconstructed with help and funding from the U.N. and 50 nations. Now the Nubian people live mostly in the Nile Valley south of

²⁸ Ancient Africa's Black Kingdoms. "Who Are the Nubians?" Myra Wysinger, Ed. <http://www.homestead.com/wysinger/nubians.html>

²⁹ Nubia Museum. "Nubia Today." Prof. Mohamed Alim Ahmed Gadkab, Director of the Center for Nubian Heritage in Cairo. 2003. <http://www.numibia.net/nubia/nubia.htm>

³⁰ "Egypt. Insight Compact Guide." 2003. Singapore: APA Publications.

Aswan. They are the largest of Egypt's linguistic minorities and speak their own indigenous language, which has several dialects.

Berbers

The Berbers are a non-Arab pre-Islamic people. They are defined by their linguistic and cultural identity, including their distinctive music. They refer to themselves as *Amazigh* and speak their own language, part of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Although their origin is not certain, most historians believe they are the original people who populated North Africa. Written references to their culture date back to 3000 BCE or earlier. Their conversion to Islam came late, as they resisted Arab dominance and lived apart from the cities. For these reasons, their practice of Islam often reflects traditional religious beliefs that they have incorporated alongside Islam.



© Leah Ruiz
Berber guide

Berbers are scattered throughout North Africa, tending to live mainly in rural or isolated mountain areas where they practice agriculture. In Egypt, Berbers live in the Western Desert around Siwa Oasis, inhabiting mud brick houses. Their economy is based on date palm agriculture and handicrafts. The Berber dialect spoken at Siwa is heavily influenced by Arabic.

Beja

The Beja are Muslims of northeastern Sudan and southeastern Egypt who speak various dialects of their own Cushitic language. In Egypt, they speak the Bisharin dialect and live in the desert between the Nile River and the Red Sea, indigenous to this region. Although they are related to the ancient Egyptians, they historically resisted being conquered by the Egyptian pharaohs.

Today many of them remain pastoral, with some living sedentary lifestyles in towns. A large number still follow the nomadic life, caring for herds of camels, cattle, sheep, and goats. The Beja are renowned camel traders, and they work this trade along the area of the Red Sea.

Although they are Muslims, they practice a kind of folk Islam and do not feel required to make the pilgrimage to Mecca or follow other precepts of the religion. Their traditional beliefs are mixed with the various religions they have practiced, including worship of Egyptian gods, Christianity, and now Islam. *Shari'a* religious law holds some importance to them, but even more important is their customary Beja law known as *salif* which maintains peace within their clans.

Religion

Introduction

Religious practice in Egypt is diverse, although the government recognizes only three official religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The majority of people (90 percent) are Muslims, most from the Sunni branch. Coptics of the indigenous Christian church of Egypt are another nine percent. The remaining one percent includes Christians who derive from churches such as Catholic, Protestant, or Levantine (Maronite or Greek Orthodox). A small Jewish community remains in Egypt.

Pre-Islamic Religion

Because of the predictable cycles of the Nile River, one can understand why the Egyptians came to believe in life after death. The rise and fall of the flood waters insured that the yearly “death” of the land would be followed by the life-sustaining rebirth of the crops. Rebirth was seen as a natural sequence to death. The Egyptians believed that the old sun vanished every evening on the western horizon only to be reborn in the eastern sky the next morning in the form of Khepry, the young sun. And so humans would also rise and live again. This can be seen in the Theban Necropolis, where the dead were buried in the west to prepare them for rebirth.

Egyptians organized their lives according to solar beliefs about life, death, and rebirth. The east bank of the Nile was for settlements because the sun was born and reborn in the east. The west bank was the preferred area for tombs because every night the sun set, or died, in the west. Tombs were placed in the desert where they would not be disturbed, away from the land that could be used to support life.

Ancient Egyptian religion was polytheistic, with many gods derived from nature. Yet all represented one divine, regenerative force. The pharaoh, a living god, was associated with the falcon god Horus. Egypt’s main gods included Re (Ra), the sun-god who balanced the world, Osiris, the ruler of the underworld, Isis, the goddess of magic, and others. People also worshipped patron deities, local city gods with special powers, and other important gods.



There were two types of temples for worship: cult and mortuary. Cult temples sat on the east bank of the Nile River, dedicated to particular gods. Such temples often included housing for different ranks of priests, libraries for research, and storage areas for grain. Mortuary temples stood opposite on the west bank of the Nile, dedicated to the dead pharaohs who were destined to reunite with the gods.

Whether rich or poor, people prepared their tombs with much thought to ensure they would be well cared for in the afterlife. Poor people had a simple tomb with basic mummification, a grave marker, and a few goods such as beads, food, and pottery. Tombs belonging to rich people were much more elaborate. Pyramids, the ultimate tombs, belonged to pharaohs. Decorated with ornate religious scenes, these structures were

complex, housing the mummies of the pharaoh's family members, their worldly riches, and religious texts.

By the time of Alexander the Great's Ptolemaic dynasty (between 323 and 30 BCE), Egypt had ended as a political entity, its religious practices mixed with those of Greece. During the subsequent Roman occupation, Egypt became largely Coptic Christian, although the ancient beliefs still endured in modified forms.

Islam

Islam came to Egypt in 642 CE and gradually became the dominant religion. Founded by the Arab Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE, Islam was divided into two sects after Muhammad died. The Sunnis favored electing religious leaders, and the Shi'a preferred naming religious leaders descended from Muhammad's family. In the majority Sunni view, religious truth is more easily available to the average believer without a special intermediary between man and God. Accordingly, religious leadership is based on merit that can be earned and is available to all. The Shi'a, however, do not accept this view. They believe that until the Prophet has returned to guide them, human beings cannot not find salvation. They thus conclude that to live in accord with the truth of Islam, people need the help of individuals who are divinely favored by the Prophet's lineage.

All Muslims, whether Sunni or Shi'a, believe that the Holy Qur'an (Koran) contains the words revealed by Allah (God) to the Prophet Muhammad.³¹ They believe in living one's life in accordance with the laws of Allah as set forth in the Qur'an. To accomplish this, believers must follow the Five Pillars of Faith. These include daily prayer, fasting during Ramadan, going on pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, the profession of faith, and giving alms to charities.

The Role of Religion in the Government

Traditionally in Islamic Egypt, legal, educational, and social welfare issues were in the hands of religious officials. Islam was in effect the state religion. Wealthy religious scholars and administrators known as *ulama* wielded great political power and cultivated close ties to the Ottoman and Mamluk rulers. They made alliances with Mohammad Ali during his rise to power, which helped him secure Egypt's independence from the Ottoman Empire. Often landowners, *ulama* managed the funds of schools, mosques, and hospitals, and were involved in commerce and property transfers. They also controlled the *Shari'a* courts, which regulated civil law in Egypt.

During the nineteenth century, members of the government began trying to achieve a secular transformation of public life. To do this, they needed a civil bureaucracy to replace the functions of the *ulama*. Thus, they repeatedly tried to limit their public power and bring religious institutions under closer state control. During his rule, Mohammad Ali brought religious institutions and village administration under centralized state control, using the military to suppress dissent. Initially, the *ulama* were rewarded for helping Ali gain power, and he retained alliances with the wealthier among them. Ultimately,

³¹ The Qur'an is distinct from the *hadith*, which are the sayings of Muhammad.

however, the power of the *ulama* in Egypt was undermined and began to decline in the twentieth century.

After the 1952 Revolution which brought Nasser to power, the remaining power of the *ulama* became weaker as the state became stronger. The government began appointing officials to serve at mosques and religious schools, drawing from outside the ranks of the religious caste. By the turn of the century, Islam was practiced with great diversity in Egypt, depending on one's background, class, or social group. This lack of uniformity still exists. Accusations have been made by devout Muslims who say that Egypt's governments have been too secular and even antireligious since the 1920s. This has led to a backlash and resurgence of conservative religious trends. For instance, *ulama* who supported family planning began adopting positions against family planning and have pressed for legal reform more in line with Islamic teaching. Still, they have remained loyal to the government rather than to the Islamist groups who pressure them.

The Egyptian government today has a somewhat contradictory view of religion. It pronounces itself officially secular, even as it recognizes and privileges Islam as the official religion. Further, the Egyptian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are officially recognized.

Influence of Religion in Daily Life

Muslims, in general, believe that there can be no split between the sacred and the secular. In Egypt this translates to devout religious practice with diverse variations. Believers observe the five formal prayers daily, at sunset, after dark, at dawn, noon, and in the afternoon. Both women and men go to the mosque to pray, or they pray at home on a special prayer rug, facing east toward Mecca. Some religious beliefs are expressed differently according to the circumstances of the believer. For example, Egyptians who are poor may substitute the required pilgrimage to Mecca with a visit to a local shrine, such as the Mosque of el-Hussein in Cairo. Alternately, religious revival movements have followers across class lines and are present throughout society.



Egypt's formal religious establishment promotes orthodoxy in urban areas through *madrassas* or religious schools attached to mosques. The grandest of such schools in Egypt is Al-Azhar University, connected to al-Azhar Mosque. Many Sunnis in Egypt and in the Middle East consider the *ulama* associated with al-Azhar to be the ultimate theological authorities and contact them by phone, letters, and e-mail for advice. The *ulama* issue *fatwas* (opinions) in response to believers' questions, on subjects from finances to family matters.

Alongside formal practice, alternate forms of Islamic worship have developed in Egypt, based on popular religion passed on through oral traditions. Folk practices include belief in *sheikhs*, or local holy men who have a reputation for sanctity. Many Egyptians visit shrines where *sheikhs* are buried to seek cures or intercession for problems such as illness

or family difficulties. People may also worship a *saiyid* (lord) or *saiyida* (lady), believing in their descent from the Prophet's lineage. Examples of this are the granddaughters of the Prophet, Saiyida Nafisa and Saiyida Zeinab. Egyptians furthermore associate themselves with Sufi brotherhoods, another powerful folk tradition. They cultivate a practice of experiencing God through a mystical state of awareness, and have many followers who donate money to the associations and gather to participate in ceremonies.

Because of the sexual segregation of Islamic society in Egypt, the religious practice of men and women varies. For example, in southern Egypt some women follow a custom known as the *zar*, a religious ceremony to help them pacify harmful spirits. Women trained in the tradition organize public meetings at which they use music and dance to induce a state of trance in those possessed. Wealthy women sometimes pay to have malevolent spirits exorcised in more elaborate and lengthy private *zars* conducted in their homes. The *zar* ceremony is considered by Islam to be pagan and is thus prohibited. Still, it is a way for women to share information as they practice a spiritual ceremony, and it has a strong following in Egyptian society.³²

Religious Holidays

Falling on the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, the month-long observation of Ramadan honors the time when Allah (God) revealed the Qur'an to Muhammad. During Ramadan, Muslim adults are obligated to seek spiritual purification by fasting and abstaining from food and drink from dawn to sunset. Only the infirm and young are exempted. When families hear the call for prayer at sunset, they gather for *iftar*, the evening meal that breaks the fast, which can include special desserts and snacks such as almonds, nuts, and dates.

Ramadan alters the usual rhythm of life in Egypt. The long, tiring period of fasting causes interruptions in normal patterns of business and life. Working hours are reduced during Ramadan to allow more time for prayer. There may be restrictions on smoking and drinking, and some restaurants will close during the day. People decorate mosques and city streets in bright colors and play traditional music throughout the night.

Non-Muslims are not expected to observe Ramadan. However, they earn respect by being sensitive to those who are fasting. Non-Muslims should try to avoid eating or smoking in public during the fast. They should also be aware that fasting people may be more irritable and tired than usual.

Ramadan is followed by *Eid el-Fitr* (also called the Lesser Bairam), a three-day feast which rewards fasters for completing the fast of Ramadan. They begin the celebration by going to the mosque for prayer and meditation on good deeds they should do during the feast and throughout the year. After prayers, people joyfully visit families and friends with whom they share special sweets made for this occasion. They continue their three-day feast celebration by visiting friends and going to movies, parks, beaches, or other favored places.

³² Tour Egypt. Feature Story: "The Zar Ceremony." Bizzari, Heba Fatteen. 2003. <http://touregypt.net/featurestories/zar.htm>

Exchange 1: Will you be celebrating the Lesser Bairam?

Soldier:	Will you be celebrating the Lesser Bairam?	HatiHtifloo bil 'eed iS Sughayar?
Local:	Yes!	aywa!

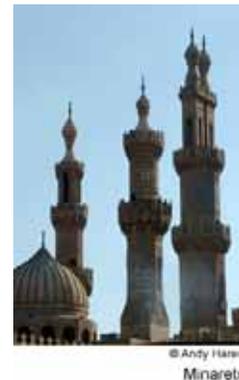
Because Islam is based on the lunar calendar rather than the Western solar calendar, Ramadan and *Eid el-Fitr* move up by about eleven days each year.

Another religious holiday is the Prophet’s birthday, *Moulid an-Nabi*, a celebration that includes parades, with streets lighted in a festive manner. People share special food and sweets on this happy occasion. It is held in the third month of the Islamic calendar.

A fourth main religious holiday is *Eid el-Adha*, which takes place at the end of the pilgrimage period. This traditional family gathering celebrates Ibrahim’s willingness to obey God and sacrifice his son.

Buildings of Worship

There are many mosques in Egypt and most are in Cairo, sometimes called the “City of 1,000 Minarets.” Because Egypt has been ruled by different empires, the complexity and styles of architecture are varied. Some of them have an Islamic school known as a *madrassa* attached to the main building, and others have hospitals or mausoleums in the complex.



Egypt’s oldest mosque is Amr Ibn el-As in Cairo, originally built in 642 CE. Throughout its history, it was not only a place of worship, but also a teaching center and a court where civil disputes could be heard and settled. Another notable mosque and one of the largest in the Islamic world is the Mosque of Sultan Hassan. Work on this mosque began in 1356, funded by the estates of people who had died in the Bubonic Plague that swept through Cairo in 1348.³³

Al-Azhar is one of Egypt’s most important and prestigious mosques in Cairo. Originally a meeting place for Shi’a students, it has remained a focal point of the teaching institute that is connected to it, al-Azhar University. The first lecture was delivered there in 975 CE, making al-Azhar the oldest university in the world. The Mosque is reserved for prayer, and the school is famous for its departments of religion, medicine, foreign languages, and science.

Behavior in Places of Worship

If you wish to visit a mosque, it is a good idea to request permission and respectfully observe the correct protocol. Mosques in Cairo that are classified as historic monuments are usually open to non-Muslim visitors.

³³ Tour Egypt. Egypt Feature Story: “The Mosque and Madrasa of Sultan Hassan.” Kamel, Seif. 27 March 2006. <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/hassanmosque.htm>

Exchange 2: May I enter?

Soldier:	May I enter the mosque/church?	mumkin adKhul il gaami' / il kaneesa?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Those who are not worshipping should avoid visiting the mosque during prayer times, especially the main service held at noon on Fridays.

Exchange 3: When do you pray?

Soldier:	When do you pray?	imta bitSaloo?
Local:	We pray at noon.	binSalee iD Duhir

Inside the mosque it is best not to speak unless spoken to, and even then, respond in a whisper. When people are praying, avoid interrupting them. Similarly, do not walk in front of someone who is praying, as this would invalidate their prayers. Women should cover their head with either a scarf or shawl, men do not necessarily have to do so.

Exchange 4: Do I need to cover my head?

Soldier:	Do I need to cover my head?	anaa miHtaag aghaTee raasee?
Local:	No.	la-a

Mosque protocol also requires that you be alert to separate male and female worship areas in order to enter the correct one. Do not touch the walls or shrines, and always ask before taking photographs. Always take off your shoes before entering the mosque. There will be an area to store them near the entrance.

Exchange 4: Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque?

Soldier:	Must I take off my shoes inside the mosque?	laazim aKhla' il gazma guwa il gaami'?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Finally, unless ordered to do so, never take a search dog into a mosque. Arabs consider dogs to be unclean animals. Taking a dog would cause great offense.

Traditions

Greetings

Egyptians are very warm and friendly people, and they always appreciate polite greetings.

Exchange 6: Good morning.

Soldier:	Good morning.	SabaaH il Kheyr
Local:	Good morning.	SabaaH in noor

Handshakes with a soft grip are the customary greeting between individuals of the same sex. Men and women who are good friends will greet each other with a handshake or a light kiss on both cheeks. Those who are more traditional may not find it appropriate to shake hands with members of the opposite sex. If in doubt, follow the cue of the Egyptian you are meeting.

Exchange 7: Good afternoon.

Soldier:	Good afternoon.	nahaarak sa'eed
Local:	Good afternoon.	nahaarak sa'eed

A typical Egyptian handshake can be somewhat prolonged. Always shake hands with a smile and direct eye contact, which is seen as a sign of sincerity and honesty. If a man is shaking hands with a woman, however, eye contact should be less direct.

Exchange 8: How are you?

Soldier:	How are you?	izayak?
Local:	Fine, very well.	kwayis, il Hamdu lil laah

Egyptian couples often walk down the street holding hands or arm in arm. More overt displays of affection are not considered appropriate.

Exchange 9: Good evening!

Soldier:	Good evening.	masaa il Kheyr
Local:	Good evening.	masaa in noor

In greetings between men and women, the woman should extend her hand first. If she does not, a man should simply bow his head in greeting.

Exchange 10: Good night.

Soldier:	Good night.	tiSbaH 'ala Kheyr
Local:	Good night.	wu inta min ahloo

Exchange 11: Hi, Mr. Mahmoud.

Soldier:	Hi, Mr. Mahmoud.	ahlan ustaaz maHmood
Local:	Hello!	ahlan!
Soldier:	Are you doing well?	izaay il Haal, kuloo tamaam?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

When you meet someone, expect an offer of coffee or tea, which demonstrates hospitality. Even if you are not thirsty or do not normally drink this type of beverage, you should accept it graciously. Declining it would be seen as rejecting the person who offered it to you.



Unless you are a female, do not ask about an Egyptian's wife or daughters specifically. Such a question would be considered inappropriate. Instead, inquire about the health of the entire family.

Exchange 12: How is your family?

Soldier:	How is your family?	izaay il 'eyla?
Local:	They are doing fine, thank you.	kuluhum kewayseen, shukran

In meetings, it is customary to show deference to the group's most senior person, who is likely to be the spokesperson. In Egypt, hierarchy is important, although the group leader seeks consensus and deliberation before making decisions. In negotiations, haggling is common, yet high-pressure tactics should be avoided.

Hospitality

When invited into an Egyptian home, guests are expected to remove their shoes at the entrance. They should dress conservatively, since clothing and appearances are an important indicator of good manners.

Exchange 13: I really appreciate your hospitality.

Soldier:	I really appreciate your hospitality.	anaa shaakir karam Deeyaافتك
Local:	It is nothing.	dee Haaga baseeTa

When arriving for dinner, it is appropriate bring a gift of good quality pastries or sweets. It is also a nice gesture to bring a small gift for the children of the hosts. Avoid bringing alcohol. Good manners dictate that your host will refuse the gift twice, and accept it only the third time that it is offered to him.

Exchange 14: This gift is for you.

Soldier:	This gift is for you.	dee hedeeya 'alashaanak
Local:	I cannot accept this.	maa adarsh a-balha

When you give a gift, always present it with the right hand, never with the left. If the gift is heavy, you should use both hands. Do not expect the host to open the gift in front of you, as gifts are not usually opened when they are received. Egyptian's would interpret such behavior as rude and indicative of greed.

At the dinner table, wait for the host to show you your designated seat. You should eat with your right hand only, as the left hand is reserved for unclean acts. To express good

manners, show appreciation for the food. One way to do this is by asking for a second helping, which compliments the host.

Exchange 15: This food is very good.

Soldier:	This food is very good.	il akil gameel gidan
Local:	It's <i>melokheya belaraneb</i> .	dee mulooKheeya bil araanib

Dress Codes

In general, people in Egypt dress conservatively to make a good impression. Women should avoid wearing clothing that is too tight, too short, or otherwise revealing. Instead, dresses should cover the knees and sleeves cover most of the arm. Men should also dress conservatively and avoid wearing shorts.

Exchange 16: How should I dress?

Soldier:	How should I dress?	il mafrooD albis ey?
Local:	Wear loose fitting clothes which cover your body.	ilbis hedoom was'a teghaTee gismak

Women should not dress in provocative clothing such as tight jeans, skimpy tops, or short skirts. This style of clothing is likely to result in advances from men, especially if the woman is traveling alone. Neither should men be underdressed. To do so could invoke scorn among the local people.

In cities, the modern Islamic dress (*hijab*)³⁴ is somewhat popular among students, white collar workers, and the working class. It has also been adopted by many immigrants. Among all social classes, women often wear long black veils and men wear robes. Although a scarf may be tucked under the collar rather than cover the head, and the face veil (*niqab*) is more rare than in the early 1990s, Egyptian women still dress conservatively.

Alternately, some people choose to wear modern Western clothing, such as casual jeans and tennis shoes, or chic dresses and suits. This is more common in large metropolitan areas such as Cairo, where women are seen wearing European clothing and make-up. There can be a risk associated with the Western look, however, since Islamist groups have openly opposed such clothing.

Exchange 17: Is this acceptable to wear?

Soldier:	Is this acceptable to wear?	il libs dah yinfa'?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Dress styles are conservative as well as functional in rural areas to accommodate the extreme temperatures and weather conditions. For instance, a man typically dresses in a long robe (*galabayya*) that absorbs the sun's heat while allowing breezes to circulate. He winds a cloth around his head and neck to inhibit loss of moisture, as such loss could lead to heat stroke. A married woman traditionally wears a brightly colored housedress with a

³⁴ The term *hijab* means to cover or conceal.

black outer layer. She often wears her dowry of gold necklaces and silver bracelets and anklets, insurance against poverty if her husband divorces her or she becomes widowed. Among the Bedouin, women wear black dresses and head covers embroidered in tiny cross-stitch designs, blue for unmarried women, red for married. They cover their faces with a veil highlighted in the same stitches and often decorated with shells and coins.

Cuisine

One of the staples of the Egyptian diet has been bread (*aysh*, also meaning “life”) prepared in several forms. Pita is a thin, round bread that can be stuffed with a variety of fillings and made into a sandwich. Bread is also leavened and allowed to rise before baking, or it is sweetened with honey, dates, fruit, and spices and served as dessert. Almost every meal in Egypt includes some form of bread.

Exchange 18: What is the name of this dish?

Soldier:	What is the name of this dish?	ism il akla dee ey?
Local:	This is <i>melokheya belaraneb</i> .	dee mulooKheeya bil araanib

Most Egyptians complete their daily diet by eating *fuul*, made from boiled fava beans mashed with vegetables, lemon, and spices such as cumin and salt. The bean mixture can be turned into a popular dish called *ta’amiyya* by forming it into patties that are deep fried. It is often served with *tahini*, a sauce made from sesame seeds, spices, and mashed beans. This food, with variations, is widely eaten across society, although the poor in Egypt eat mainly grains and vegetables out of economic necessity. Less affluent Egyptians cannot afford to eat animal protein more than once a week or once a month.

Exchange 19: The food tastes so good.

Soldier:	The food tastes so good.	Ta'm il akil gameel gidan
Local:	Thank you.	shukran

Another national dish is *kushari*, a mixture of rice, noodles, fried onions, lentils, and tomato sauce. The ingredients are served in a bowl in restaurants that specialize in this dish, or spooned into plastic bags for takeout. Kushari restaurants are recognizable by the large bowls of rice and noodles visible in their windows.

In Alexandria and at the Red Sea resorts, fish is popular and usually served grilled, fried, or baked in rock salt. Several kinds of fish are available, including sea bass, mullet, sole, snapper, and Nile perch. Squid and shrimp are also popular.



Egyptians who can afford to do so eat a variety of meats with the exception of pork, which is prohibited by Muslim restrictions. Two of the most popular meat dishes in Egypt are *kebab*, grilled lamb or chicken on a skewer, and *kofta*, spicy ground meatballs, both introduced during the Turkish occupation. The meat is often served on a bed of parsley surrounded by grilled onions and tomatoes. Lamb and chicken are most widely served in Egypt,

although pigeon is also popular. It is stuffed with rice and spices and roasted, or served as a stew cooked in a clay pot with tomatoes, onions, and rice. Another specialty is *melokheyya belaraneb*, a leafy legume like spinach cooked together with rabbit to make a stew.

Exchange 20: What ingredients are used?

Soldier:	What ingredients are used to make <i>melokheyya belaraneb</i> ?	il mulooKheeya bil araanib dee ma'moola min ey?
Local:	Rabbit soup, minced <i>melokheyya</i> , and dry coriander.	shorbet araanib wu mulooKheeya mafrooma wu kusbara naashfa

As for desserts, 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. *Baklava* is a delicacy of filo pastry filled with honey, crushed nuts, and pistachios. Another popular desert is *umm ali*, a cake soaked in milk, cinnamon, raisins, coconut, and sugar and served hot.

Drinks in Egypt are primarily Turkish or European-style coffee, fruit juices, and soft drinks. Tea, the national beverage, is usually served black with sugar added. Alcohol can be obtained, except on the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, or during the month of Ramadan. The one exception to the inhibition on alcohol is beer, the consumption of which goes back to the time of the pharaohs. Ancient Egyptians are credited with inventing this beverage. Several brands are available.

In rural areas, the diet consists of mainly grains and vegetables. 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, diners scoop up food with small pieces of bread dipped into the serving bowls.

Non-Religious Celebrations

The first day of spring, *Sham el-Nessim*, is in April on the first Monday after Coptic Easter. People throughout Egypt celebrate by going on picnics and participating in outdoor activities with family and friends.

Official political holidays include Sinai Liberation Day on 25 April, commemorating Israel’s 1982 return of the Sinai to Egypt, and National Day on 23 July. Also called Revolution Day, this holiday honors the 1952 nationalist revolution led by President Nasser. The day is marked by military parades, flight displays, and a presidential speech.

Social Events

Weddings

For Egyptians of all backgrounds, weddings are exuberant family events complete with a feast, music, dancing, and several days of celebration and preparation. Family bonds in

Egypt are highly venerated, and weddings joyfully express a new union between families. One visitor to Cairo describes a public wedding as follows:

A garlanded automobile, escorted by a honking entourage of cars driven by family and friends, weaves through the city streets, perhaps with a stop on a Nile bridge for photographs, and finally arrives outside the family home or reception hall.

The couple is met with exultant rhythms from trumpets, drums and tambourines. The beat of traditional wedding songs— sometimes at very high volume—is punctuated by joyful, trilling ululations from the women, the famous zaghareet. El-farah, the wedding celebration, is on.

A crowd of family and friends of all ages envelops the couple for el-zaffah, the slow procession, accompanied by music, into the reception room. In Upper Egypt, some rural families still retain the old tradition in which a couple's new furniture is paraded through the village on horse- or donkey-drawn carts en route to the couple's new home. In all places, though, the processions, dancing, noise and merriment ensure that everyone knows that there will be a new family in the community.³⁵

Wedding traditions vary, according to the celebrants' backgrounds. For those from Upper Egypt, one important ritual is the henna-party, *laylat el-hinna*. The evening before the wedding, the bride's female relatives and friends apply beautiful designs to the bride's hands and feet to bring her good luck. Because henna stains the skin, many urban couples no longer follow this custom.



Another ancient custom averts the “evil eye” of envy away from the bride. In this ceremony, celebrants shower the couple with flower petals, gold coins, or chocolate coins wrapped in foil. Prior to the ceremony, the bride receives gifts of money, clothing, and household goods. The family members continue their visits to the couple for several days, bringing gifts of food and good cheer.

Exchange 21: Congratulations on your wedding!

Soldier:	Congratulations on your wedding!	mabrook 'ala id duKhla!
Local:	We are honored you could attend.	inta shariftina bemagayak

Before the actual wedding, there is a long period of preparation. Many Muslim couples follow the tradition of arranged marriage, initiated by a young man who asks his mother to help him find a wife. The mother arranges a meeting with a prospective bride's family,

³⁵ Saudi Aramco World. “Family Affairs: Weddings in Egypt.” Morgan, Patti Jones. September-October 1995. <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199505/family.affairs-weddings.in.egypt.htm>

and this leads to a possible formal proposal of marriage accompanied by disclosure of the suitor's finances. It is important for both families to have similar social and educational backgrounds. If the woman's family agrees to the marriage, the two families set a date. The suitor must then arrange for a residence, and the bride's family is responsible for providing household goods. At the Muslim wedding ceremony, it is customary for the bride's father to stand in for his daughter.

Exchange 22: I wish you both happiness.

Soldier:	I wish you both happiness.	atmanalkum is sa'aada intum il itneyn
Local:	We are honored.	iHna itsharafna

Funerals

Many funeral customs are similar for both Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt. Both try to bury a body on the same day that death occurs. Mourners pay their condolences to the family immediately and again after forty days and at the end of a year following the death. Both religious traditions in Egypt believe in an eternal soul which exists before birth and after death.

Traditions for preserving the body differ among Egypt's religious groups. In Islamic culture, embalming is not allowed. Muslim believers do not believe they should delay decomposition, and they prefer to cover the deceased with a shroud rather than using a coffin. Orthodox Jewish culture also follows this belief except that they use coffins that are free of metal parts. Christians, however, believe in embalming to preserve the deceased's body.

Exchange 23: I would like to give my condolences.

Soldier:	I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.	anaa 'aayez a'azeek wa a'azee il usra
Local:	Thank you.	shukran

State funerals are lavish affairs, often attended by thousands or millions of passionate mourners. For high government officials, coffins are draped in a flag and may be borne past a military honor guard in a horse-drawn carriage. At the funeral of former Prime Minister Saad Zaghlul Pasha, bands led the procession, followed by army units and mounted police. The coffin lay on a gun carriage and approximately 4,000 mourners followed. The funeral of Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1970 was scheduled to be a somber affair with 5,000 army troops accompanying his funeral bier. However, as the procession advanced, it was surrounded by up to five million hysterical mourners who wanted to carry his coffin. Many were crushed to death, and the coffin had to be transferred to a military vehicle in order to proceed.

Umm Kalthoum, the most prominent singer in the Arab world in the twentieth century, also received a lavish state funeral when she died in 1975. It was in fact a national event, attended by over three million mourners. As her body was carried along a three-hour

route, the official pallbearers were forced to surrender it to grief-stricken mourners who wanted to share the weight of carrying her remains to the mosque.

Exchange 24: Please be strong.

Soldier:	Please be strong.	shid Heylak
Local:	We will try.	ish shida 'ala il laah

Do's and Don'ts

Do's

Do sit with the soles of your feet flat on the ground.

Do use your entire *right* hand only to summon a person. Keep your palm down and wave downward.

Do remove your shoes before you enter a mosque.

Do get permission before you take a picture of anyone in rural regions.

Don'ts

Do not take a picture of a woman unless you first get permission.

Do not ask questions about the women of the family, if you are a male.

Do not stare at or make advances to women in public or private.

Do not engage in overt expressions of affection with the opposite sex.

Do not eat with your left hand, and do not receive a present or pass an object to someone with your left hand. The left hand is considered unclean.

Do not use the Western way of beckoning with one finger. It is very offensive.

Do not point to anybody with a finger. Use the entire *right* hand instead.

Do not make the "A-OK" signal (circle with index finger and thumb of one hand). Some Egyptians may misinterpret it as an obscene gesture.

Do not point upward with the middle finger. It is obscene in the U.S. and equally so in Egypt.

Do not use obscene or indecent language within earshot of Egyptian citizens. Many Egyptians are familiar with American slang.

Do not talk with an Egyptian with your hands in your pockets, not even one hand. This is seen as impolite. Egyptians place great importance on politeness.

Do not cross your legs when sitting in a chair, or show the bottom of your feet to someone.

Urban Life

Urbanization Issues

Thousands of subsistence farmers (*fellaheen*) have migrated to the cities to escape the poverty of working on small farms, but the city lifestyle they find is usually no better. If they are lucky, they can find work as unskilled laborers, dishwashers, or doormen for the middle class. The jobs they find are usually in the informal sector of the economy, not covered by minimum wage laws or any kind of social security net. Whether they find jobs in the city or not, and many do not, their living conditions are harsh. This is also true for the urban poor who often live in makeshift housing found in all of Egypt's larger cities. Here, squatters live in mud huts or demolished remains of buildings and in cemeteries. Cairo's infamous City of the Dead is one such example, where over one million poor people adapt tombs and gravestones for living quarters.



In Egypt, almost 40 percent of the urban population live in slums, which are often very profitable for their absentee landlords.^{36 37} Most are located in Cairo, in the core of the city or on the periphery. Besides living in cemeteries, poor Cairenes live on rooftops, in squatter camps, or informal housing where they pay minimal or no formal rent. They may, however, be forced to pay bribes to city officials or police in exchange for living at the site. Some of the squatter camps are on publicly-owned land in the desert outskirts of the city, and the government provides no infrastructure such as schools, clinics, and police.

One sector of the urban poor in Cairo, the *zabbaleen* (garbage collectors) have developed a business enterprise around collecting garbage. A Coptic Christian community of former landless peasants from Upper Egypt, the *zabbaleen* began migrating to Cairo around 50 years ago. They settled in slum areas and began collecting garbage door-to-door, using donkey carts or small trucks to haul trash, charging residents under USD 1 per month for this service. After collecting the garbage, they sort it into “monstrous piles”³⁸ outside their houses and recycle up to 80 percent of the waste into raw materials. They keep pigs to eat the organic waste, and sell the usable materials to factories which in turn resell them as manufactured goods.

The government has been trying to put the *zabbaleen* out of business by refusing to renew their licenses, planning to replace them with sanitation companies. However, the 70,000 members of Cairo's *zabbaleen* community are resisting the change. They claim that the Italian or Spanish companies the government wants to hire can only collect one third of Cairo's garbage, compared to the estimated 85 percent the *zabbaleen* collect.

³⁶ Slums are defined as areas characterized by poor housing, overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and lack of access to safe water.

³⁷ *Planet of Slums*. Davis, Mike. 2006. New York: Verso.

³⁸ The Christian Science Monitor. “Egypt dumps ‘garbage people.’ ” Gauch, Sarah. 6 January 2003. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0106/p07s02-woaf.htm>

Also, the change would deprive the *zabbaleen* of their livelihood, which averages USD 75 per month for a family.³⁹

Urban Society

The majority of people living in cities are working class, employed as factory workers, service or retail employees, skilled and unskilled laborers, or underpaid government workers. Usually they are unable to support a family on one job. If they are skilled factory or construction workers in the public sector, they are likely to receive raises and benefits such as paid holidays and sick leave.

Most urban working people have aspirations to move up the social scale. A middle class exists in Egypt, developed in the free market policies of the Sadat era and by urbanization and the creation of industrial suburbs. Upward mobility into the middle class in Egypt depends more on accumulation of wealth than on one's immutable social background. *Fellaheen* with enough resources can open small shops and join the lower echelons of the merchant class. It is extremely difficult but possible for them to accumulate enough money to move upward in the social strata. Such opportunities also exist for enterprising merchants, who make and sell crafts such as pottery, paintings, rugs, or jewelry and pots. They often operate small retail outlets or grocery stores, or trade in merchandise for farms and households.

The urban upper-middle class and elite in Egypt receive the highest levels of municipal services and the best housing, often in new suburbs on the city's outskirts. Unlike the increasingly marginalized poor, members of the propertied class are connected to the world economy and benefit from a tax system which favors them. Investment money ends up benefiting people of property and means. It is channeled to developers who are politically favored, or used to build tourist facilities or vacation homes. In Cairo, the poor cannot afford to buy new houses. Many new homes remain unoccupied because their owners are working in other Arab countries where wages are higher.⁴⁰

Education

After the Revolution, Nasser's government expanded opportunities for education and abolished fees for attending public school. Large gains were made during this period in the number of women receiving higher education. Also, the number of primary schools doubled and enrollment increased for children. After the mid 1970s, however, the government was forced to scale back its assistance, rerouting up to 85 percent of the educational budget to government salaries.

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a chronic shortage of teachers in Egypt, and teaching in general is seen as a low-status career. Salaries and training have improved, but many schools are overcrowded, and some schools have had to offer two shifts daily to

³⁹ SFGate.com. "From Cairo's trash, a model of recycling: Old door-to-door method boasts 85% reuse rate." Epstein, Jack. 3 June, 2006. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/06/03/MNGKOJ82991.DTL>

⁴⁰ *Planet of Slums*. Davis, Mike. 2006. New York: Verso.

accommodate all students. In 1985-86, the ratio was around 62 students per teacher.⁴¹ Many teachers have gone abroad to teach to earn higher salaries.

Egypt's educational system today is centralized and divided into three levels: primary, which covers ages six through 15, secondary, and post-secondary. Primary education is mandatory for all children, although the government does not enforce the attendance laws. In urban areas most children attend school, although some children do not complete their studies for economic reasons. Their parents may take them out of school to help support the family, or they may be forced to live on the streets.

At the secondary education level, students are placed in the general, vocational, or technical track, depending on their aptitude. Technical schools have been expanded in response to the growing private sector need for more trained personnel and skilled labor. Students can choose to study agriculture, business, and other technical areas and after graduation, proceed to the post-secondary tier of education. At this level, they have the choice to attend free public universities or expensive private schools. Primarily middle-class students take advantage of the post-secondary level of education.



© Dafys Jones
British International School, Cairo

Problems developed in the higher education system when government policy began to allow graduates of technical schools to enroll in universities without attending classes. The goal was to provide students an easier route to obtain their university degree, by just sitting for exams. The program backfired, however, when an underground commerce in note-sharing began to flourish. Professors became overburdened with administering exams for the many students who were in effect auditing classes from a distance, and only appeared on exam day.

Another educational alternative is the Al-Azhar Institution, an Islamic religious school system supervised by the Egyptian Prime Minister rather than the Ministry of Education. Al-Azhar includes both primary and secondary tiers. Its schools are spread throughout the country, including rural areas. Graduates of an Al-Azhar secondary school must attend prestigious Al-Azhar University if they choose to continue at the post-secondary level.

At both government and private schools, English and French are taught, as well as Arabic.

For many years, the state was the main employer of college graduates, who were guaranteed jobs in the civil service. This led to an excess of graduates in relation to the number of jobs, however, and government offices became seriously overstaffed. This system has since been changed, and graduates are now placed on a waiting list when no jobs are available.

Health Care and Sanitation⁴²

⁴¹ U.S. Library of Congress. Country Studies. "Egypt: Education." 1990. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+eg0083\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+eg0083))

Government spending on health increased substantially after the revolution in 1952. As a result, health and life expectancy improved for many Egyptians. In 1952, life expectancy at birth was 39 years. By 1989, it had climbed to 59 years. The infant mortality rate also declined during the same period. Still, disparities have remained, with urban areas providing greater access to health care. Social class is also an indicator of health. Upper Egypt has consistently retained the highest rates of infant mortality, but such rates have also prevailed among the poor in Cairo and Alexandria.

Egyptian citizens are entitled to free health care, and there is a network of public hospitals in major towns and cities. Clinics offer maternal and child care and routine medical care. However, the standard of care is often inadequate, not least because of a shortage of trained medical personnel. Doctors and nurses work mainly in the cities and prefer working in private medical facilities where the wages and working conditions are better. People who have the financial resources are often treated in private hospitals or clinics.

Exchange 25: Is there a hospital nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a hospital nearby?	fi mostashfa orayyeba men hina?
Local:	Yes, in the center of town.	aiwa, fi wesT elbalad

The main causes of death in Egypt are diseases of the digestive tract and respiratory ailments. In the 1980s, diarrhea resulting from unsafe drinking water caused the majority of deaths in infants and children. The government, however, working with the U.S. Agency for International Development, was able to reduce the number of deaths through educational programs.

Exchange 26: Do you know what is wrong?

Soldier:	Do you know what is wrong?	inta ta'rif ey il mushkila?
Local:	No.	la-a

A chronic disease known as schistosomiasis (*bilharziasis*) caused by parasitic worms is common among people who are exposed to Nile River water. Unless treated, it can cause death. The infecting parasites develop in certain kinds of fresh water snails that come into contact with people. It is prevalent in areas where the ecology has been altered, such as near dams and canals. One of the side effects of the creation of the reservoir at Aswan High Dam is plant life that has grown in Lake Nasser which hosts the disease-carrying snails.

Drinking untreated water in Egypt can also result in exposure to bacterial infections. More people have access to safe water than to sanitation systems, since the water system is seen as a greater priority as the country develops. Close to one fourth of the population did not have safe drinking water available in 1990, and more than half lacked plumbing in their homes.

⁴² Many of the statistics in this sections are from: U.S. Library of Congress. Country Studies. Egypt: "Health and Welfare." 1990. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+eg0084\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+eg0084))

Exchange 27: May I use your phone?

Soldier:	May I use your phone?	mumkin a'mil mukaalmit teleefon?
Local:	Sure.	Tab'an

In tourist areas, medical facilities are adequate for routine matters, but not for emergencies or intensive care. Hospitals are poorly equipped and staffed outside of a few urban centers. The most modern facilities are in Alexandria, Cairo, and Sharm el-Sheikh, centers of commerce that also cater to tourists. Most medical treatment centers require payments in cash.

Because of the lack of reliable health care in so many areas, Egyptians have turned to philanthropic and community-based organizations for help. Some Islamist groups seeking support among the population have assisted with health care services in poor areas, which has increased their popularity.

Exchange 28: Is Dr. Ahmad in, sir?

Soldier:	Is Dr. Ahmad in, sir?	id duktoor aHmad mawgood, yaa ustaaz?
Local:	No.	la-a

Transportation and Traffic

Transportation in Cairo, Alexandria, and cities up and down the Nile includes inexpensive inner-city buses and trams. Passengers can buy bus tickets at city terminal kiosks or at the station window. Visitors, however, should be aware that public minibuses have an unreliable safety record.

**Exchange 29: Will the bus be here soon?**

Soldier:	Will the bus be here soon?	il otobees muntazar yeegee dilwa-tee?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

For individual drivers, driving conditions are perilous, and traffic jams are common at all hours but especially between 2 and 5 p.m. when schools and offices close.

Exchange 30: Where can I rent a car?

Soldier:	Where can I rent a car?	mumkin a-agir 'arabeeya meneyn?
Local:	Downtown.	min wisT il balad

Exchange 31: Is there a gas station nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a gas station nearby?	fee maHaTet banzeen urayiba?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Drivers often speed, and city buses have the right of way. Pedestrians cross the streets at random, without looking for traffic. Drivers ignore traffic lanes, driving rules, and traffic signals, which often don't work. Roads are not marked, cars drive without headlights at

night, and vehicles travel the wrong way on one-way streets and ramps that connect to highways. Egypt, in fact, has one of the highest rates of road fatalities per miles driven in the world.⁴³

Exchange 32: Which road leads to the airport?

Soldier:	Which road leads to the airport?	ay shaari' biwadee 'ala il maTaar?
Local:	The road heading east.	ish shaari' il mitegih lil shar

Exchange 33: Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?	fee ay meekaaneekee kwayis urayib?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Trains are available up and down the Nile and across the Delta and are considered a relatively safe way to travel. Train travel is broken into three classes, first, second, and third. First and second-class travel is comfortable, but third-class is crowded and seats are often rough and not upholstered. Passengers must purchase their tickets at the station in advance of travel.

Exchange 34: Is there a train station nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a train station nearby?	fee maHaTet aTr urayiba?
Local:	No.	la-a

When taking a taxi, passengers should ideally know the fare in advance and pay it on arrival, rather than bargaining or asking how much. However, if the rider does not know how much the fare is, he or she should agree on it before starting off.

Exchange 35: Where can I get a cab?

Soldier:	Where can I get a cab?	mumkun arkab taksee meneyn?
Local:	Over there.	henaak

Service taxis that seat up to twelve people are also an option, cheaper than regular taxis. They are usually faster than trains or buses and operate on a variety of pre-planned routes.

Exchange 36: Can you take me there?

Soldier:	Can you take me there?	mumkin taaKhudnee henaak?
Local:	Yes, I can.	aywa, mumkin

⁴³ U.S. Dept. of State. Bureau of Consular Affairs. Consular Information Sheet: "Egypt." 22 May 2007. http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1108.html

Daily Life

Urban working-class or lower middle-class families (including those with college degrees) typically live in apartments in overcrowded suburbs. Because of the shortage of affordable living quarters and overburdened utilities in cities such as Cairo, housing is likely to be very modest with possible problems in water, plumbing, or electricity services. Living conditions improved somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s, and telephones, air conditioning, and television became more common.

Exchange 37: What is your telephone number?

Soldier:	What is your telephone number?	raqam teleefonak kaam?
Local:	My phone number is 425-425-0.	raqam teleefonee arba'a itneyn Khamsa arba'a itneyn Khamsa Sifr

Life in the cities is expensive. Most urban dwellers use public transportation to commute to their jobs as the cost of owning a car is often prohibitive. It is common for a husband to work more than one job to make ends meet. Typically, the wife stays home and cares for the children and household, although sometimes women work outside the home to make ends meet.

The poor in Egypt's urban areas work longer hours and are forced to cut expenses in areas of food, medical care, and education. For poor women who head households, the situation is worse. They sometimes pool resources with neighbors or rely on charity from family, their neighbors, or mosques and churches.

In their free time, city dwellers take trips to the zoo, gardens, cinemas, or museums in Cairo or perhaps opt for a boat ride. Locals often patronize the many coffeehouses (for men only) to socialize, read newspapers, and meet and converse with friends or make new friends.



Urban locals who have the means and connections also hold membership in clubs (*nadi*) that have sporting facilities. Usually the clubs are in a relaxing environment surrounded by a garden or greenery, away from the traffic and crowds.

In summer, families go out late to do their household shopping, after the temperature has cooled a little. Often, dinner reservations in Cairo are also made late, around 10 p.m., and the nightlife in bars and clubs continues on until morning.

Football (soccer) is another favored leisure activity, and Egypt has internationally known players. The season is between September and May, and tickets are in great demand. Soccer scores and games are topics which elicit passionate conversations.

Dining Out

In Cairo and at Red Sea resorts, restaurants are available that serve international food, from gourmet to very inexpensive fast food at any time of the day.

Exchange 38: Are you still serving breakfast?

Soldier:	Are you still serving breakfast?	lisa bit-adimo fiTaar?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

A wide range of regional specialties are available in restaurants and cafes throughout Egypt.

Exchange 39: What type of meat is this?

Soldier:	What type of meat is this?	'andukum laHma no'ha ey?
Local:	Lamb.	Daanee

Exchange 40: I'd like some hot soup.

Soldier:	I'd like some hot soup.	'aayez shorba suKhna
Local:	Sure.	HaaDir

Most restaurants serve wine and beer, especially if they cater to foreigners, although alcohol is forbidden to strict Muslims.

Exchange 41: May I have a glass of water?

Soldier:	May I have a glass of water?	mumkin kubaayet maya law samaHt?
Local:	Yes, right away.	Haalan, yaa fandim

Exchange 42: Do you have dessert?

Soldier:	Do you have dessert?	'andukum Halaweeyaata?
Local:	Yes, we have <i>umm ali</i> .	aywa, 'andina um 'alee

Credit cards are an accepted form of payment at many restaurants. Another service that restaurants often offer is delivery of food.

Exchange 43: Can I have my total bill, please?

Soldier:	Can I have my total bill, please?	mumkin tegeeb lee faatorit il Hisaab, law samaHt?
Local:	Yes, of course.	Tab'an, yaa fandim

Tipping is expected in restaurants. Doorkeepers, bartenders, rest-room attendants, and other service people also expect small tips.

Exchange 44: Where is your restroom?

Soldier:	Where is your restroom?	feyn il Hamaam law samaHt?
Local:	That room to your left, over there.	il Hamaam 'ala ish shimaal, henaak

Coffeeshouses known as *ahwas* are informal establishments that cater to men; they are not frequented by Egyptian women. Patrons can order coffee, tea, and cooler drinks such as iced *karkadey* (boiled hibiscus leaves). In the winter, they can order a hot drink called *sahleb*, made of milk, semolina powder, and chopped nuts.

Exchange 45: I would like coffee or tea.

Soldier:	I would like coffee or tea.	'aayez ahwa aw shaay
Local:	Sure.	HaaDir

At coffeeshouses, customers sit, chat, and play dominoes (*domina*) and backgammon (*towla*). They smoke waterpipes known as *sheeshas*, which they share with friends. The waterpipe uses a special tobacco flavored with molasses or apples, and the waiter will often provide disposable plastic mouthpieces for smokers to use. Visitors do not cause offense by refusing to partake.

Marketplace

A variety of foods and drinks is available from street vendors and at outdoor markets. Stand-up juice bars and fruit stands are common in the cities. Fresh fruit juices include guava, banana, mango, orange, strawberry, coconut, pomegranate, and sugar-cane juice. Normally patrons at juice bars order and pay at the cash desk before exchanging a plastic token for their drinks at the counter. Street vendors serve iced sweet lemonade (*asir limoon*), bittersweet licorice water, and soft drinks.



Exchange 46:

Soldier:	How much longer will you be here?	Hatistana hina ad ey?
Local:	Three more hours.	talat sa'aat kamaan

For snacks and light eating, nut stands are scattered around the cities, offering roasted pistachios, peanuts, and pumpkin seeds. Sandwich stands typically offer favorites such as *ta'amiyya* (falafel), *fuul*, and sandwiches of cheese or marinated lamb. Depending on the food purchased, the quality of meat at street stands may not be high.

Exchange 47: Do you accept U.S. currency?

Soldier:	Do you accept U.S. currency?	beti-bal dolaraat amreekaanee?
Local:	No we only accept Egyptian guineas.	la-a, benaakhud genehaat maSree bas

Bargaining over prices is a customary part of shopping in all stores, and this is especially true in bazaars and street markets where crafts and merchandise are sold.

Exchange 48: Is the market nearby?

Soldier:	Is the market nearby?	fee ay maHalaat urayiba?
Local:	Yes, over there on the right.	aywa, henaak 'ala ish shimaal

Merchants expect customers to haggle over prices for the most humble objects, and they use high-pressure tactics to make a sale.

Exchange 49: Can I buy a carpet with this much money?

Soldier:	Can I buy a carpet with this much money?	a-dar ashtiree segaada bil mablagh dah?
Local:	No.	la-a

Buyers are advised to adopt their own tactics such as refraining from showing too much interest in an item when they ask questions about it.

Exchange 50: Do you have any more of these?

Soldier:	Do you have any more of these?	'andak taanee zay dol?
Local:	No.	la-a

To get a reasonable price, they can also remind the merchant of lower quotes received elsewhere, or simply leave the store with a polite “sorry, no thanks.” It is acceptable to terminate a lengthy negotiating session without buying anything.

Buyers should take their time when making a purchase and compare the products they are interested in buying.

Exchange 51: May I examine this close up

Soldier:	May I examine this close up?	mumkin abuS baSa 'ala dee?
Local:	Sure.	Tab'an

In areas heavily-frequented by tourists, such as around the temples at Luxor, fixed-price shops are rare and pressure to buy is more extreme than in non-tourist areas. Tourists who accept a taxi driver's or tourist guide's offer to assist them with shopping in such areas may have to confront his demands that they owe him a commission.

Exchange 52: Please, buy something from me.

Local:	Please, buy something from me.	argook nafa'nee, ishteree minee ay Haaga
Soldier:	Sorry, I have no money left.	aasef, maa 'adsh ma'aaya ay floos

It's a good idea to have the exact amount of money needed for a transaction.

Exchange 53: Can you give me change for this?

Soldier:	Can you give me change for this?	mumkin tefik lee dee law samaHt?
Local:	No.	la-a

Beggars sometimes follow visitors at tourist sites, asking for money or gifts. They include poor and handicapped people, homeless children, and those who lack family support and connections. They see tourists as sources of money that will help them survive. Giving money to one of these people will bring a barrage of others wanting the same. When beggars approach, it is best to simply reply that you have no money and keep walking

Exchange 54: Give me money

Local:	Give me money	ideenee floos
Soldier:	I don't have any.	ma'eyeesh ay floos

Crime and Demonstrations

Egypt has a low crime rate and few incidents of violence. Of the violent crimes that have occurred, most notable are political attacks made by Islamist groups against tourists in 1996 near Giza, 1997 at Luxor, and other tourist sites in 2004, 2005, and 2006.^{44 45} Several tourists and Egyptian nationals were killed. On a more typical basis, however, the main crimes are petty theft and pickpocketing in tourist areas. Also, unescorted women may be subject to verbal abuse or harassment.



Occasional public demonstrations take place in Cairo and near universities and mosques such as Al-Azhar following the Friday noon prayers. A heavy security presence including road closures frequently accompanies such demonstrations.⁴⁶ Tourists and visitors are warned to stay away from these potentially volatile gatherings.

⁴⁴ CNN World News. "Egyptian bus assailants sentenced to death." 30 October 1997. <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9710/30/egypt.verdict/>

⁴⁵ BBC News. "Massacre in Luxor." 6 Dec. 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/correspondent/2546737.stm>

⁴⁶ U.S. Dept. of State. Bureau of Consular Affairs. Consular Information Sheet: "Egypt." 22 May 2007. http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1108.html

Rural Life

Rural Economy

Around 70 percent of Egypt's poor people live in rural areas, with a large number in Upper Egypt where access to sanitation and safe water are scarce.⁴⁷ Many also live in the Nile Delta region.

In rural Egypt, the economy is based on agriculture, with three fourths of the income coming from cotton and rice. Although the area of cotton under cultivation has declined in recent decades, Egypt's cotton still provides one third of the world's total supply.⁴⁸

Rural poverty is extreme partly because of the limited availability of agricultural land. Since most of the cities in Egypt are built on such land and are expanding, little acreage is left to support family farms in rural areas. Poverty and landlessness have also resulted from large areas of former agricultural land going out of production due to poor drainage and subsequent salinization of the land. This has been another side-effect of the construction of Aswan High Dam.

Landlessness in rural areas decreased slightly after land reforms that followed the Revolution in 1952. However, land ownership has steadily gone down since the late 1960s. As the population grew, available land decreased, and cost of production increased.

All members on a family farm help with farm labor and care for animals, but the farms are not large enough to support families trying to make a living off the land. As a result, the majority of farmers or their family members are forced to work second jobs. One possible choice is to work as agricultural laborers on the farms of larger landowners, or work in the villages as repairmen or construction workers. Farmers may be forced to migrate to the cities to find temporary jobs as unskilled laborers, or they may find short-term jobs in other Arab countries and send their wages home. Forced migration to find laboring jobs has been especially disruptive of families in Upper Egypt. In some villages, almost all males of employment age work in other areas for much of the year. Parents are often forced to pull their children out of school to help with farm labor.



Exchange 55: Where do you work, sir?

Soldier:	Where do you work, sir?	inta bitishtaghil feyn?
Local:	I am a farmer, sir.	anaa falaaH, yaa beyh

⁴⁷ 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>

⁴⁸ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Egypt. "Agriculture and Industry." 2007. <http://www.britannica.com/ebi/article-200012>

In Egyptian agriculture, most functions, such as planting, cultivating, and weeding are done by hand. Most farmers cannot afford the machinery that could help with plowing, harvesting, or pumping water. Only the wealthier farmers can afford the luxury of renting or owning such machinery.

Peasants benefit from being able to obtain credit, fertilizer, and seed from agricultural cooperatives. Some farmers are able to accumulate enough resources to rent out small parcels of extra land. The overwhelming majority, however, cannot sustain a living from the family farm.

Exchange 56: Are you the only person in your family who has a job?

Soldier:	Are you the only person in your family who has a job?	inta il waHeed fee 'eyltak ilee biyishtaghil?
Local:	No.	la-a

Rural Lifestyle

The Egyptian countryside remains tied to traditions and values that have changed little over the years. Most families are large with extended families living under one roof. When a son marries, the parents build on to the house if they can afford to do so. Families value many children. Not only is the family the center of life in Egypt, but large rural families also count on their children as a source of labor and social security in the parents' old age. For these reasons, rural families have remained resistant to family-planning campaigns initiated by the government.

Exchange 57: Do you have any brothers?

Soldier:	Do you have any brothers?	'andak ay iKhwaat?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

The patrilineal clan (lineage) has been the center of village organization and family identity. Individuals identify not as members of autonomous groups but as members of a large, male-headed lineage that are deeply integrated into village life and politics. The interests of the lineage take precedence over one's individual interests. A man's strongest social connections are within his lineage with his male relatives, including father, brothers, uncles, and cousins.

In the last two decades, the structure of many rural lineages has been changing. The elders of a lineage in past years based their authority on wealth from land ownership, which belonged to the minority. Land ownership has declined, however, and inheritance of land has dwindled even further. This, combined with migration to the cities in search of work has weakened family ties among many lineages. Especially in the Delta, children are finding new opportunities for nonagricultural work, which permits them to disconnect from the lifestyle of their parents. Some have gained upward mobility from higher education, when rural parents are able to send their children to college. Although the rural extended family still prevails, there are more nuclear families now, while the majority are in urban areas.

Other social changes are coming to the villages. Migrant agricultural workers who travel back and forth between country and city bring new ideas to the village as a result of their intermediary role. Customs may gradually change from this interaction, as people learn and adopt different ways of doing things. Migrants returning from oil-rich countries in the Gulf, for instance, may have adopted styles of building homes that they observed in other countries.

Exchange 58: Is there lodging nearby?

Soldier:	Is there lodging nearby?	fee makaan lil nom hina?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Everyday customs may be quite different between country and city. One difference is found in the service of food and the way people sit when they eat. In villages, family members usually seat themselves on the floor around a low wooden table. Each person may use a utensil or scoop up food with small pieces of bread dipped into serving bowls or into one main dish. In cities, the style of eating is often more westernized, with individual utensils and plates.

Gender Roles in Rural Areas

Men are the head of the family and the lineage. They are also the primary income earners, responsible for managing the farms and all stages of cultivation and harvesting, and maintaining equipment.



In most rural regions, women work in the fields alongside their husbands. In addition, they are responsible for the household, caring for the family and children, feeding and caring for animals, and cleaning and cooking. This household labor is simply a role that is expected of women.

When families are extremely poor, women may need to take on additional unskilled work for pay outside the home, although their primary role remains that of homemaker. In many cases, the demands of their multiple roles result in the removal of girls from school so that they are available to help support the family. Often, young women are the head of the household and school is simply not an option for them

Housing and Land Use

Most village homes are one-story dwellings surrounded by agricultural land and located along dirt roads. Older homes are made of mud and newer ones of brick, if the owner can afford this more expensive building material. If they build with brick and need to enlarge their homes, families often extend their homes upward, adding another story to preserve the agricultural land.

Exchange 59: Does your family live here?

Soldier:	Does your family live here?	heya 'eyltak 'aaysha hina?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

If the family has farm animals, a stable will be attached to the house where the animal can be closely guarded against theft, since a farm animal represents a high investment. The roof may be used as an area to keep rabbits or chickens.

Exchange 60: Do you own this land?

Soldier:	Do you own this land?	inta SaaHib il arD dee?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Public areas in the village include a mosque for worshipping and also a guest house to be used mainly for men within an extended family to hold social gatherings. Another public space is the weekly market, where both men and women buy and sell or trade goods, exchange news, and solidify their social bonds.

Who's in Charge?

In the country, wealthier families assume leadership roles. They not only take responsibility for their relatives and neighbors who need help, they are leaders of village politics.

Exchange 61: Does your mayor live here?

Soldier:	Does your mayor live here?	huwa 'umditkum saaken hina?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

The male head of the wealthiest lineage is the person with the most power. It is he who makes important decisions concerning the entire village with its combined lineages.

Exchange 62: Can you take me to your mayor?

Soldier:	Can you take me to your mayor?	mumkin taKhudnee 'and 'umditkum?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Disagreements among villagers or among lineages are usually handled through extensive discussion.

Exchange 63: Respected mayor we need your help / advice / opinion.

Soldier:	Respected mayor we need your help / advice / opinion.	yaa HaDrit il 'umda, iHna miHtaageen musaa'detak / naSeeHtak / ra-yak
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Health and Sanitation

The majority of doctors and nurses work in the cities in private employment, which pays more than public employment. In rural areas, there is a severe shortage of trained medical personnel and clinics, as well as inadequate ambulance services.

Exchange 64: My arm is broken, can you help me?

Soldier:	My arm is broken, can you help me?	deraa'ee maksoor, mumkin tisaaidnee?
Local:	Yes, I can help you.	aywa, mumkin asaa'dak

Most births occur before doctors or nurses can arrive. Midwives assist the majority of births, and women in Upper Egypt have higher rates of maternal mortality than urban women do. Rural women often use the services of a traditional birth attendant called a *dayah* to give birth. If the instruments used are not sanitized, infection can result. Because of limited transportation and medical facilities in rural areas, when complications arise it is very difficult to get the woman to a doctor. Using a *dayah* to assist in childbirth is a very strong tradition in Upper Egypt. Most are unlicensed and lack formal training.

Other nontraditional health practices include using an untrained midwife to provide women with general medical advice as well as pregnancy advice. Seers and spirit healers are often consulted in rural areas for healing advice.

Exchange 65: Is there a medical clinic nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a medical clinic nearby?	fee 'eeyaada Tebeeya urayiba?
Local:	Yes, over there.	aywa, henaak

Most homes do not have functioning sanitation facilities, such as connection to a sewer or septic tank, and this leads to recurring health problems. In 2002, only 56 percent of the rural population had access to adequate sanitation.⁴⁹

Poor nutrition is also much higher in rural areas, where many rural children suffer from malnourishment and anemia. UNICEF has reported that drinking water has improved for the majority of people living in rural areas, but many still do not have access to clean water. Community development projects are underway to improve the sanitation and public health in schools in Upper Egypt where many schools lack safe water and adequate drainage. The Ministry of Education has formed a partnership with U.S. AID and UNICEF to assist over 300 primary schools to provide health education and modernize the toilet facilities in the schools. They are also working to provide safer water and better sanitation facilities to private homes.



Rural Education

The public school system in rural Egypt is structured the same as in the cities. However, because of a shortage of teachers and facilities, the attendance rate for primary school is almost twice as low in rural areas.

Exchange 66: Is there a school nearby?

Soldier:	Is there a school nearby?	fee ay madrasa urayiba min hina?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Moreover, the rate varies by gender. In Upper Egypt, it is reported that less than 30 percent of all students were girls. Girls drop out of primary school more often than boys

⁴⁹ Globalis – Egypt. “Population with access to improved sanitation, rural.” 2002. http://globalis.gvu.unu.edu/indicator_detail.cfm?IndicatorID=34&Country=EG

because poor families need their daughters to care for younger siblings and help with housework. In rural Egypt, girls suffer the highest rates of illiteracy. Illiteracy among households headed by women in rural areas is 85 percent, compared to around 57 percent in urban areas.⁵⁰

Exchange 67: Do your children go to school?

Soldier:	Do your children go to school?	wilaadak beerooHoo madrasa?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Although education is highly respected in Egypt, many families cannot make the investment required. Having a university degree is widely seen as a means for upward social mobility. But it is beyond the means of many, especially in rural areas, where children are often not educated beyond the elementary level.

Rural Transportation

As in the cities, drivers in rural areas usually exhibit high speeds and disregard for traffic lanes or signals. Traveling at high speed in the country often incurs a risk of running into donkey carts or wandering pedestrians and animals, all oblivious to traffic. On two-lane country roads and highways, drivers pass in the face of oncoming traffic, sometimes flashing their lights in warning. At night, they drive without lights. Sand drifts, road obstructions, disabled vehicles, and roads washed away by flash floods are additional hazards of driving. Off-road driving in the country should be absolutely avoided because of the danger of unmarked land mines.

Exchange 68: Do you know this area very well?

Soldier:	Do you know this area very well?	inta te'rif il manTi-a dee kwayis?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Bumpy dirt roads with deep potholes are widespread in the country. This is an impediment to driving but not to villagers who travel by walking or by horseback, as many do. It is also not uncommon to see people in the country travel by riding in a donkey cart.

Buses run in rural as well as urban areas. In the countryside, passengers usually buy tickets at the bus depot an hour or so before the desired departure time. Buses are often crowded, with standing room only.

There is no train travel into the Eastern or Western deserts, nor do trains run into Egypt from neighboring countries.

Land Mines

Land mines are buried throughout rural Egypt and have caused many casualties. Known minefields may be enclosed in barbed wire, but many are not marked with signs and for

⁵⁰ United Nations. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. IRIN. "Egypt: Poverty rampant in rural areas, says new report." 13 February 2006. <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=26131>

this reason, off-road driving is dangerous. Heavy rains can flood the land and cause land mines to shift. Travelers should avoid driving through piles of sand on the roadways.

Exchange 69: Is this area mined?

Soldier:	Is this area mined?	heya il manTi-a dee mitlaghama?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Most land mines are in World War II battlefields west of Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast. They are also found in the Sinai Peninsula and the Eastern Desert between the Suez Canal and Cairo.⁵¹

Border Crossings and Checkpoints

Before traveling to Egypt’s frontiers including the borders with Sudan, Libya, Israel and parts of the Sinai, travelers must get permission from Ministry of the Interior. Borders are frequently closed at the Egyptian-Gaza border at Rafah.



Exchange 70: Where is the nearest checkpoint?

Soldier:	Where is the nearest checkpoint?	feyn a-rab nu-Tit tafteesh?
Local:	It’s two kilometers.	'ala maasafit itneyn keelo

Exchange 71: Please get out of the car.

Soldier:	Please get out of the car.	law samaHt, iTla' min il 'arabeeya
Local:	OK.	HaaDir

Because of possible violence in the area that has led to travel warnings, reopenings are announced on short notice. In all cases, borders are sensitive areas and should be approached with caution.

Exchange 72: Did these people threaten you?

Soldier:	Did these people threaten you?	huma in naas dol hadidook?
Local:	No.	la-a?

Along major highways and near towns and oases, militarized checkpoints are stationed to check cars for weapons. These stops are indicated by signs in English which say “Traffic Stations.”

Exchange 73: Show us the car registration.

Soldier:	Show us the car registration.	wareena ruKhSet il 'arabeeya
Local:	OK.	HaaDir

⁵¹ U.S. Dept. of State. Bureau of Consular Affairs. Consular Information Sheet: “Egypt.” 22 May 2007. http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1108.html

Police or military personnel often search vehicles driven by Egyptians, seldom by foreigners, although they might be asked to show a driver's license or passport.

Exchange 74: Is this all the ID you have?

Soldier:	Is this all the ID you have?	dah kul taH-ee ish shaKhSeeya ilee ma'aak?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Exchange 75: Are you carrying any guns?

Soldier:	Are you carrying any guns?	inta shaayil ay slaaH?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Family Life

The Egyptian Household

In Egyptian families, it is customary that the senior male is the center of authority, and he expects deference from other family members. The husband traditionally earns the income and the wife stays home caring for their children and running the household. She also spends time visiting with family members. In urban areas, many women also work outside the home to bring in extra income.

As it has been for thousands of years, the family is the most important institution in the everyday lives of Egyptians. Although many urban households have developed into nuclear families, the extended family remains central. This is true among individuals of all classes. To be a member of a family implies both the security and obligation of belonging to a mutually supportive network.



A family's wealth, honor, and social standing are interconnected and one's identification with family is paramount. Having few connections to sources of societal power, Egyptians tend to remain connected to their families to fulfill their needs for financial and personal support throughout their lifetimes.

Exchange 76: Is this your entire family?

Soldier:	Is this your entire family?	dee kul 'eyltak?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

The family includes not only members related by blood ties, but also by marriage and by being employed by the household. Unmarried relatives are included. Furthermore, family members tend to live in close proximity throughout their lives, regardless of wealth. It is common for older generations who live in urban areas to share their living space with their children as they grow older and marry. If they can afford it, the parents will buy apartments near their own for their married children to live in. In cases where the residences are not shared, families typically gather together often to keep the ties strong.

Exchange 77: How many people live in this house?

Soldier:	How many people live in this house?	kaam waaHid saakin fee il beyt dah?
Local:	Ten.	'ashara

When women marry, they become members of their husbands' families, but they also remain members of their birth families. Men are responsible for caring for all the women in their families. Women in turn grow up with a strong sense of their role as caregivers along with the expectation that their main economic security lies in their relationships to their husbands, sons, and fathers.

When children are born to a family, there is a preference for sons, to have an heir and provide familial continuity in the father's name. However, children of both sexes are treated with equal care and devotion.

Exchange 78: Are these people part of your family?

Soldier:	Are these people part of your family?	huma in naas dol min 'eyltak?
Local:	No.	la-a

Within families, young children generally defer to older adults, showing them respect. They are not expected to challenge or raise their voices to their elders.

The family pattern of migrant workers varies from that of the traditional family. When migrant workers enter a new country or city from their point of origin, they tend to settle in areas where others from their native village or town live. They do not usually bring their families. Later, if they remain and become established, they will acquire a separate residence and bring their families.⁵² Often, however, they return to their original home after working temporarily in an area.

Exchange 79: Did you grow up here?

Soldier:	Did you grow up here?	inta itrabeyt wu kbirt fee il manTi-a dee?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

Status of Women

In general, men and women have equal legal rights. Equality, however, is also determined by family law in Egypt, which reinforces women's unequal status. Women do not have the same rights as men in personal areas that affect the family.

The Constitution adopted in 1956 established equal rights for women in the public sphere. This included the right to vote and hold public office. Women made gains in these areas and many have been elected to public office or hold leadership positions in business. Their rights were weakened, however, when the Sadat government amended the Egyptian Constitution in 1980 and made *Shari'a*⁵³ the primary source of legislation. Although the Egyptian Constitution guarantees equal rights for all citizens, the *Shari'a* provision undercuts those rights by denying equality to women in areas that affect marriage, divorce, and child custody. For instance, women in Egypt do not have the right to pass on Egyptian nationality to their children. Only men have that right.

⁵²“Defining Family in Egypt.” 2007. <http://family.jrank.org/pages/438/Egypt-Defining-Family-in-Egypt.html>

⁵³ *Shari'a* means the “correct path” in Arabic and specifically applies to conduct that conforms to the teachings and practice of Islam.

In addition, although the principle of equal pay set by law applies, it applies only in the formal sector which falls under government regulations. Women working in the informal, unregulated sector are often paid less than men.

These issues that affect women have been widely debated by different factions within Egyptian society. Other contentious gender issues include censorship that limits 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, and he may reverse his consent at any time. Women's rights advocates who oppose these laws and practices are often accused of being pro-western and anti-Islamic.

Women's status 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. The government, in contrast, has sometimes been supportive of women's rights. For instance, the ruling National Democratic Party 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 live independently.



© Carrolyn / flickr.com
Egyptian woman

Although many oppose it, female genital mutilation (FGM) is still widely practiced in Egypt, rooted in economic necessity. The majority of girls subjected to FGM are from a modest to low socio-economic background, often from rural areas. For 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 had genital mutilation.⁵⁴ Other estimates, however, place the figure lower.

This procedure typically takes place with girls between six and eleven years of age. It involves removal of the clitoris and genitalia with a sharp instrument, without anesthesia. Infection is common afterwards. FGM is arranged by the girl's mother, believing she is acting in her daughter's interest, and is often performed by a midwife.

Efforts to ban FGM continue. UNICEF has partnered with Egyptian NGOs to educate the public as to how it harms women and serves no useful purpose. In 1994, a task force was charged with mobilizing 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

⁵⁴ "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>

have originated in pre-Islamic society which dominated Egyptian culture for thousands of years, giving rise to traditions that remain active today.

Marriage and Divorce

Marriage and family are the center of social life in Egypt. Everyone is expected to marry and raise children. Within the Muslim community, Islamic law defines the rights and obligations of marriage. Marriage decisions are made collectively by the family.

For Muslims, the process of finding a marriage partner begins with negotiations among family members, including the parties marrying. Tradition remains strong that a young man or woman should choose a partner similar in background and educational level, subject to approval by both sets of parents. A prospective husband is expected to have the financial means to support his wife and their children, and his finances are a strong consideration in the negotiations. Family approval and financial support are required for both Muslims and Coptic Christians. Within urban middle classes, the man or woman marrying often has more choice in the matter and faces fewer constraints from family members.

Exchange 80 Are you married?

Soldier:	Are you married?	inta mitgawiz?
Local:	No.	la-a

Islamic marriage is based on a legal, religious, and economic contract that sets forth conditions negotiated into the marriage. For instance, it may prohibit the husband from taking another wife,⁵⁵ or clearly establish the woman's right to dissolve the marriage. A marriage contract precedes the period of engagement and the wedding.

During the period of engagement, the families and the prospective bride and groom begin building family ties. Most women do not spend time alone with a suitor or prospective husband before marriage, even when engaged. They must be accompanied by family members or groups of friends.

The next step is signing a marriage document to legalize the marriage. In it, the groom puts his financial commitments in writing, and the bride's family declares in writing whether she has been married before. A false statement can give the groom grounds for immediate divorce. The document is signed by the groom, the bride, and her father or guardian, witnessed by a religious leader in a mosque or the home of a family member.

When a woman marries she retains her father's family name. She remains a member of her natal family even as she becomes part of her husband's family. Historically, marriage has been patrilocal, with the bride moving to the husband's household. This still holds true, although in urban areas the couple may move out after a few years into their private

⁵⁵ Polygamy, or marrying more than one wife, is rare among Muslims partly for economic reasons. A man must have the means to maintain a separate household for each wife, and this financial burden discourages the practice. Coptic Christians do not recognize polygamy.

residence. Organization of the household around a nuclear family has become a modern urban trend in Egypt.

Exchange 81: Is this your wife?

Soldier:	Is this your wife?	heya dee miraatak?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

While she is married, a Muslim woman has the legal right to financial support from her husband. She is also entitled to keep any inheritance or property that she owned before the marriage or that she earns while married.

Muslim divorce is preceded by attempts by the family to reconcile the couple. A woman can then initiate divorce, and once divorced or widowed, she is expected to move back into her father’s home. Alternately, she could live with another relative. She should not live alone, however. Those divorced or widowed would meet disapproval from society if they chose to live alone instead of with a family member.

Following divorce, the mother retains custody of young children. When they are older, the father has the right to claim them.

Naming Conventions

In Arab culture, a person’s family name and ancestry are important as a marker of social identity. Egyptians often do not have a “last name” or family name that is commonly shared by all family members within a particular group. Instead, each person receives a unique name followed by the given names of his or her father and other male ancestors to establish paternal lineage. Three or more names can be assigned. For instance, a typical male name would be “Hakim Ali Abdallah.” The first name, Hakim, means “wise, insightful” in Arabic. It is the personal name used by family and friends. The last two names would customarily be the names of a father and a grandfather.



Exchange 82: Are these your children?

Soldier:	Are these your children?	huma dol wilaadak?
Local:	Yes.	aywa

A name may also include an honorific name identifying a person as the father or mother of someone. One example is the honorific “umm,” meaning “mother of,” as used in the name of the famous Egyptian singer Umm Kalthoum. Married women are often identified by such a respectful title followed by the name of her first son. A wife keeps her maiden name, but children of the marriage take the father’s ancestral name as part of their name.

Alternately, the honorific term may mean “son of” or “daughter of.” The name Hasan ibn Faraj means Hasan, the son of Faraj. Alternately, the female name Ghazala bint Faraj means Ghazala, the daughter of Faraj.

When people address those who are not family, they often show politeness by preceding the given name by a title. For instance, *'am* (uncle) is frequently used for men. When addressing family members, children or young adults typically use special titles for uncles, aunts, grandparents, or very close non-relatives.

Egyptian names, both Muslim and Christian, can be religious or secular and have origins in several languages, including Arabic, old Egyptian, and Hebrew. Christians who choose religious names may take the names of saints.

The Egyptian government transliterates its documents using the “el” article to precede given names, rather than “al” used in other Arab countries. The Arab name al-Rashid would be changed to el-Rashid in Egyptian, in both cases meaning “the rightly guided.”