



CULTURAL ORIENTATION

ARABIC-EGYPTIAN



Egyptian men, Assuit Governorate Flickr/USAID Egypt

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CULTURAL ORIENTATION | Arabic-Egyptian



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*Al Moez Ldin Allah Al Fatmi Street in Cairo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site
Wikimedia/Yasser.mahmoud CC BY-SA 4.0*

Chapter 1 | Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Profile

Introduction

The Arab Republic of Egypt (Jumhuriyat Misr al-Arabiyyah, or locally Misr) is located in northeastern Africa. Long known for its pyramids and ancient civilization, Egypt is the largest and most populous Arab country. The country borders the Mediterranean Sea between Libya to the west and Israel and the Gaza strip to the east. It shares its southern border with Sudan and most of its eastern border is defined by the Red Sea.¹

Egypt has played a central role in Middle Eastern politics in modern times. As a presidential republic, the president and the military wield considerable power. Since 1952, five of Egypt's six presidents have emerged from its armed forces, which is

the largest in the Arab world and among all African states.^{2, 3} The 2014 amended constitution strengthened executive and military powers, but also introduced several secular and democratic features. It still recognizes Islam as the official religion, but all religious-based political activity is prohibited.^{4, 5, 6}

Approximately 90% of the 97 million Egyptian residents are Muslim, mostly Sunni, and have mixed African, Arab, Ottoman, and European ancestry.⁷ Arabic is the national language, and the Arabic-Egyptian dialect is spoken by nearly all Egyptians in the country as well as the large numbers of Egyptians living throughout the Middle East. The dialect is thought to be the most widely understood in the Arab world.⁸

Ancient Egypt was among the earliest civilizations in Africa. For millennia, Egypt maintained a unique, complex, and stable culture that influenced later cultures of Europe. The country has been a leading ally of the West since the mid-1970s, playing a major role in the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. Currently, the country faces numerous socioeconomic challenges. These include a rapidly growing population, limited farmable land, and heavy dependence on the Nile.^{9, 10} Moreover, the government of Egypt has had to step up efforts against Islamic militants at home since 2014.^{11, 12}

Geographic Divisions

Ancient Egypt developed into two regional cultures. Upper Egypt encompassed the *southern* part of the country extending toward sub-Saharan Africa, to include the area between Qena Bend and Aswan. Lower Egypt includes the area between Memphis and the Nile Delta, which drains into the Mediterranean Sea. In contrast to Upper Egypt, Lower Egypt is densely populated. Because of sea trade and interaction with people from foreign countries, cities in Lower Egypt developed faster than in the south.^{13, 14}



Egypt and its neighbors
Graphic/DLIFLC

The vast majority of Egypt's landscape—about 95%—is desert. Only 3.5% of Egypt's land is settled, and the country's crowded cities and almost all agricultural activity are concentrated along the banks of the Nile River, which bisects Egypt north to south.¹⁵ Geographically, there are four main regions of Egypt.¹⁶

Nile River Valley and Delta

The first, the Nile River Valley and Delta occupies about 4% of the country's area. The Nile River enters Egypt at the Sudanese border and runs northward, crossing more than 1,200 km (750 mi) of the country. At Cairo, the Nile begins spreading into a delta, which is 160 km (99 mi) long. At its widest, the Nile Delta spans 250 km (155 mi).¹⁷



NASA satellite image of the Nile and Delta
Flickr/NASA Goddard Space Flight Center

Egyptians rely almost entirely on the Nile for their water supply, and the river provides 85% of all irrigation.¹⁸ Nearly all agricultural activity takes place in the Delta and along the banks of the Nile. But urbanization, climate change, and desertification have led to a loss of farmable land. The heavy dependence on the Nile and the surrounding area by Egypt's rapidly growing population have overburdened the land and river.¹⁹ As a result, water and food insecurity are major challenges.^{20, 21}

Western Desert (Al-Ṣaḥra' al-Gharbiyyah)

West of the Nile River is the Western Desert, which makes up about two-thirds of Egypt's land area (approximately 680,000 sq km/262,549 sq mi). This harsh, arid desert is the Egyptian portion of the greater Libyan Desert; large parts of it are uninhabitable.^{22, 23} The Western Desert rarely receives any rain and is one of the most arid regions on earth. It is marked by seven depressions or basins, six of which are



Town of Al-Qasr, Dakhla Oasis, Western Desert
Wikimedia/Vyacheslav Argenberg

oases with fresh water provided by the Nile or groundwater sources. These areas support small permanent settlements and limited agriculture.²⁴

Within the Western Desert lie the Qattara Depression and the Great Sand Sea. The Qattara Depression, north of the Siwa Oasis at 133 m (436 ft) below sea level, is an expanse of salt lakes and marshes covering 18,000 sq km (7,000 sq mi). The Great Sand Sea forms a natural barrier

between Egypt and Libya. It extends for 600 km (373 mi) between the Siwa Oasis and the Gilf Kebir Plateau, making it the second-largest continuous sand-covered area on earth.²⁵ The Western Desert has long been a route for smuggling arms and other contraband across Libya's porous border.²⁶

Eastern Desert (Al-Ṣaḥra' al-Libiyah)

East of the Nile and extending to the Red Sea is a third region, the Eastern Desert, or Arabian Desert. Like the Western Desert, it makes up a small portion of the vast Sahara Desert, which stretches across North Africa. But unlike its cousin to the west, the Eastern Desert is fairly mountainous. It is also a much smaller region—about 220,000 sq km (84,942 sq mi). Its hills join a rugged mountain chain, known as the Red Sea Hills, which reach an elevation of 2,187 meters (7,175 ft). There are few permanent settlements in this isolated region, though many of the country's oil fields are located here. Most of the population lives in small fishing, mining, or petroleum-extracting communities along the Red Sea coastal plain.²⁷



Rugged mountains of the Eastern Desert
Flickr/masterplan

Sinai Peninsula (Shibh Jazirat Sina)

A fourth region, the triangle-shaped Sinai Peninsula, also referred to simply as Sinai, borders Israel and Gaza to the northeast. Farther south, the Gulf of Aqaba lies between Sinai and Saudi Arabia, narrowing to just 13 km (7 mi) at the Tiran Straits. To the west, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea separate it from the rest of Egypt. In Arabic, Sinai is known as *muftah*, or “a key space,” and the peninsula has been an important thoroughfare since the time of the Egyptian pharaohs.²⁸ This northeastern



Jebel Musa, southern Sinai
Flickr/Thomas Depenbusch

section of Egypt covers around 61,100 sq km (23,590 sq mi) and is largely sandstone plateaus, gravel plains, jagged mountains, and dry wadis.²⁹ The Red Sea Hills continue from the Eastern Desert into the southern high mountain region of Sinai. This granite range includes Mount Catherine (Jebel Katrinah) which, at 2,642 m (8,668 ft), is Egypt's highest point.³⁰ Next to Mount Catherine is Jebel Musa ("Mountain of Moses"), the traditional location of Mount Sinai (Horeb), which is considered a holy site by Christians, Jews, and Muslims.³¹



*U.S. National Guard peacekeeping force, Sinai
Flickr/The National Guard*

Sinai has been the epicenter of decades of conflict. It was the focus of Israeli-Egyptian combat in every war between the two countries.³² Even today, the northern flat coastal plain extending from the Suez Canal into the Gaza Strip and Israel is where most of Egypt's violence is centered. The peninsula has been under a state of emergency since October 2014, when Egypt launched a massive operation targeting Islamic militants in the area. Hundreds of civilians and soldiers have been killed during the conflict in recent years.^{33, 34} As part of the 1979 Camp David Accord between Israel and Egypt, a small number of U.S. peacekeepers are stationed in northern Sinai and farther south to provide security assistance to Egypt.^{35, 36}

Climate



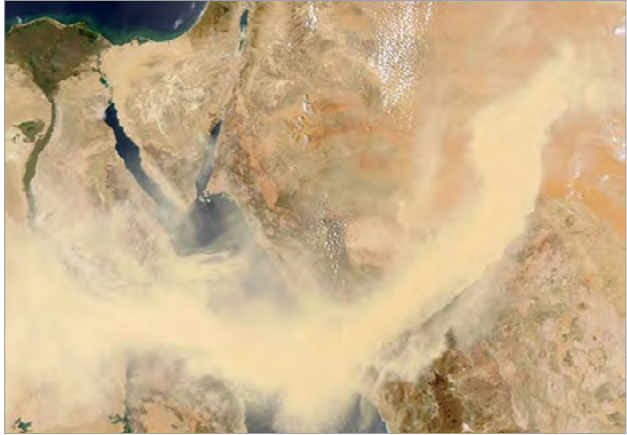
*Outskirts of Cairo
Flickr/Dinesh Bareja*

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

in the daytime. Winter temperatures in the desert range from 0°C (32°F) to 18°C (64°F).³⁷

Rainfall is light and occurs predominantly along the Mediterranean coast. In most areas, Egypt receives less than 8 cm (3 in) of rain annually. The wettest area is around Alexandria, with about 20 cm (8 in) of annual rainfall. Cairo receives only slightly over 1 cm (0.39 in) of rainfall annually, although humidity is high.

South of Cairo, there is very little rainfall at all; some areas go years without rain. These extreme dry spells may be followed by heavy rainfall and damaging flash floods.^{38, 39} Ferocious sandstorms rage in the desert, rearranging dunes and blocking the vision of anyone caught in such a storm. Swirling clouds of dust that can be seen on satellite imagery blow over Egypt and northern Africa.^{40, 41}



Thick band of dust across the Red Sea
NASA Earth Observatory

Bodies of Water

Nile River (Baḥr Al-Nil)

It is said that Egypt owes “its essence, its culture, and its life” to the Nile River, as it supports almost all of Egypt’s agriculture and population.^{42, 43, 44} The river originates in the high lakes of Ethiopia and Uganda. Its tributaries are the White Nile (out of Uganda) and Blue Nile (out of Ethiopia). At Khartoum in Sudan, these tributaries merge into the Nile. It then flows through Egypt south to north and empties into the Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁵ In total, the Nile is 6,695 km (4,160 mi) long, with 1,467 km (912 mi) of that length in Egypt. Worldwide, only the Amazon River extends as far as the Nile.⁴⁶



Elephantine and Amun islands, near Aswan
Flickr/David Stanley

The Nile basin includes parts of numerous African countries. Between 80% and 86% of its water originates in Ethiopia.⁴⁷ Over the years, attempts have been made to

establish agreements among the countries sharing Nile waters. In 2010, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda signed an agreement on sharing the Nile water, though it raised strong opposition from Egypt and Sudan.⁴⁸ The Aswan Dam, built in 1960, restricts annual flooding of the Nile, which has gradually decreased the fertility of agricultural lands in the delta.⁴⁹ More recently, Egypt is battling to halt construction of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. When finished, it will be Africa's largest hydroelectric power station and generate much-needed electricity for Ethiopia and Sudan, but the dam will reduce water flow to Egypt's Nile.^{50, 51}

Lake Nasser



Lake Nasser, Upper Egypt
Flickr/Alberto Gonzalez Rovira

Lake Nasser, also known as Lake Nubia, Egypt's "insurance" against drought, is 550 km (342 mi) long and 12 km (7.2 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 the water is distributed by agreement between the two countries.⁵² Its creation displaced over 100,000 Nubian inhabitants and flooded sites of ancient Egyptian buildings such as Abu Simbel.

Lake Nasser provides irrigation for hundreds of thousands of acres and has allowed for more agricultural rotations per year.⁵³

Suez Canal



USS America (CV 66) in transit, Suez Canal
Wikimedia/U.S. Navy

The Suez Canal, completed in 1869, is one of the world's most heavily traveled shipping channels. It is 163 km (101 mi) long and runs between the Red and the Mediterranean seas. Because of its strategic importance, the Suez Canal is protected by international treaty.⁵⁴ The U.S. Department of Energy identifies it as a "geographic chokepoint," or passageway that is essential to international oil trade; it is also vulnerable to accident or

attack.^{55, 56} About 10% of the world's current trade and 2.5% of its oil is transported through the Suez Canal, which meets the Mediterranean at Port Said. In 2015, Egypt opened a major expansion of the canal, which deepened the main waterway and provided a 35-km (22-mi) parallel channel.⁵⁷ In 2016, nearly four billion barrels of crude oil traversed the canal daily.⁵⁸

Mediterranean Sea

Forming Egypt's northern boundary, the Mediterranean lies between Europe and Africa. On its west end, it merges with the Atlantic Ocean at the Strait of Gibraltar, between Spain and Morocco. To the east, the Mediterranean borders the westernmost point of the Asian continent, linking to the Red Sea by the Suez Canal and to the Black Sea by the Turkish Straits.⁵⁹



Beachgoers in Alexandria
Flickr/ASaber91

In ancient times, the Mediterranean Sea served as a natural barrier against Egypt's enemies and as an important route for the exchange of ideas and goods between Egypt and the other great civilizations around its basin. This environment fostered the early development of art, music, literature, and science in the region, and ultimately the creation of the Royal Library in Alexandria. It was one of the largest and most significant libraries in the ancient world, where many of the most famous thinkers of the time studied.^{60, 61}

During World War II, the Mediterranean held significant strategic and military importance, and numerous conventional naval battles were fought in its waters. Today, the Mediterranean continues to hold strategic, geographic, and economic significance, serving as an important transportation route for goods between the East and West through the Suez Canal.⁶²

Red Sea (Al-Baḥr Al-Aḥmar, or Baḥr al-Qalzam)

The Red Sea stretches between the continents of Africa and Asia and is an extension of the Indian Ocean.⁶³ To the west, the Red Sea 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 Peninsula) and the Gulf of Aqaba (on the eastern side). To the east, the

Red Sea borders Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The Red Sea connects to the Indian Ocean via the Gulf of Aden.⁶⁴

The Red Sea is one of the most vital sea lanes in the world; its regional and international oceangoing traffic includes oil tankers, cargo ships, ocean liners, and fishing boats. Important deepwater shipping ports on the Red Sea include Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, Mukalla in Yemen, and Suez at the entrance of the Suez Canal in Egypt.⁶⁵ The Red Sea is economically and militarily important to the countries surrounding it, and it is becoming host to fierce competition as the individual countries seek to safeguard their interests.^{66, 67}



Oceangoing traffic in the Red Sea
Flickr/Rusaila Bazlamit

The Red Sea also provides household and industrial water for cities on its shoreline. Several Egyptian resorts, such as Sharm El Sheikh and Hurghada, are located on the Red Sea, on the eastern shoreline of the Sinai Peninsula. These luxury resorts were popular with wealthy foreigners until the downing of a Russian passenger plane departing from Sharm El Sheikh in 2015.⁶⁸

Major Cities

Cairo (al-Qahira)

Located on the banks of the Nile in northern Egypt, ancient Cairo is the administrative capital of the country. It is also Egypt's primary commercial and financial center. In 2017, an estimated 20 million people, or 43% of all Egyptians, lived in Greater Cairo in 2017, making it one of the largest and most densely populated urban areas in the world.^{69, 70}



View of the Qasr al-Nil Bridge from Cairo Tower
Wikimedia/Sailko

The city is a blend of the ancient and the modern, with high-rise buildings set among historic monuments dating from the time of Ramses II. A cosmopolitan city, Cairo is marked by Arab, European, and

African influences, and its medieval markets coexist alongside the most modern commercial enterprises. The city's ancient structures, combined with its many temples, churches, museums, an opera house, Cairo University, and over 600 Islamic monuments have made Cairo Egypt's de facto cultural capital. Cairo's proximity to many of Egypt's archeological sites, including the nearby Pyramids of Giza, has made it a popular tourist destination.⁷¹



Horse carts and camels, modern Cairo in the distance
Flickr/David Stanley

A major commercial hub in the Arab world for over 1,000 years, Cairo has been a trading center for goods shipped to Europe from Africa and India. During the 19th century, it was revitalized by industry, a rising cotton trade, and the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869. Cairo grew rapidly in the 20th century, especially after World War II, and industrial development drew people to the cities in search of jobs. The city's growth strained urban services and housing availability. Public services such as transportation, water resources, and trash collection have been seriously overburdened.⁷² As a result, Cairo has some of the world's largest slums, where an estimated 8 million people live.⁷³



A street market, Old Cairo
Flickr/Francisco Antunes

The city's chronic congestion has led the government to pursue development of a new administrative and financial capital for the country. Government buildings, foreign embassies and major companies will be moved to an area 45 km (30 mi) outside of Cairo. The first phase of construction of the new capital is due to be completed in 2019.^{74, 75}

Alexandria

Egypt's second-largest city, Alexandria, lies on the Mediterranean coastline, just west of the Nile Delta. Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great over 2,300 years ago (332 BCE) and has been a major port ever since. Alexandria's sea trade



Entrance to Alexandria's shallow East Harbor
Flickr/Gian Cornachini

with Europe declined from the 16th century to the 18th, after the trade route around the Cape of Good Hope was discovered. But trade and export of goods to Europe were revived in the 19th century; with maritime expansion came population growth. Between 1821 and the end of the 19th century, Alexandria's population grew from 12,500 to 320,000.⁷⁶ As of 2015, the population was around 5 million.^{77, 78}



A view of Alexandria
Flickr/Lyn Gateley

Originally home to the greatest library of ancient times, it was a center for Hellenistic scholarship, culture, and science; some regard Alexandria as the birthplace of Western science.⁷⁹ The city was also once an important center of Christianity and, until the exodus of foreigners after World War II, had a thriving Jewish population. From its inception, Alexandria has been a cosmopolitan center with ties to Mediterranean cultures; the city still has a large community of Greeks.

Recent changes have brought an influx of native Egyptians, and today the city has stronger ties to the Nile Valley.^{80, 81}

Modern Alexandria is an important industrial and commercial center. It accounts for about 40% of all industrial production in Egypt and thus plays a significant role in the national economy. The city's industrial base includes oil refineries, textile mills, chemical and metal plants, and food-processing facilities. Major products include rice, salt, paper, asphalt, and cement.^{82, 83}

Luxor

Located 656 km (408 mi) south of Cairo, on the east bank of the Nile, Luxor was the ancient city of Thebes, the great capital of Egypt from around 2000 to 1075 BCE.⁸⁴ Known as *Waset* in antiquity, the city's contemporary name is from *Al-Uqsar*, meaning



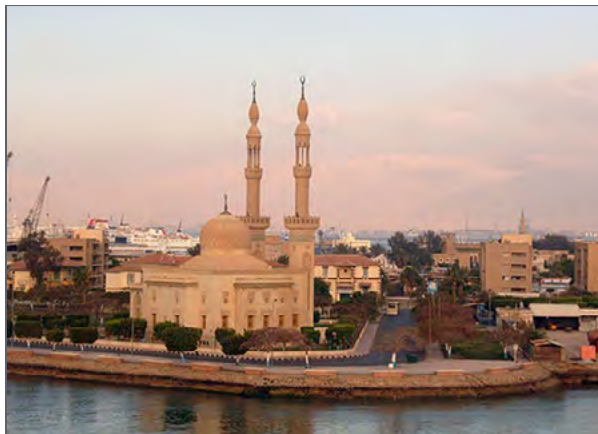
*Statues of Ramses II as Osiris, Karnak
Flickr/Andrea Pravettoni*

“the palaces” in Arabic. The area of Luxor includes the city of Luxor, on the Nile’s east bank, and the surrounding ruins of Thebes. The largest surviving ancient monuments in the Nile Valley are located here. Architectural remains suggest that people have been living in this area for about 6,000 years.⁸⁵

Since the Roman and Greek periods, travelers have visited Luxor to view the temples and tombs of kings and queens.⁸⁶ Just north of the city rests the massive Karnak Temple Complex, which includes the ruins of the Great Temple of Amon. On the west Nile’s bank stretch the ruins of Thebes—a massive necropolis for Egyptian royalty, priests, and tomb builders.⁸⁷ Because of the historical significance of the many ruins and antiquities in the area, Luxor

remains an extremely popular destination and has many hotels and amenities.^{88, 89} In 2016, Luxor’s population was 1,200,000.⁹⁰

Suez



*Grand Mosque at Port Fouad, part of metropolitan Port Said
Wikimedia/Jerrye & Roy Klotz, MD, CC BY-SA 3.0*

Suez, located at the southern end of the Suez Canal, lies at the northernmost point of the Gulf of Suez, the Red Sea’s western arm. The city of Suez has served as a commercial port since the seventh century. Modern Suez is one of Egypt’s largest ports and functions as a refueling station and holding area for ships traveling through the canal.⁹¹ Its growing population was 643,000 in 2016.⁹² Suez is a manufacturing center for petroleum products, fertilizers, and paper. The

opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 made it possible for ships to travel between Europe and Asia. Infrastructure associated with the canal helped Suez develop into a modern city. Suez is linked by rail to Cairo (135 km/84 mi, to the west). With a population of around half a million, the city is slightly smaller than Port Said.⁹³

The Suez Canal was closed twice in the 20th century, blocking the shortest link from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. Once following the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956 (motivated by the nationalization of the canal) and another time following the Suez Crisis of 1967.⁹⁴ During the October War of 1973, when Egypt and Syria attacked Israeli forces in the Sinai and the Golan Heights to regain territory lost during the Suez Crisis, almost 80% of the town of Suez was destroyed.⁹⁵ When the canal reopened in 1975, Suez became a tax-free industrial zone.⁹⁶

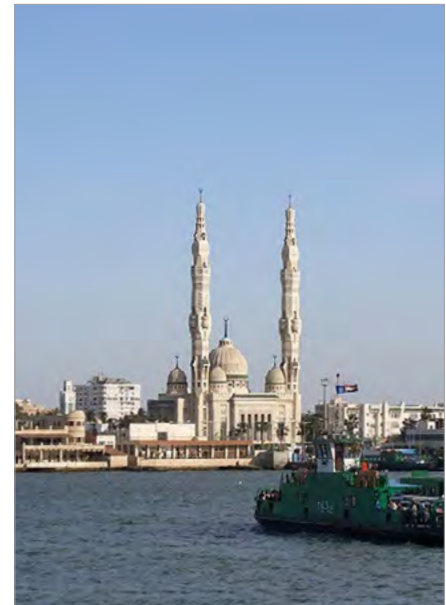


Egyptian vehicles crossing the Suez, October 7, 1973
Wikimedia/Dār al-Shurūq, Egypt

Port Said

Located on the northern tip of the Suez Canal on the Mediterranean Sea, Port Said has been an active port since the late 19th century. Builders of the Suez Canal founded the city in 1859 as a camp for canal workers. Since then, the population of Port Said has grown to over 600,000.⁹⁷ Port Said today is a fueling area for ships and a site for canal maintenance.⁹⁸

In 1967, when Nasser blockaded the Tiran Straits and cut off Israel's main oil shipping route through the Gulf of Aqaba, and during the 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars, Port Said was bombed by the Israelis, which led to closing the harbor to shipping. Port Said was rebuilt after the war, and the government supported a tax-free industrial zone. Industries include computer manufacturing, textiles, glass, clothing, and sea salt. Port Said also has electrical plants and railway services.⁹⁹



Port Said, northern Egypt
Wikimedia/Nicola

Aswan

Located in southern Egypt on the first cataract (small waterfall or rapids) of the Nile River, Aswan has for many years been a center of commerce. In ancient times, it was



Aswan Dam hydroelectric power plant, Upper Egypt
Wikimedia/Ad Meskens/CC BY SA 3.0



Boating on the Nile, Aswan
Flickr/yeowatzup

an ivory market and a trading gateway for caravans carrying incense, ivory, and ebony between Egypt, Nubia, and Central Africa.¹⁰⁰ Its quarries were also the source of much of the granite used in ancient construction projects.¹⁰¹ Aswan became an industrial center after 1960 when hydroelectric production began in the region. Today it is an important commercial and industrial center, with mining operations for hematite and iron ore. Major products include copper and steel, fertilizers, cement, refined sugar, and quarried rocks.¹⁰²

Because of its climate and location, Aswan has been a winter resort for travelers since the early 19th century. During the period of British colonization of Egypt (1881–1952), many British vacationed in Aswan in the winter. It was a trip here that inspired British writer Agatha Christie to write *Death on the Nile*.¹⁰³ Modern visitors sail in feluccas, fish on the Nile, and visit the many historical sites in the area, including ancient ruins

on Elephantine Island.¹⁰⁴ Aswan has a population of roughly 300,000 people, many of them Nubians who were forced to relocate to Aswan with the construction of the High Dam reservoir south of the city.¹⁰⁵

History

Introduction

Egypt is the site of one of the oldest civilizations in the world. Settlements in the bountiful Nile River Valley date back as far as 7000 BCE.¹⁰⁶ As they grew into agricultural societies, two kingdoms, Upper and Lower Egypt, emerged and became unified around 3000 BCE. The government ruled by pharaohs, or “god-kings,” was established.¹⁰⁷ Over the next three millennia, a series of dynasties witnessed vast

cultural achievements, including hieroglyphic writing and the pyramids. Internal weakness and bankruptcy left the empire vulnerable to invasions.¹⁰⁸

Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 BCE marked the end of ancient Egypt as a political entity; native culture declined further during subsequent Roman rule that ended in 640 CE.¹⁰⁹ By this time, the indigenous religion of Egypt 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.^{110, 111}

During Roman rule (31 BCE to 642 CE), Egypt established its own Christian (Coptic) Church. In 641 CE, Arab Muslims swept into the region and established Islam's first Egyptian capital at a site that would become Cairo. Arabic became the new language, and Sunni Islam gradually replaced the pagan gods and coexisted with the older Coptic (Christian) religion.¹¹² During rule by the Mamluks and Ottomans (1250-1798), Egypt became an Islamic state with an Arabic-speaking majority.^{113, 114, 115}



*Roman amphitheater in Alexandria
Flickr/Institute for the Study of the Ancient World*

Modern European influence began with the British occupation of Egypt, which lasted from 1882 until the mid-20th century.¹¹⁶ Since then, Egypt has seen six presidents, been in four wars with Israel (1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973), and seen repressive regimes incapable of managing the country's socioeconomic problems. These conditions have led to assassination attempts, terrorist attacks, and eventually the ouster of former President Hosni Mubarak through a popular uprising in January 2011—dubbed the “Arab Spring.” Most recently, former army general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was elected to a second, consecutive term as president in 2018.¹¹⁷

British Colonialism and the Suez Canal

Under Ottoman leadership, Egyptian farmers were ordered to cultivate cotton, which became a mainstay of the economy. When U.S. cotton production fell after the Civil War, Great Britain turned to Egypt for raw cotton for its manufacturers. Britain manufactured the raw cotton and sold it back to its colonies, becoming ever more



British heliographers signaling by Morse Code, Citadel of Cairo, 1882 Flickr/signal mirror

eliminated the need to circumnavigate Africa, and 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.^{120, 121}

Although the British recognized Egypt as an independent state in 1922, Great Britain kept control of all aspects of Egyptian communications, defense, and the legal system until independence in 1953. Egypt would not have full control of the Suez Canal for another 14 years.¹²²



Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Al-Banna (third from left), Cairo, 1947 Wikimedia/Eltaher.com

religion and politics with charitable giving and education. This integrated approach of providing social support and assistance to the common people was popular, and the organization grew rapidly. The Arab League, a Cairo-born organization of Arab states in the Middle East, opposed the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. When

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 grounds for their occupation of Egypt in 1882.^{118, 119}

Built between 1859 and 1869, the Suez Canal increased British vested interest in Egypt by providing a strategic shipping channel linking the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. This vital passage

Nationalism in Egypt—energized by continued British interference—found expression in Pan-Arabism. This new notion of a cultural and political unity among Arab countries led to the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 and the founding of the Arab League in 1945. The Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamic political and social movement, advocated for a state governed by a combination of civil and shari'a (Islamic) law.¹²³ In addition, the Brotherhood mixed

the state of Israel was created in 1948, Arab League countries joined together to attack it, in what became the first Arab-Israeli war.^{124, 125}

Nasser and Independence

Egyptian officer Gamal Abdel Nasser, a proponent of Pan-Arabism, gained power when he effectively headed a movement to overthrow Egypt's British-backed government. The group declared Egypt a republic in 1953 and proceeded to develop the country into a more modern and powerful nation. In 1954, Nasser survived an assassination attempt by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Nasser government dissolved the organization and thousands of its members were arrested, many others went underground.¹²⁶



*President Nasser (center) with foreign heads of state, 1960
Flickr/Tullio Saba*

One of Nasser's first major projects was to build a dam that could harness the power of the Nile River, control its floods, and generate electricity.¹²⁷ Discord ensued when Britain and the United States withdrew funding for construction, protesting an arms deal that Nasser had concluded with the Soviet bloc. To secure revenue for Egypt, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. Fearing that Egypt would close the canal to their shipments, Great Britain and France joined with Israel in attacking Egypt, in what became known as the Suez Crisis. With the ultimate goal of seizing the canal, Israel took control of and occupied northeastern Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt.^{128, 129} British and French troops then entered the Israeli controlled areas. The United States opposed any seizure of the Suez Canal, and in a United Nations resolution, called for the evacuation of the foreign forces from Egypt. Under international pressure, British, French, and Israeli troops withdrew from Egyptian territory.^{130, 131}



Oil tanks burn after an Anglo-French attack on Port Said, Suez Crisis, 1956 Wikimedia/Imperial War Museum

Tensions between Israel and Egypt following the Suez Crisis escalated. In 1967, Nasser sent forces into Sinai and blockaded the Tiran Straits, cutting off Israel's access to the Red Sea and its main oil shipping routes. Israel responded in a surprise attack and destroyed Egypt's air force in what would later be called the Six-Day War. The Suez Canal remained closed for 8 years, and Israel occupied Sinai, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and West Bank.^{132, 133, 134}



After defeat in the Six-Day War, Egyptians protest President Nasser's resignation Wikimedia/AI-Ahram Weekly

Anwar Sadat and Peace with Israel

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 United States, Israel agreed to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. In return, Egypt recognized Israel's right to exist as a nation.^{135, 136} The new accord, however, did not proceed unchallenged. This agreement for a separate peace agreement with Israel was seen by the Arab world as a betrayal because it weakened their collective power to confront Israel. Egypt was expelled from the Arab League for 10 years, while Sadat paid with his life. In 1981, he was shot and killed by four soldiers, members of an Islamist fundamentalist group.^{137, 138}



Anwar Sadat (left) and Hosni Mubarak, 1973
Flickr/Central Intelligence Agency

Hosni Mubarak, a former air force general, succeeded Sadat as president in 1981. During his rule, Egypt remained at peace with Israel and regained prestige in the Arab world. Its standing became more visible when Cairo became the seat of the Arab League in 1990.¹³⁹

Arab Spring



Demonstrators, Tahrir Square, 10 February 2011
Wikimedia/Jonathan Rashad

military rule, the first presidential elections in half a century were won by Mohammed Morsi in 2012.¹⁴³

Morsi's political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, had strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt.¹⁴⁴ The protesters' hoped-for transition to democracy proved elusive, as Morsi gave himself broad powers and made changes that were out of step with the Egyptian public.¹⁴⁵ He pushed through constitutional changes that made the principles of shari'a the main source of legislation and mandated that lawmakers consult Islamic authorities on any legislation.^{146, 147}

Aftermath



Supporters of ousted President Mohamed Morsi, October 2013
Wikimedia/Voice of America

Beginning on 25 January 2011, following a popular uprising in Tunisia, thousands of Egyptian protesters filled Cairo's Tahrir Square for 18 days—leading to the resignation of President Mubarak on 11 February.¹⁴⁰ On 19 March 2011, a constitutional referendum was held in Egypt, and new amendments were overwhelmingly ratified.¹⁴¹ Despite reforms, deadly confrontations between protesters and government forces continued.¹⁴² Following a year of interim

By 2013, politics had become polarized between the Islamists, the military, and secular forces. Growing discontent with the increasing authoritarianism and Morsi's Islamist agenda among secularists, liberals, and Coptic Christians resulted in another wave of mass protests. Simultaneously, a growing Islamist militant insurgency in Sinai began to shake Egypt's stability. In June, tens of thousands of protestors converged on Tahrir Square to demand Morsi's resignation from office.¹⁴⁸ Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, an Egyptian army



Protestors, Rabaa al-Adawiya Square, Cairo
Wikimedia/Voice of America

general at the time, led a coalition to remove Morsi from power and suspended the Egyptian constitution. Weeks later, an equal number of Egyptians protested the ouster of Morsi in a sit-in at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square in Cairo. In what became known as the Rabaa massacre, Egyptian security forces forcibly dispersed the protesters, killing at least 817 people.^{149, 150} In the months that followed, Egyptian authorities outlawed the Brotherhood, designating it a terrorist organization, and started drafting a new constitution; it also curbed media freedom.¹⁵¹ Sisi won the presidency in the May 2014 elections.^{152, 153} That same year, a constitutional referendum removed language that promoted a stricter interpretation of Islamic law, prohibited all religious-based political activity, strengthened the power of the presidency, and bolstered the role of the military.^{154, 155}

Recent Events



Cairo protest for detained journalists, March 2014
Flickr/Bora S. Kamel

Sisi's rise and his increasing authoritarianism have left some fearing an effective return to military rule. Others are more apprehensive of a campaign of violence by jihadists in the Sinai Peninsula. Sisi launched a massive offensive against Islamic militants there in 2014, seeking to end a conflict that has killed hundreds of Egyptians in recent years. The campaign has so far failed to crush the local Islamic State affiliate in Sinai, Wilayat Sinai, which is also blamed for the bombing of churches in Cairo and other cities. In addition, the group downed a Russian passenger jet carrying tourists back from the resort of Sharm El Sheikh in 2015, killing 224 people.¹⁵⁶

In 2018, after an election campaign marked by the intimidation and arrest of his political opponents, Sisi secured another four years as president.^{157, 158} Fourteen

international and Egyptian rights groups and the International Commission of Jurists condemned the elections, accusing the government of having “trampled over even the minimum requirements for free and fair elections.”¹⁵⁹

Media

Egypt’s press is one of the most influential and widely-read in the region, and its entertainment industry provides much of the Arab-speaking world with television and film.¹⁶⁰ The current Egyptian constitution guarantees freedom of the press, freedom of opinion, and freedom of expression. But many television and radio stations, websites, newspapers, and magazines are controlled by the state.¹⁶¹



*News anchor, protester, Tahrir Square, February 2011
Wikimedia/Deidre Kline*

Bloggers, online radio, and social networking sites played an important role during the revolutionary uprising in 2011. Since then, new radio stations, private networks, and independent newspapers have emerged, though most pro-Islamist media outlets have been closed, or now broadcast from abroad.¹⁶²

Journalists in Egypt are allowed to express their views on political and social issues; but it is against the law to libel the president, government institutions, and other foreign heads of state. Criticism of the Sisi regime or religious institutions, challenging Islamic doctrine, or expressing support for the Muslim Brotherhood can result in prison sentences. According to media reports and local and international human rights groups, journalists in Egypt have been arrested and imprisoned, harassed, and intimidated.¹⁶³ Ahead of the 2018 elections, over 400 media and NGO websites were blocked.¹⁶⁴

As of 2017, 48% of the population had access to the internet in Egypt.¹⁶⁵ The most popular source for news is television. Although two state-run national television stations and six regional channels provide programming, many Egyptians rely on pan-Arab stations such as Al Jazeera.¹⁶⁶

Economy

Historically, the Egyptian economy was based on agriculture, mainly cotton. About one-third of the Egyptian labor force depends on farming, and a substantial number of others rely on jobs related to agriculture. The agricultural sector is now largely privatized and deregulated except for cotton, sugar, and rice. Agricultural production, however, has been limited by the small amount of arable land in Egypt (less than 3% of the total area) and has not kept pace with the growing population.¹⁶⁷



Farms in the fertile Nile Delta
Flickr/camilo g. r.

As of 2013, one-quarter of the Egyptian labor force was employed in industry. Egypt's major industries, in addition to hydrocarbons, include textiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, food processing, and construction. Services, including banking, government services, and tourism, account for about 56% of gross domestic product (GDP) and half the labor force.¹⁶⁸

Egypt's economy today is hampered by government intervention, state-run industries, a bloated public sector, and substantial fuel, housing, and food subsidies.¹⁶⁹ In addition, the Egyptian military wields enormous economic and political power. Senior military officers dominate large portions of the economy, and military-owned enterprises are active in all areas of business, including food, energy, construction, and tourism.^{170, 171, 172}



Bread line, El Mahalla El Kubra, Nile Delta
Flickr/James Buck

In recent years, the Egyptian government began privatizing public enterprises, raising the price of subsidized fuel and electricity, and introducing other measures to boost the economy. As a result, foreign investment has increased. With increasing revenues from natural gas and foreign investment, Egypt's real GDP grew about 4.3% between 2015 and 2016.¹⁷³

Current Socioeconomic Climate



Offshore drilling rig run by British Petroleum, northern Egypt
Wikimedia/Olav Gjerstad

held college degrees, and the unemployment rate increased with each educational level attained.^{175, 176} The unemployment figures are much higher for university-educated women.¹⁷⁷ Thus, the rate of young Egyptians migrating out of the country has increased sharply.¹⁷⁸

Despite Egypt's efforts to boost the economy and the recent increase in foreign investment, poor living conditions, rising inflation, and limited job opportunities have contributed to public discontent.¹⁷⁴ For many, the standard of living remains low. Since the elections of 2014, unemployment in Egypt has fallen only slightly, from 13.3% to 11.6% in late 2017. Moreover, unemployment among Egypt's youth, which accounts for 75% of the country's population, continues to climb. A full 70% of the young unemployed



Urban scene, Luxor, Upper Egypt
Flickr/Richard Messenger CC BY-NC 2.0

Over the past decade, poverty in Egypt has steadily increased. As of 2016, 27.8% of the population lived below the poverty line, an increase of 2.6% from 2010.¹⁷⁹ Rising prices and the lowering of government subsidies on food and services have made day-to-day life difficult, especially for the poor. Though subsidies continue, cheaper fuel benefits those who can afford a car, and subsidized food often does not reach the rural poor who live beyond administrative reach.¹⁸⁰

Languages and Ethnic Groups

Arabic-Egyptian is spoken by nearly all the country's residents and by large numbers of Egyptians living throughout the Middle East. This colloquial dialect of Arabic is thought to be the most widely understood in the Arabic-speaking world, primarily because of the popularity of Egyptian films and television.¹⁸¹ Several regional

dialects have been identified, although the differences among them are relatively minor. For example, the Cairene dialect spoken by those in Cairo is used in Egyptian entertainment media. Arabic dialects are mainly used for spoken communication, though they may be used in informal writing such as handwritten notes, blogs, and online forums. Nearly all printed materials, such as newspapers and books, are in Modern Standard Arabic, which is used throughout Egypt and the broader Middle East. Egypt's educated classes are also well versed in English and French.¹⁸²



*Men playing dominoes, Cairo
Flickr/Jenny*

Egyptians, a catchall demographic category for those of Arab and mixed Arab descent, comprise over 99% of the country's population. The various peoples of the Mediterranean and the European colonialists also influenced the hybrid Egyptian identity. Other Egyptians are descended from Nubians, a people who have a long history associated with Egypt and Sudan.^{183, 184}

The central elements binding these peoples together are the Arabic language and the religion of Islam. Arabic-speaking Egyptians account for 98% of the population.¹⁸⁵ Another 1% of the population consists of Bedouins, Beja, Berbers, Copts, Greeks, and Nubians. A small number of Europeans (approximately 1%) also live in Egypt.¹⁸⁶

Bedouins

The word "Bedouin" is derived from the Arabic *bedu*, "desert dwellers." The semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes of Egypt mostly reside in the Sinai Peninsula along the Red Sea coast, and in the suburbs of Cairo. While many continue to care for herds of camels and goats, others work as fishermen, drivers, and miners, and in tourism.¹⁸⁷ Egyptian Bedouin tribes are descended from immigrants from the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE. Some 300,000 to 400,000



*Seminomadic Bedouins, Sinai Peninsula
Flickr/Изгорь М*



Bedouin family camp near Marsa Alam
Flickr/Chris Barnes

Bedouins reside in Sinai today, living in poor economic conditions.¹⁸⁸

Classified as permanent residents (not citizens) with no land rights, Bedouins are a marginalized population. Since the mid-1980s, tribes have been subject to discriminatory government policies, land-grabbing, and economic exclusion. Some Bedouins with no steady source of income have turned to smuggling contraband into Israel and Gaza.¹⁸⁹ By the early 2000s, radical Islamist terrorist

groups such as Tawhid wal-Jihad had established themselves in northern Sinai, where they recruited disaffected Bedouin youths.^{190, 191} While some tribes have allied with the jihadists around specific activities, others have held out against Cairo and local militants alike.¹⁹²

Most Bedouins are Sunni Muslims; their society is tribal and patriarchal, typically composed of extended families that are patrilineal with multiple wives. The head of a tribe or extended family is called the sheikh, who is assisted by an informal tribal council of male elders.¹⁹³ Bedouins, even those who have adapted to modern life, follow their tribal loyalties and the code of honor, hospitality, and revenge based on an intricate kinship system. This tribal code, *urfi*, shapes order and justice independent of any structured legal or political institutions.¹⁹⁴

Beja



Ababda Beja in Wadi Um Ghamis, near Aswan, Upper Egypt
Wikipedia/Gerhard Haubold

The Beja of Egypt are Muslims who speak Beja (*Bedawiyet*), a Cushitic language, and live in the desert between the Nile River and the Red Sea (Eastern Desert).^{195, 196} Although they are related to the ancient Egyptians, they historically resisted conquest by the Egyptian pharaohs.¹⁹⁷ Today, many Beja remain pastoral, although some live in towns. Egyptian Beja society is organized into tribes—the largest being the Ababda and the

Bisharin. A large number lead a nomadic life and care for animal herds. The Beja are renowned camel traders, and they work this trade along the Red Sea.^{198, 199}

Berbers

In the Western Desert, lives a very small population of Berbers, an indigenous North African pre-Islamic people. They live in mud-brick houses around the Siwa Oasis, an area of palm groves, salt lakes, olive trees, and fresh water pools. Known for their unique traditional dress and silverwork, the Berber people are divided into tribes, or *qabilas*, each of which has a sheikh who is elected by male members. Headship is usually patrilineal, descending from father to son. Berbers are characterized as independent, private, and resistant to central authority—they call themselves *imazighen* (noble and free men). Their economy is based on date palm and olive agriculture and handicrafts—basketry, pottery, and embroidery.²⁰⁰ The Berber dialect spoken at Siwa is heavily influenced by Arabic, and not closely related to other Berber languages.²⁰¹ Their practice of Islam often reflects a blend of traditional religious beliefs.^{202, 203}



Berber girl, Siwa Oasis
Wikimedia/Raki_Man

Copts

The Coptic Orthodox Church is an early Christian denomination that began in Alexandria in the first century CE, when Egypt was part of the Roman Empire. Ethnically, Copts trace their origins to the ancient Egyptians; the word “copt” is derived from the Arabic word *qubt* (Egyptian). The Coptic language was the last vestige of ancient Egyptian and was used as a literary language until its decline in the seventh and eighth centuries, caused by the rise of Islam. Coptic was written in the Greek alphabet, supplemented by letters borrowed from ancient Egyptian colloquial script.^{204, 205} Estimates suggest Copts make up 6-18% of the population.²⁰⁶



Pope Shenouda III, Coptic Orthodox Church
Flickr/Obama White House

In recent years, tensions between Egypt's Muslims and its Coptic Christian minority have escalated; sectarian attacks against Copts and their churches have become increasingly frequent.²⁰⁷ The most severe attacks have been claimed by the Islamic State. According to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, Coptic institutions or individuals were attacked nearly 100 times in 2017, with numerous deaths and injuries.^{208, 209}

Greeks



*St. George, a Greek Orthodox complex, Cairo
Flickr/Edgardo W. Olivera*

Greeks have been present in Egypt since the seventh century BCE. Until the 1950s, they numbered 250,000, and constituted the largest non-Arab population in Egypt. Most were forced to leave in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution of 1952. Today, the Greek community numbers about 5,000 people, mostly in Alexandria and Cairo.^{210, 211} Engaged primarily in business, they continue to use Greek as their main language and practice Greek Orthodox Christianity.²¹²

Nubians



*Nubian men running a food stand, Upper Egypt
Flickr/Nubian Image Archive*

The Nubians in Egypt are Africa's oldest civilization and perhaps the first of its indigenous peoples. Their culture along the Nile can be traced from 3800 B.C.E. onward. During one period in the first millennium B.C.E, the powerful Nubian kingdom of Kush controlled all of Egypt. The Nubians built pyramid tombs in the fourth century BCE. Historically, their economy has been based on agriculture, intensive cultivation of date palms, and export of dates.²¹³ Most of the Nubian homeland, which stretches about 200 miles from the Sudanese border north to the city of Aswan, now lies under Lake Nasser reservoir. Today, Nubians make up less than 1% of Egypt's population and live primarily in Cairo, Alexandria, and other northern cities.²¹⁴ They were previously dislocated from

their homeland by the construction of the Aswan Low (1902) and High (1970) dams, which, upon completion, caused the flooding of Nubian homes and mosques.^{215, 216}

Culturally and racially distinct from other Egyptian ethnic groups, the Nubians are more akin to the peoples of Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa. They speak two Nubian languages, Kenuzi-Dongola and Nobiin. Other linguistic minorities include Berber speakers in Siwa and a small number of Beja east of Aswan.²¹⁷ They reside primarily in the southern extremes of the country.²¹⁸

Dom



*Egyptian Dom musicians, Kom Ombo, Upper Egypt
Wikimedia/Zerida*

The Dom, Egyptian gypsies, are descended from wandering South Asian immigrants. They live primarily north of Cairo in the Dakahlia Governorate, but also live in poorer districts of other cities and in rural areas.²¹⁹ The Dom number around 1 million, of which slightly more than 20% speak Domari, an Indo-Aryan language, as their primary language.²²⁰ They work as entertainers, blacksmiths, livestock traders, and weavers. Many practice folk medicine and divination.^{221, 222}

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Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Chapter 1 | Profile

Assessment

1. About 95% of Egypt consists of arid desert.
2. Copts are an indigenous ethnic group of Egypt.
3. The Tiran Straits separate the Gulf of Suez from the Red Sea.
4. Lake Nasser was created when the Aswan High Dam was built.
5. The Suez Canal connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Dead Sea.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. False



*About 90% of Egyptians are Muslim, of which most are Sunni Muslim
Flickr/Gabriel Garcia Marengo*

Chapter 2 | Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Religion

Introduction

Today, the majority of Egyptians are Muslim, mostly Sunni, representing 90% of the population. Another 9% are Coptic Christians. The remaining 1% are Christians who belong to Catholic, Protestant, or Levantine (Maronite or Greek Orthodox) churches. Islam is the state religion. The constitution also gives Christianity and Judaism legal recognition, which guarantees their followers the freedom of worship and to establish places of worship. Followers of other religions do not have these guarantees.²²³

In Egyptian society, there are different groups that have different interpretations of Islam. Sufi groups view Islam as set of emblematic practices. The Muslim Brotherhood sees Islam as more of a social and political system. Salafi follow Islam as a very strict set of practices. There are also secular Egyptians, some of whom are religious and view Islam as a form of private practice and faith, while others are not religious at all.²²⁴



*El-Botroseya (St. Peter and St. Paul's Coptic Church), Cairo
Wikimedia/Roland Unger*

Between 2015 and 2018, religious freedom conditions improved in several areas. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi condemned sectarian attacks and pushed for reform in religious discourse. The government completed rebuilding and restoring more than 50 churches destroyed by Islamic extremists in 2013. While sectarian attacks targeting Christians increased, particularly in Upper Egypt and North Sinai, Egyptian courts have brought to justice some of the perpetrators. In 2016, prosecutions and imprisonment

of Egyptian citizens for blasphemy charges decreased. Though some religiously discriminatory and repressive laws and policies remain in place, public debates have occurred in parliament and in civil society on a range of religious freedom concerns.²²⁵

Islam



*The word Islam means "to submit" or "to surrender"
Pixabay*

The word Islam means "to submit" or "surrender." Islam, like Judaism and Christianity before it, is a monotheistic religion and recognizes the validity of the Old and New Testaments. Muslims believe that the final and culminating revelations were made to Muhammad, the last prophet. The Quran, the Muslim's sacred text, is considered the record of God's revelations made to Muhammad. Muslims worship Allah directly, without the intermediary of clergy.^{226, 227}

Islam has two main branches: Sunni and Shi'a. The origins of the Sunni-Shi'a split lie in conflicting views of how the successor to the Prophet Muhammad was to be chosen. Upon the Prophet's death, Sunnis felt that the community should choose the next leader. Shi'a, by contrast, believed that leadership should remain within the family, and that Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, was the rightful successor. The Sunnis prevailed and chose the first caliph (successor) based on his merit. While Ali eventually became the fourth caliph, his succession followed violence between the disputants.^{228, 229} Those who believe Ali should have been the immediate successor are called Shi'a, short for Shi'a-t-Ali (party of Ali). This difference in beliefs continues to divide the two schools of Islam and remains a source of theological tension.²³⁰



*The tombs of the Abbasid Caliphs, Cairo, 19th-century
Wikimedia/Cornell University Library*

Islam was introduced to Egypt in 642 CE, and it eventually replaced the polytheistic religion of the ancient Egyptians as well as Coptic Orthodox Christianity among the country's elite. Today, Islam is practiced by 90% of Egyptians. Most Egyptian Muslims are Sunni; Shi'a make up a small minority and their practices, which have a long history in Egypt, are common today because many Sunnis have adopted Shi'a traditions. These include celebrating Mawlid al-Nabi (the Prophet's birthday), Ashura (commemoration of Ali's death), and using lanterns during Ramadan.²³¹ "Egypt is Sunni by sect, but Shi'a by temperament," is a saying in the country.²³² Overall, Egyptian Muslims follow a wide variety of traditions—from mystical Sufism to fundamentalist Salafism.²³³



*ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ Mosque, Egypt's oldest mosque, Cairo
Flickr/David Stanley*

The Five Pillars of Islam

Mainstream Islamic religious practice in Egypt emphasizes Islam's core tenets. The most important of these are the Five Pillars of Islam, a set of essential beliefs and



At prayer, Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi Mosque, Alexandria
Flickr/Gian Cornachini

will determine whether each individual will spend their afterlife in heaven or hell.²³⁵

rites of the Islamic faith. The first and foundational pillar requires sincerely reciting the *shahada*, or Islamic creed: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.” The remaining pillars include: performing a ritual prayer five times per day; giving alms (money or other assets) to the needy, traditionally through an income tax; fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; and making a pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city of Mecca.²³⁴ Muslims believe in a day of judgement when Allah

Care and Treatment of the Quran



Quran, subha (prayer beads), and pen, Cairo
Wikimedia/Voice of America

The printed Quran is regarded as holy, and desecrating a copy is a serious offense. As such, Islam’s holy book should be treated with respect. Do not touch the Quran with dirty hands. Keep the Quran off the floor—if you are sitting on the floor, hold the Quran above your lap or waist. When not in use, protect the Quran with a dustcover and do not place anything on top of it. Muslims keep Quranic texts on the highest shelf of a bookcase. Finally, keep Qurans out of latrines. Old or damaged copies can be properly disposed

of in one of two ways. Burning is acceptable if the process is conducted with respect. Texts should not be burned with trash or other items. The second method of disposal is burial. Before burying the text, it should be wrapped in something pure and then buried where people do not walk.^{236, 237, 238} Other texts sacred to Muslims include the Hadith, a collection of the sayings of Muhammad, and the Sunnah, which describes the practices of Islam by way of Muhammad’s example.²³⁹

Sufism

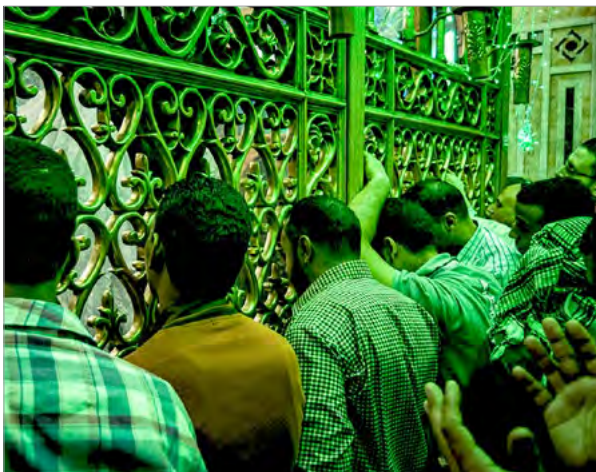


Sufi dervishes performing in the Wikalat al-Ghuri, Cairo
Flickr/Michal Huniewicz

though the majority are Sunni. Popular Sufi practices in Egypt include meditation, chanting, dancing, celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birth during Mawlid al-Nabi ceremonies, and visiting the tombs (*ziyarat*) of saintly figures.^{240, 241} Islamic extremists, who view Sufism as heretical, have targeted Sufis in Egypt.²⁴² In northern Sinai Peninsula, which has seen increased violence in recent years, an attack on a Sufi mosque by Islamic extremists in 2017 killed more than 300 people.²⁴³

Sufism (*tasawwuf*), is a form of Islamic mysticism that emphasizes introspection, self-purification, and spiritual closeness with God. Sufism has deep historical roots in Egypt, and the country is marked with hundreds of sites significant to Sufis. Today, roughly 15% of Egyptians are either members of Sufi brotherhoods (each with its own leader, or sheikh), or participate in Sufi practices. There are more than 70 officially recognized Sufi orders with an estimated 3-4 million members. Sufi believers can be Sunni or Shi'a,

Alternative Forms of Islamic Worship



Muslim men praying at a Sufi shrine
Flickr/Michal Huniewicz

illness, or problems such as crop failure.^{244, 245} People may also worship a *sayyid* (lord) or *sayyida* (lady), or visit the shrines of famous imams. Such shrines are located in

Although Egyptians are predominantly Sunni, Shi'a and Sufi influences pervade religious expression, creating a unique blending of Muslim traditions. This is seen most clearly in rural areas, where folk beliefs and practices, including divination and healing, are transmitted through oral tradition. Other practices include the veneration of saints and famous spiritual leaders. Some Egyptians visit shrines (*ziyarat*) where holy men or women (*wali*) are buried. Disciples seek cures for family troubles, infertility,

villages and cities. Foremost among shrines are the ones associated with the Prophet Muhammad's family in Cairo.^{246, 247}

Some religious practices also vary between men and women; for example, divination, mentioned above, and healing are predominantly female activities. In southern Egypt, some women follow a custom known as the *zar*, a religious ceremony to help pacify harmful spirits. Women organize public meetings, using 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, considered pagan by Islam, is prohibited. Nevertheless, it is widely practiced throughout Egyptian society.^{248, 249}

Coptic Orthodox Christianity

The Copts are an indigenous Christian sect and the largest religious minority in Egypt. Their religion is the remnant of a faith that was once prevalent in Egypt; the word *copt* is derived from the Arabic word *qubt* (Egyptian). Although Coptic Christianity shares theological similarities with Roman Catholicism, disagreements with Rome regarding the dual nature of Christ caused the Copts to break with Roman tradition.^{250, 251}



Coptic Orthodox Church of Santa Barbara, Cairo
Wikimedia/Sailko

Belonging to the Jacobite branch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Copts believe Mark the Evangelist founded their church in Alexandria in 42 CE. Coptic Christians are counted among the most influential people in Egypt, but they are also among the poorest. Despite this, Copts have resisted attempts to marginalize their religion and are active in Egyptian political and social life.

Copts are expected to pray seven times daily. Priests are permitted to marry before they are ordained, however, they are not permitted to remarry after the passing of a spouse; monks and nuns are celibate.^{252, 253, 254} Coptic Christians practice ritual fasting. Weekly fasts occur on Fridays and Wednesdays, and there are at least five other major fasting periods. In all, Copts fast a total of 210 days out of 365. During fasts, believers avoid animal products (including eggs and dairy foods); those with enough stamina are encouraged to forgo food completely.²⁵⁵

Although the constitution affords Christians freedom of religion, Copts have endured discriminatory policies at the hands of successive Egyptian regimes, and attacks and incitement by Islamist groups. In 2017, 128 Egyptian Christians were killed in religiously motivated attacks; many others had to flee their homes.^{256, 257, 258} According to Amnesty International, Egyptian authorities have failed to prosecute those responsible for the sectarian attacks, resorting instead to “state-sponsored reconciliation agreements which, at times, have involved the forced eviction of Christian families from their homes.”²⁵⁹

The Role of Religion in the Government

After the Egyptian revolution of 1952, the power of religious scholars weakened as the state became stronger. The government began appointing officials with no religious background to serve in religious schools and mosques. By the turn of the century, Islamic religious practices in Egypt varied greatly, depending on one’s background, class, or social group.²⁶⁰



Tahrir Square demonstrators at prayer, Cairo
Wikimedia/Mona

More recently, there has been a significant change in the interpretation and enforcement of laws governing religion in Egypt. When President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power in 2014, he began to enforce a more moderate Islam in Egypt, outlawing religious political parties, such as the powerful but controversial Muslim Brotherhood. He also closed mosques, banned unregistered clerics, and called for a renewed Islam, one that would project a less violent image to the world.²⁶¹

Under Sisi, the Egyptian government has increased its tight control over all Muslim religious institutions and regulates them to protect against extremism. All mosques must be licensed by the government, and all sermons are monitored. Sunni imams are appointed by the state, which also pays their salaries. Sisi has spoken out against female genital mutilation and called for an end to *talaq* (verbal divorce), though some clerics maintain the practices are acceptable.²⁶² All this has earned Sisi praise from the international community and, as part of his agenda to promote a moderate Islam, has allowed him to further suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, which still has strong support in Egypt.^{263, 264}

Religion in Daily Life

Nearly all Egyptians (99%) report that religion plays a key role in their daily lives.²⁶⁵ Muslims, in general, believe there can be no split between the sacred and the secular.²⁶⁶ Believers observe the five formal prayers daily, however, there are variations in religious beliefs and practices in Egypt. For example, poor Egyptians may substitute the required pilgrimage to Mecca with a visit to a local shrine, such as the Al-Husayn Mosque in Cairo.²⁶⁷

Egypt's formal religious establishment promotes orthodoxy in urban areas through madrassas, or religious schools attached to mosques.²⁶⁸ The grandest of such schools in Egypt is Al-Azhar University, connected to the Al-Azhar Mosque.²⁶⁹ Many Sunnis in Egypt and throughout the Middle East consider the ulema (religious scholars) associated with Al-Azhar the ultimate theological authorities and seek advice from them via phone, letter, and e-mail.^{270, 271}

Prayer

Islam heavily influences a person's daily routine in Egypt. Foremost among daily rituals, Muslims are required to perform a series of prayers, known as *namaz* (the second pillar of Islam). Traditionally, *salat* (prayers) are performed at five approximate times of the day: before dawn, midmorning, midafternoon, at sundown, and after sundown. Muslims are called to prayer at each *salat* time by the muezzin, who typically announces the call to prayer (the *azaan* or *adhan*) from the minaret of the local mosque. Whether the hands are folded during prayer or placed on the thighs generally identifies the worshipper as either Sunni or Shi'a, respectively.²⁷² Daily prayers may be performed alone or with other Muslims at mosques. On Fridays, the Muslim community meets at the local mosque to participate in group prayer. Since 1971, Egyptian women have been allowed to attend Friday prayers. All prayers must be offered in the direction of Mecca, the holy city of Islam in Saudi Arabia.²⁷³



Interior of Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi Mosque in Alexandria
Flickr/Gian Cornachini

Cleansing

Prior to prayer, Muslims are required to perform *wudu* (a ritual cleansing). This purification process typically involves washing one's hands, face, arms, neck, and feet, as well as rinsing out the mouth and nose.²⁷⁴ Cleansing is not solely intended for purposes of physical cleanliness—although this, too, is important. Rather, the rite is meant to spiritually and mentally prepare the participant to perform a holy action in a pure and concentrated state. A Muslim can break this state of ritual purity through several acts: defecating or urinating, breaking wind, or, for many Muslims, simply touching a person of the opposite sex. The necessity of performing multiple daily prayers encourages Muslims to maintain ritual purity throughout the day. Mosques often have facilities where Muslims can cleanse prior to prayer.^{275, 276}



Ablution fountain, Sultan Hassan Mosque, Cairo Flickr/Mohammed Shamma

Religious Holidays

Ramadan

Ramadan (or Ramazan) is the ninth and holiest month of the Islamic calendar. During this time, observant Muslims fulfill the third pillar of Islam—fasting. During Ramadan, Muslims demonstrate their piety and devotion to the Islamic faith. Tradition requires that adults abstain from eating, drinking, and smoking during daylight hours for 30 days. Restrictions also apply to sexual intercourse. Only the young, sick, elderly, and pregnant or nursing women are exempt from fasting. A common greeting during the first few days of Ramadan is *ramadan mubarak* (Have a blessed Ramadan).²⁷⁷

In addition to fasting, many people perform extra prayers during Ramadan, and take care to avoid any wrongdoing. During this time of piety, Muslims also make charitable contributions to the homeless or to an established organization like a mosque or the Red Crescent Society (similar to the Red Cross).^{278, 279}

Ramadan alters the usual rhythm of life in Egypt. In general, the pace of life slows considerably and people are released from work early. Preparations for *iftar*, the evening breaking of the fast, begin before sunset. While most restaurants are closed

during the day, many restaurants offer evening *iftar* deals, especially in big cities like Cairo.²⁸⁰ As part of their charitable contributions, many Egyptians offer free *iftar* meals to the underprivileged. Mosques and city streets are colorfully decorated. People play traditional music throughout the night.^{281, 282}



Iftar dinner during Ramadan, Cairo
Wikimedia/Otto J. Simon

Non-Muslims should avoid eating and drinking in public during fasting hours of the day as such activities are considered disrespectful and rude. The rigorous demands of the daytime fast may affect some more than others during Ramadan; people may become more irritable or fatigued. Foreigners should be aware of this and be prepared to show patience.²⁸³

Eid

Eid means “festival” in Arabic, and Eid al-Fitr or Eid Ramazan (The Feast of the End of the Fast) marks the end of Ramadan. Muslims celebrate the end of the fast with a large, multiday feast with family and friends. Family gatherings center around cooking holiday foods such as *kahk*, shortbread cookies filled with nuts and covered with powdered sugar. Throughout the three days of Eid al-Fitr, or Lesser Eid, Egyptians visit friends and go to movies, parks, beaches, or other favorite places.²⁸⁴ A common greeting during Eid is *eid mubarak* (Have a blessed Eid). In Cairo, the crowds during the holiday become especially dense in popular places, and incidents of harassment of women, and even rape, increase.²⁸⁵



Children at play during Eid al-Adha, Cairo
Wikimedia/Bertramz

One of the holiest days in Islam, Eid al-Adha (The Feast of Sacrifice), celebrates the 12th month of the Islamic calendar. It traditionally marks the end of the Muslim pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to Mecca. The festival commemorates Abraham’s willingness to

sacrifice his son in obedience to Allah. Egyptians participate in the traditional Eid practice of *qurbani*, the slaughter of a goat, cow, or sheep. *Qurbani* is sometimes performed in front of homes or on the street, but in recent years the Egyptian Ministry of Endowment banned the slaughter of animals on the streets as a violation of Islamic law. In Cairo, doing so will incur a fine.^{286, 287}

Mawlid al-Nabi

The Prophet’s birthday, Mawlid al-Nabi, is celebrated in the third month of the Islamic calendar. Mawlid al-Nabi is associated with Sufism, and is marked with poems and songs that honor the Prophet. The festival includes parades and other festivities. People share special foods and sweets made of sugar-coated sesame seeds, pistachios, and almonds. Traditional candy figurines, in the shape of a doll or a sultan on a horse, are decorated with colored paper and given as gifts.²⁸⁸

Will you be celebrating the Lesser Eid?		
Visitor:	HatiHtifloo bil ‘eed iS Sughayar?	Will you be celebrating the Lesser Eid?
Local:	aywa!	Yes!

Exchange 1

Because Islam is based on the lunar calendar rather than the Western solar calendar, Ramadan and the Eid holidays move up by about eleven days each year.²⁸⁹

Christmas

Coptic Christians, who use the Julian calendar, celebrate Christmas on 7 January, an official state holiday in Egypt.²⁹⁰ During the week before Christmas, Copts usually fast, avoiding meat, poultry, and dairy products. On Christmas Eve, dressed in brand-new clothes, Copts attend church services lasting until midnight. At the end of the service, everyone is given special bread called *qurban*. *Qurban* has a cross in the middle and 12 dots representing the apostles. Copts then return to their



*Christmas tree, Shepherd’s Hotel, Cairo
Flickr/radiowood CC BY-NC 2.0*

homes and eat a special meal called *fata*, which consists of bread, rice, garlic, and boiled meat, usually lamb. On Christmas morning, people visit friends and eat *kahk* (cookies) and drink non-alcoholic fruit cocktails (*sharbat*), a favorite among Egyptians regardless of religion.^{291, 292, 293} In recent years, there is tightened security around Coptic churches at Christmas due to sectarian violence.²⁹⁴

Easter



Interior of the Coptic church of St. Anthony, Luxor
Wikimedia/Roland Unger, CC BY-SA 3.0

Easter is a public holiday in Egypt. Among Coptic Christians, where fasting during religious holidays is unequalled in any other Christian community, the pre-Easter (Lenten) fast is the longest at 40 days. On the eve of Easter, or Holy Saturday, Coptic Christians start their Easter Vigil, also known as The Great Vigil, which lasts until sunrise Easter day. Most Copts prefer to fast completely, abstaining from all food and drink on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and break the fast upon the end of Mass.²⁹⁵

The Easter Eve ceremony includes a symbolic reenactment of the ascension of Christ, and prayers are recited in Coptic and Arabic. On Easter day, Copt families celebrate with banquets to break their long fast. The food served includes cookies and biscuits, meat, and Egyptian *fatteh* (rice with crispy flatbread). The day after Easter is known as Sham al-Nassim, a national celebration of the beginning of spring, which goes back to the times of ancient Egypt. It is celebrated by all Egyptians but has a special place in Coptic culture. The Arabic name is originally Coptic (*shoum in nissim*), meaning “the garden of crops.” Egyptians from all religions celebrate by going to the parks, coloring eggs, and eating salted fish.^{296, 297, 298}

Buildings of Worship

Mosques

There are many mosques in Egypt, particularly in Cairo, which is sometimes called “the City of a Thousand Minarets.” Because Egypt has been ruled by different empires,

the complexity and architectural styles of mosques are varied. Some have a madrassa attached to the main building; others have hospitals or mausoleums in the complex.^{299, 300}

Egypt's oldest mosque is 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ in Cairo, originally built in 641 CE.³⁰¹ 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.^{302, 303}

Al-Azhar is one of Egypt's most important and prestigious mosques. Originally a meeting place for Shi'a students, it has remained a focal point of Al-Azhar University. The first lecture was delivered there in 975 CE, making Al-Azhar the second-oldest degree-granting institute in the world. For most of its 1,000-year history, Al-Azhar has acted independently of the Egyptian government. Each year it trains thousands of clerics, while tens of thousands of students, foreign and local, study in its schools.³⁰⁴ The mosque is reserved for prayer, and the school is famous for its departments of religion, medicine, foreign languages, and science.³⁰⁵



Interior courtyard of the 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ Mosque
Wikimedia/Protious

Churches

Christian churches are located throughout Egypt. Some are built in caves, some in pharaonic temples, and others in originally pagan buildings. The Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Cairo was built in the fourth century and is believed to be the oldest of the Christian churches in Cairo.³⁰⁶ The Hanging Church is the most famous Coptic Christian church in Cairo. It is thought to have been built between 690 and 692 CE, and by the 11th century it was the official residence of the Coptic patriarchs.³⁰⁷

Behavior in Places of Worship

Mosques

Mosques are sacred spaces, and they should be respected as such. Foreigners should ask permission to enter a mosque. If prayers are in progress, especially Friday prayers, visitors should refrain from visiting the mosque. Public modesty in dress and behavior is highly valued in Egypt, even among men. Clothing should always be loose fitting and free of images of living creatures. As a rule, the more rural the region, the more one should be covered. For men, pants are preferred, but shorts that cover the knees are acceptable. Shirts should have sleeves no shorter than a standard T-shirt. Once inside the mosque, non-Muslims should not touch books or walls (especially the western corner where people direct their prayers). Mosques in Cairo that are classified as historic monuments are usually open to non-Muslim visitors.³⁰⁸



Egyptian women, Al-Azhar complex inner courtyard, Cairo
Flickr/Christopher Michel

Under normal, noncombat circumstances, shoes should be removed at the doorway and placed in the designated area. Turn off cell phones and observe photography restrictions. Visitors must refrain from eating or drinking inside the mosque. Do not touch the walls or shrines or speak inside mosques unless spoken to, and then, respond in a whisper. When people are praying, avoid interrupting them. Similarly, do not walk in front of people who are praying; doing so is considered to invalidate their prayers.³⁰⁹

Mosques have separate worship areas for men and women. Women should cover their head with either a scarf or shawl, but men do not need to do so.³¹⁰ Finally, unless ordered to do so, never take a search dog into a mosque. Many Muslims consider dogs unclean animals. Taking a dog into a mosque would cause great offense.³¹¹

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

Exchange 2

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

Exchange 3

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

Exchange 4

Coptic Christian Churches



Saint Virgin Mary's Church
Wikimedia/Berthold Werner

According to Coptic Orthodox culture, attire should be modest at church as well as in secular life. Arms and legs should be properly covered: long-sleeved, buttoned shirts and pants are expected for men. T-shirts, especially with writing on them, low-cut dresses, and pants for women are also inappropriate, especially if attending a service. It is not necessary to remove one's shoes before entering.³¹²

When entering and leaving a church, Copts make the sign of the cross. It is also customary to light a candle before entering the main part of a Coptic church. (A minimum donation is requested for candles available in the vestibule.) Although during services women usually occupy the north side of the sanctuary and men the south, this rule is not hard and fast.³¹³

If entering a Coptic church during a service, remain quiet and wait until a scriptural reading is complete before finding a place to sit. Because crossing one's legs in church is considered disrespectful, be sure to keep your feet flat on the floor.³¹⁴

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

Exchange 5

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Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Chapter 2 | Religion

Assessment

1. Eid al-Adha is a sacred spring believed to have been visited by Abraham.
2. In Egypt, it is acceptable to throw away old or damaged copies of the Quran.
3. The majority of Muslims in Egypt practice Sunni Islam.
4. Men and women pray in separate areas of a mosque.
5. The Egyptian constitution recognizes only two religions: Islam and Christianity.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. False; 3. True; 4. True; 5. False



*Feluccas on the Nile, Aswan, Upper Egypt
Flickr/Sam valadi*

Chapter 3 | Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Traditions

Introduction

Islamic and Christian traditions are deeply woven into Egypt's social fabric. Like its land and people, the customs and traditions observed are nuanced, diverse, and have been practiced for centuries. Traditions and standards for behavior can vary greatly from region to region. Egyptians are widely regarded as a proud and resilient people. They are also known for wit and a trademark sense of humor, even in difficult times.^{315, 316, 317} Hospitality carries great value for Egyptians, who are always willing to help each other and strangers. Although helping strangers is most evident in rural areas, it also occurs in Egypt's cities.³¹⁸

In Egypt—as in all Arab cultures that value harmony in social relations—having good interpersonal skills is more important than time and money. Because the strongest interpersonal relationships exist within the family, the needs of individuals are subordinate to those of the collective group.^{319, 320}

Honor and Values



Egyptian importers and real estate investors
Wikimedia/Jaguar MENA

Honor and reputation are very important aspects of Egyptian life. Maintaining honor places demands on people, including extending hospitality to guests, showing respect toward elders and those in authority, and keeping one's word. The honor of entire families and family lines is related to social standing in the community. The most important component of family honor is the reputation of its women.³²¹ In extreme cases, women are killed by male relatives who believe the women has dishonored their families through alleged

adultery or inappropriate interactions with men.³²² Officially, these “honor killings” do not occur in Egypt, but they can be disguised as suicides.^{323, 324}

Blood feuds also are common, especially in Upper Egypt. These are lengthy conflicts among feuding families involving cycles of murder and revenge to maintain honor and protect land. A vendetta is obligatory for all male clan members and most frequently involves “an eye for an eye”; proportional vengeance is critical. The underlying rationale is that it is better to seek vengeance than to be disgraced.^{325, 326}

Greetings

Egyptians are widely regarded as warm and sociable people, and polite greetings are always appreciated. Customs surrounding greetings in Egypt are influenced by a person's age, social class, and religion. When speaking to someone whose religion is unknown, a very common greeting is *ahlan wa sahlán*, or simply *ahlan*, or ‘Hello.’ It comes from an older saying that means “May you arrive as part of the family, and tread an easy path (as you enter).” Other popular greetings are *Izayak?* (How are you?); *Sabaa al kheer* (Good morning), which is used in more formal settings; or *Masaa al kheer* (Good evening). Although *Salaamu alaikum* (Peace be with you) is the most

important greeting in Islam, most Egyptians only use the phrase when speaking to someone unfamiliar.³²⁷

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

Exchange 6

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

Exchange 7

Good evening!		
Visitor:	masaa il Kheyr	Good evening!
Local:	masaa in noor	Good evening!

Exchange 8

When greeting someone, handshakes with a soft grasp (formal and informal) or a kiss on both cheeks (informal) are customary between individuals of the same sex. If a man is greeting a woman, he should wait for the woman to extend her hand first. If she does not, it is appropriate to bow slightly and place the right hand over the heart. A typical Egyptian handshake can be somewhat prolonged. Smiling and making direct eye contact when shaking hands is seen as a sign of sincerity and honesty. If a man shakes hands with a woman, however, eye contact should be less direct.^{328, 329, 330}

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

Exchange 9

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

Exchange 10

Etiquette and Terms of Respect

Unless you are a female, do not ask specifically about someone's wife or daughters. Egyptians consider such an inquiry inappropriate. Instead, ask about the health of the entire family. In meetings, it is customary to show deference to the group's most senior person, who is likely the spokesperson. Hierarchy is important, although a group leader will seek consensus and deliberate before making decisions.^{331, 332, 333}

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

Exchange 11

Titles of respect are very important in Egyptian society. When speaking to someone older or of importance, Egyptians address the person as *hadretak* (good sir) or *hadretik* (good madam). Another common term of respect is *ya fandem* (sir, ma'am).^{334, 335} The most common polite terms of address are *ustaaz* (Mr., sir, Professor) and *ustaaza* (Mrs., ma'am). Professional titles are also used quite often. A doctor (medical or Ph.D.) is addressed as *doktoor*; a general in the army, even if retired, is addressed as *lewa*; and an engineer is addressed as *mohandis*. When using a title with someone's name, the first name is used, not their last.^{336, 337} That said, first names should not be used on their own unless invited to do so.³³⁸



CJCS Gen. Joseph Dunford and members of the Egyptian Armed Forces Flickr/Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

How is your family?

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

Exchange 12

Customary Behaviors and Gestures



Women in black hijabs and abayas (caftans), Old Cairo
Flickr/Jay Galvin

something funny. Another common gesture, used to indicate “wait a minute” is an upturned hand with all fingers pulled together into a point as the hand bounces up and down.³⁴¹

In Egypt, it is not uncommon for men to display affection or friendship through physical contact. Male friends may kiss each other on the cheek and link arms or hold hands while walking, as do female friends.³³⁹ Egyptian couples also hold hands or walk arm in arm in public. More overt displays of affection, however, are not considered appropriate, even for married couples.³⁴⁰

Egyptians use a gesture similar to a high-five that is an acknowledgment of

Hospitality and Gift Giving



Egyptian shai, served with sugar and fresh mint
Flickr/annemarieangelo

When you meet someone, expect a hospitable offer of coffee or tea. Even if you are not thirsty or do not normally drink either beverage, it is important to accept the offer graciously. Declining could be considered a rejection of the person making the offering.³⁴²

As in many Arab cultures, guests are honored in Egypt. When invited for a meal to an Egyptian’s home, being on time is not very important; in fact, Egyptians

expect guests to arrive at least 15 minutes after the given arrival time.³⁴³ Guests should dress well and conservatively. Clothing and appearance are important social indicators. When first arriving at a Muslim home, it is polite to stand to the side of the front door (opposite to the direction the door opens). Thus, the visitor avoids looking directly into the house in case a female is unveiled and needs to cover. When entering a home, shoes are usually removed.³⁴⁴

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

Exchange 13

It is customary to bring a dessert, such as pastries or a cake, when arriving for a meal. It is also a nice gesture to bring a small gift for the children of the hosts. When giving gifts, avoid bringing flowers, which are usually reserved for weddings or the ill, or alcohol. It is usual for a host to refuse a gift twice and accept it only after the gift is offered a third time. When giving a gift, always present it with the right hand, never with the left. If the gift is heavy, both hands should be used. Do not expect the host to open the gift as they are not usually opened when received.^{345, 346}



Basbousa, a dessert eaten with nuts or heavy cream
Flickr/Waleed Alzuhair

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

Exchange 14

At the dinner table, wait for the host to show you to your seat. Before meals, guests say *Sahtain!* (Bon appétit!). The right hand should be used for eating, drinking, and offering a dish. To show appreciation of the food, ask for a second helping. Such a request is regarded as a compliment to the host.³⁴⁷ In any dining situation, guests should allow another person at the table to fill their glass when it is empty, and then return the

favor. Guests leave a small amount of food on their plate to indicate they are full. The host will continue to offer food if a guest's plate is empty. When the meal is over, guests should say, *Daimah* (May there always be plenty at your table). Finally, it is important to remain for a while after the meal has ended; leaving immediately after is disrespectful.^{348, 349, 350}

Dress

Traditional Dress

Access to international trade routes in Egypt encouraged the use of various fabrics from around the world, which contributed to the development of a variety of regional styles. The Siwa region near the Libyan border, for example, is known for silver ornaments and a distinctive “sunburst” embroidery design used on shawls and clothing, including wedding dresses. Another original style of dress is found in the Sinai, where heavily embroidered cotton dresses are worn in the north. Dresses in the south are often unadorned or decorated with beads. Contemporary veils often worn in this area are decorated with plastic beads imported from China, rather than with the traditional elaborate beadwork of earlier years.³⁵¹



Egyptian man in a traditional galabeya, Luxor
Flickr/Güldem Üstün

Clothing in rural areas is conservative as well as functional, providing protection from extreme temperatures and weather conditions. For instance, a man typically wears a long robe (*galabeya*) that absorbs the sun's heat and is loose enough to allow cooling air to circulate.³⁵² He winds a cloth around his head and neck to prevent loss of moisture, because such loss could lead to heatstroke. A married woman in this environment may wear a brightly colored housedress covered with a black outer layer. She covers her hair with a long veil that often sweeps the ground.³⁵³ These long robes also act as a shield against the harsh sand blown by wind.³⁵⁴ Bedouin women wear black dresses and head coverings embroidered with tiny cross-stitch designs—blue for unmarried women and red for married. A veil displaying the same kind of stitching, often decorated with shells and coins, covers a woman's face.³⁵⁵

Contemporary Urban Dress



*Egyptian girls in jeans and hijabs, Cairo
Flickr/Ama Ngelo*

In cities, traditional dress exists alongside the contemporary, though Egyptian women are always well covered. Even in cosmopolitan areas such as Cairo, women increasingly cover their head with a scarf (hijab) tucked into the collar. Some even completely cover their face with a *niqab*. Some Egyptian men and women choose to wear modern Western clothing, such as casual jeans and tennis shoes, or chic dresses and suits. Men, however, are much freer in their clothing choices; unveiled

women are sometimes harassed.³⁵⁶ That said, a young veiled Muslim woman can wear almost anything, including body-hugging clothes, as long as no skin is revealed.^{357, 358} Many young women, veiled or unveiled, wear sunglasses, which give them anonymity and make them virtually unapproachable by men.³⁵⁹

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

Exchange 15

In recent years, dress has become a complicated matter for urban women because they face social pressure to wear the hijab in Muslim Egypt but not wear the hijab in secular parts of Egypt. Some upscale restaurants ban veiled women, while women who forgo the scarf may be subjected to abuses from friends, family, or even strangers.³⁶⁰ Women have been arrested, barred, and publicly condemned for either being too skimpily or too conservatively dressed.³⁶¹

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

Exchange 16

Dress Codes



Students from the STEM School for Boys, Cairo
Flickr/ USAID Egypt

In general, Egyptians care a great deal about appearance, and as a rule people dress conservatively. Flip-flops, sweatpants, and tank tops are considered inappropriate and are not typically worn in public. Thus, visitors to Egypt should avoid being underdressed.³⁶² Women should avoid wearing clothing that is too tight, too short, or otherwise revealing. Dresses and skirts should be below the knees, and sleeves should be long enough to cover most of the arm. Wearing tight jeans, strappy tops, or short skirts is likely to result in advances from men, especially if a woman is traveling alone. Sunglasses make it easier to avoid making eye contact with men, which is considered a form of flirtation.³⁶³ Men should wear trousers or jeans and a T-shirt, as locals are uncomfortable seeing a man in shorts. Men should also avoid wearing visible jewelry, especially around the face and neck.³⁶⁴ In resort areas and at tourist sites, dress codes for men are more relaxed, but once a man enters a local restaurant or market, he should be more covered.³⁶⁵

Cuisine



Delivering aish baladi, downtown Cairo
Flickr/Paul Keller

The traditional food of Egypt combines Arab, Turkish, European, and African influences to create a uniquely national cuisine. *Semna*, or clarified butter, is a constant in virtually every meal.³⁶⁶ Bread (*aish*, also meaning “life”) is a staple of the Egyptian diet and is prepared in several forms. The most commonly eaten bread is *aish baladi*, a thin, round bread similar to pita that can be filled to make a sandwich. Bread is typically leavened and allowed to rise before baking; it is also sweetened with honey, dates, fruit, and spices and served as dessert. Almost every meal in Egypt includes some form of bread.³⁶⁷



A bowl of kushari
Flickr/Andrew

Just as many people maintain that no meal is truly complete without meat, many Egyptians complete their daily meals by eating *ful* (or *foul*), which is 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 (falafel). It is often served with tahini, a sauce made from sesame seeds, spices, and mashed beans.^{368, 369}

The food tastes very good.		
Visitor:	T'am il akil gameel gidan	The food tastes very good.
Local:	shukran	Thank you.

Exchange 17

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

Exchange 18

Another national dish is *kushari*, a mixture of rice, noodles, fried onions, lentils, and tomato sauce. At restaurants that specialize in this dish, *kushari* is served in a bowl. *Kushari* restaurants are recognizable by the large bowls of rice and noodles visible in their windows.^{370, 371}

Other popular dishes include fish, kebab (grilled lamb or chicken on a skewer), and *kofta* (spicy ground meatballs). Another specialty is *melokheya*, a leafy legume similar to spinach, cooked with rabbit to make a stew.^{372, 373}

What is the name of this dish?		
Visitor:	ism il akla dee ey?	What is the name of this dish?
Local:	dee mulookheeya bil araanib	This is melokheya belaraneb.

Exchange 19



Man sipping a sharbat, Cairo
Flickr/Gabriel Garcia Marengo

Sweetened fruit juice beverages (*sharbat*) are also a favorite among Egyptians. These popular drinks combine syrup with fruit or flower juices, and may include milk, sesame seeds, nuts, and dried fruit.³⁷⁶ Alcohol, beer, and wine can be purchased in bars, restaurants, and some grocery stores, except on the Prophet Muhammad's birthday or during Ramadan.^{377, 378}

Egyptian desserts are exceptionally sweet. A popular dessert is *kunafa*, thin strands of pastry arranged on top of a soft cheese or cream. It is eaten at feasts, including those that end Ramadan. Baklava is a delicacy of filo pastry filled with honey, crushed nuts, and pistachios. Another popular dessert is *umm ali*, a cake soaked in milk, cinnamon, raisins, and coconut and served hot.^{374, 375}

Drinks in Egypt include tea (*shai*), coffee (*ahwa*), fruit juices, and soft drinks. *Qasab*, sugarcane juice, is uniquely Egyptian.

Gender Roles and Relationships



Coptic family celebrates New Year's, Tahrir Square, Cairo
Flickr/Lilian Wagdy

Domestic chores and raising children are almost exclusively a woman's responsibility. Women also contribute significantly to productive work outside the home, especially in cities. But since many women work informally (lower-skilled, short- or part-time), the size of their contribution is often underestimated. More women than men work unpaid jobs in support of a family business.³⁷⁹ In rural areas, many women work in the fields. In addition, the household responsibilities of village women include caring for animals and processing dairy products. They may also take part in harvesting, preparing crops for market, and selling produce in markets.^{380, 381}

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Under Egyptian law, men and women have equal legal rights. In practice, however, there are still clear inequalities. The principle of equal pay applies only when a woman is working full-time and earning regular wages. Most Egyptian women work in the informal sector, where most earn less than men. Additionally, women do not have the same legal rights as men in the domain of personal status (marriage, divorce, and child custody). For example, only Egyptian men have the right to pass on Egyptian nationality to their children. Various feminist and human rights groups, however, are promoting legal change in areas of discrimination against women.³⁸²

Gender Roles

Although men and women have equal rights under the Egyptian constitution, the country remains deeply patriarchal and gender roles are traditional. Men are the primary breadwinners and are expected to make major decisions for the family. Household work and child rearing are almost exclusively a woman's responsibility. Nevertheless, Egyptian women have much influence and informal power within the family.³⁸³



*Health workers in Upper Egypt
Flickr/USAID Egypt*

While Egyptian women are increasingly university-educated, there are fewer employment opportunities for women than for men. Social norms place a high value on women's reputational safety, and working outside the home, which is viewed as a threat to that safety, is considered inappropriate in many Egyptian households. Additionally, work takes women away from what are considered their primary responsibilities: the home and child-rearing.³⁸⁴ Urban women contribute more in terms of work outside the home than women in rural areas, but they primarily work in low-paying part-time jobs or are self-employed; their income is viewed as secondary to that of the males in the family. In rural areas, women often work in the fields or tend animals.³⁸⁵

Status of Women

In the mid-20th century, Egyptian women made some gains in education and professional employment. The constitution of 1956 established equal rights for

women in the public sphere, and extended to women the right to vote and hold public office. Since then, women in Egypt have been elected to public office or appointed to important government positions, and women are in top leadership positions in the television industry. But family law in Egypt reinforces women's unequal status.³⁸⁶

Women's rights were weakened when the Sadat government amended the Egyptian Constitution in 1980 and made shari'a law, or Islamic law based on the Quran, the primary source of legislation in Egypt. Although the Egyptian Constitution guarantees equal rights for all citizens, shari'a undercuts those rights by denying equality to women in areas of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The debate about women's issues also includes the practice of female circumcision, censorship that limits the printed discussion of gender issues, and discriminatory laws that affect land ownership and travel rights. A woman, for instance, cannot obtain a passport without written consent from her husband, who may reverse his consent at any time. A backlash has arisen against women's rights advocates who oppose these laws and practices; they are often accused of being pro-Western and anti-Islamic.³⁸⁷ Despite this, and despite their claims of a campaign of intimidation by the Sisi government, women's rights organizations continue to be vocal in Egypt.^{388, 389}



*Egyptian woman in a niqab
Flickr/Christopher Michel*



*Community health workers practice counseling skills,
Luxor Flickr/USAID*

Sexual harassment and violence against women in Egypt remains endemic.³⁹⁰ Women police officers, part of a special unit started in 2013 to combat violence against women, are now visible in public places, especially during crowded holidays.³⁹¹ But prosecution of perpetrators is still rare. In 2015, the Egyptian government passed a declaration of a National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women, but women's rights observers have noted that there are few, if any, monitoring mechanisms.^{392, 393, 394}

Female Circumcision

A traditional custom that is part of the social fabric of the Egyptian community is female circumcision, frequently called female genital mutilation (FGM). Poorer families, especially, believe a girl who is not circumcised will have difficulty finding a partner and will face a future of poverty.³⁹⁵ FGM is believed by some to reduce sexual desire and, therefore, the likelihood of infidelity. Although FGM was outlawed in December 1997, the World Health Organization estimates that 9 out of 10 women in Egypt are still circumcised, though other studies place the number lower. FGM is widely practiced in Egypt by both Muslims and Christians. The practice can lead to immediate complications such as shock, tetanus, illness, and may even lead to death. The practice can create innumerable lifelong difficulties, including obstetrical problems before and after childbirth.^{396, 397, 398}

Arts and Literature



Fayum mummy portrait,
c. 30-392 BCE *Wikimedia*

Because ancient Egyptian civilization was highly religious, much of the art of that early period centers on gods, goddesses, and pharaohs who were divine in nature. Paintings have survived because of the dry climate. They often depict the afterlife of the deceased or the journey through the underworld. The funerary text known as the Book of the Dead was buried with entombed persons to introduce them to the afterlife. Writers from ancient times also created imaginative stories with characters or plots intended to entertain, and wrote treatises on medicine, math, astronomy, and agriculture.³⁹⁹

A strong literary tradition exists in Egypt, with short stories first appearing in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Egyptian writers have experimented with the novel form, and drama and poetry have a broad and sophisticated audience as well. In 1988, Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz was the first Arab writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. His classic work, *Midaq Alley*, brought international attention to gaps between rich and poor and other aspects of life in urban Cairo.^{400, 401} Other famous writers are Taha Hussein, who wrote an autobiography called *Al-Ayyam*; Tawfiq al-Hakim, author of *Return of the Spirit*, and Yusuf Idris, a master of the Arabic short story form.⁴⁰²

Music and Dance

Egypt's musical and dance traditions have endured over the centuries. Lutes, harps, and stringed instruments are still used much as they were in ancient times. Classical music is popular, as are folk songs celebrating traditions or the different seasons. Dancing is always part of celebrations and weddings. Traditions from other countries have blended with those of Egypt. For instance, Russian influence combined with Egyptian tradition led to the development of the Cairo Opera Ballet Company.^{403, 404}



Umm Kulthum, a virtuoso Egyptian singer, 1968
Wikimedia

One of Egypt's well-known artists is Umm Kulthum, the most celebrated singer in the Arab world in the 20th century. With a musical style rooted in traditional classical Arab music, Umm Kulthum often donated the proceeds of her concerts to the Egyptian government or to charities. President Nasser admired her, and she often entertained heads of state. She also identified with Egyptian commoners and village life. She was a spokesperson for Arab culture and a supporter of nationalism after the 1952

revolution. Even though Umm Kulthum has been dead since 1975, she is still highly regarded in Egypt and in Arab countries.⁴⁰⁵

Sports and Recreation



Olympic soccer, Egypt vs. Brazil
Wikimedia/Ihourahane

Following the 1952 revolution, the Egyptian government promoted sports and sports culture. As such, schools at all levels incorporated sports into their curricula. Sporting clubs emerged. Emphasis was placed on sports that were traditional to Egypt's historic past: weightlifting, wrestling, and swimming. Egyptian weightlifters have won several Olympic medals. But soccer emerged as the most popular sport of contemporary Egypt, and the national team has met with success in international venues,

including championships in the African Cup of Nations and qualifying for the 1934, 1990, and 2018 World Cup finals.⁴⁰⁶ The domestic soccer league attracts tens of thousands of spectators at matches.⁴⁰⁷

Nonreligious Celebrations and Public Holidays

Sham al-Naseem is a holiday observed by all Egyptians that dates back as many as 4,500 years. The name originally derived from the ancient Egyptian harvest season.⁴⁰⁸ Celebrated on the first Monday after Coptic Easter, the modern holiday marks the beginning of spring. The literal translation is “smelling the breeze.” On the morning neficial. On this day, people eat traditional foods, including salted fish, boiled colored eggs, lupine seeds, and green onions.⁴⁰⁹



Al-Azhar Park, Cairo
Wikimedia/ Błażej Pindor

Official public holidays also include several tied to Egypt’s turbulent history with Israel: Sinai Liberation Day (25 April), Armed Forces Day (6 October), Suez Victory Day (24 October), and Victory Day (23 December). On 23 July, Egyptians celebrate National Day. It is the largest secular holiday in the country. Also called Revolution Day, this holiday commemorates the 1952 military coup, led by President Nasser, that brought an end to the monarchy and established an independent republic. The day includes military parades, flight displays, and a presidential speech.⁴¹⁰

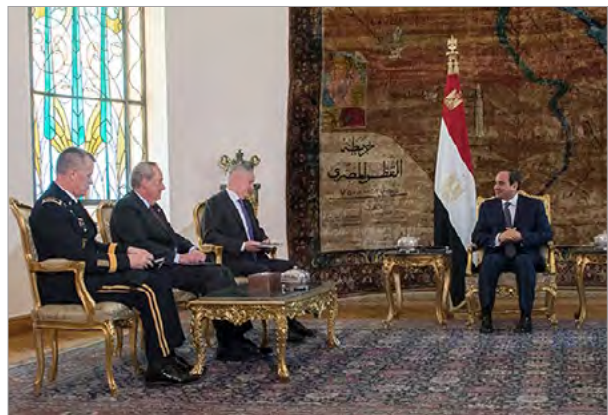
Dos and Don’ts

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

Do use *your right hand only* to eat, shake



U.S. SECDEF James Mattis with President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi
Flickr/James N. Mattis

hands, and receive and pass objects from/to another person. The left hand is considered unclean.

Don't take a picture of a woman unless you first get permission.

Don't, if you are a male, ask questions about the women of a family.

Don't stare at or make advances to women in public or private.



CJCS Gen. Joseph Dunford with gift for Egyptian Chief of Defense Flickr/Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Don't engage in overt expressions of affection with the opposite sex.

Don't use the Western way of beckoning with one finger. It is very offensive.

Don't point to anybody with a finger. Use the entire right hand instead.

Don't make the "A-OK" signal (circle with index finger and thumb of one hand) or "thumbs up" sign. These signs are obscene or offensive in Egypt and the entire Arab world.

Don't use obscene or indecent language within earshot of Egyptian citizens. Many Egyptians are familiar with American slang.

Don't talk with an Egyptian with your hands in your pockets, not even one hand. To do so is considered impolite. Egyptians place great importance on politeness.

Don't cross your legs when sitting in a chair or show the bottoms of your feet to anyone.

Don't bring up the topic of Israel.

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Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Chapter 3 | Traditions

Assessment

1. In Egypt, it is appropriate for a man to initiate a handshake with a woman.
2. It is considered good manners to use only the right hand for greeting and eating.
3. The traditional long robe worn by Egyptian men is called *aish*.
4. Kebab is a dish that consists of grilled pork on a skewer.
5. Muslim couples often walk down the street holding hands or arm in arm.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. False; 4. False; 5. True



*Fishing boats on the Mediterranean, Alexandria
Flickr/Jay Galvin*

Chapter 4 | Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Urban Life

Introduction

Egypt's cities are a striking mix of old and new—modern business centers and entertainment districts juxtapose its many ancient sites. With more than 43% of the population living in urban areas, Egypt's cities are crowded, congested, noisy, polluted, and teeming with activity at all hours of the day.⁴¹¹ Although there are 223 cities in Egypt, about 56% of the country's urban residents live in Greater Cairo and Alexandria alone.^{412, 413} Here, traditional dress exists alongside the contemporary, and there are a myriad of different restaurants, including Western fast-food chains.⁴¹⁴

Despite the obvious Western influences in Egypt, Islam dominates Egyptian life. Five times a day, loudspeakers broadcast the *azan*, calling the faithful to prayer.⁴¹⁵ Government offices, businesses, and most schools observe Friday as the day of rest. Family is central, and many activities in Egyptian cities—including shopping, going to the movies, and watching or participating in sporting events—are family oriented.⁴¹⁶

The lives of Egypt's city dwellers vary according to social class. The divide between the urban elite and the popular masses, which has existed since pharaonic times, remains large. It can be seen in the type of housing and transportation they can afford, their language, education level, and choice of clothing and music.⁴¹⁷ Overall, there is an enormous gap in Egypt between the very poor and the very wealthy, and in recent years progress toward income equality has deteriorated.⁴¹⁸ Most Cairenes, for example, live in apartment buildings. Because space is difficult to find, only the wealthy can afford to live in free-standing houses. While most urban Egyptians have piped water, a connection to sewage lines, electricity, and mobile phones, there are millions of urban poor who have none of these.^{419, 420}



Aswan Souk at night
Flickr/Endlisnis

Urban Development

Egypt's population is growing at a rate of about 2% per year (twice the worldwide average), and it is rapidly urbanizing. This has stressed the housing availability in major cities, which are increasingly overcrowded.⁴²¹ Additionally, the rapid expansion of cities has had a direct impact on the country's food security, as arable land is swallowed up by construction or the encroachment of slum areas.⁴²²



A park in Cairo
Flickr/Ryan Quattlebaum

Recent figures indicate more than half of Egypt's urban population resides in the Greater Cairo Region and Alexandria in extremely congested conditions. Cairo is especially dense, with roughly 20,000

inhabitants per sq km—twice the density of New York City.^{423, 424} These city dwellers face high rates of unemployment, critical levels of air pollution, inadequate sewage facilities, and a lack of usable open space. In Cairo, particulates from cars and sand blowing in from the desert cast a virtually constant haze over the city.^{425, 426}

In a country where 26% of the population lives below the poverty line, urban growth has led to a pressing need for low-income and affordable housing.^{427, 428} Faced with no alternatives, many people build substandard homes without permits on public or privately owned land. These so-called informal settlements are where as many as 70% of the inhabitants of Greater Cairo live. Both poor and middle-income Cairenes can be found in these inner-city neighborhoods. The poor, however, also live wherever they can, including in cemeteries, crumbling mansions, and tenements.⁴²⁹



An impoverished area in urban Giza, Greater Cairo
Wikimedia/Mujaddara

Cairo and Alexandria are home to a number of sprawling slums, the largest of which is Cairo's Manshiet, where an estimated 1.5 million people live. In Egypt's slums, and in the squatter settlements on the outskirts of cities, there is little in the way of infrastructure or public services.^{430, 431, 432} Although the government is attempting to provide basic infrastructure and to regulate slums, efforts have been largely ineffective.⁴³³

Industry and Services

Today, most of Egypt's manufacturing takes place in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Suez. In 2013, about one-quarter of the Egyptian labor force worked in industry, which accounted for 33% of GDP in 2017. In addition to hydrocarbons, Egypt's major industries, include textiles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, food processing, and construction. Growth of Egypt's industrial base has been slow, about 3.5% in 2017, because of the centralized economy. Heavy industry is owned by the government and controlled by the public sector, which is constrained by debt.^{434, 435}



Trash waiting for collection, Cairo
Flickr/Jenny



Resort on the Red Sea, Hurghada
Flickr/Konstantin Zamkov

Services, including banking, tourism, and government services, account for about 56% of Egypt's GDP and half the labor force.⁴³⁶ The country has one of the largest banking sectors in North Africa, with Islamic banks, international banks, capital markets, a national investment bank, and a stock exchange (EGX) that is becoming a major source of financing. The industry has undergone restructuring and privatization in recent years, and the Bank of Alexandria (now called AlexBank)

is fully privatized. Inflation, which remains high at 14% (2018), dropped considerably from the previous year.^{437, 438}

While the government continues to reduce the number of state-owned companies, it remains one of the largest employers in Egypt. Construction projects, in particular, receive the most government spending and are a major source of employment.⁴³⁹ Tourism also employs many Egyptians, and it is a top source of revenue for the country. In 2017, the industry began to recover after the political upheaval of the Arab Spring in 2011, the downing of the Russian passenger plane, and fears over security at ancient sites.⁴⁴⁰

Education



Students from Maadi STEM School for Girls, Cairo
Flickr/USAID Egypt

Since 1951, the government has provided tuition-free public education through college. Attendance for primary education (grades 1-9) is compulsory.⁴⁴¹ As a result, illiteracy in Egypt has steadily declined over the last few decades. According to a 2017 Egyptian census, 20% of Egyptians could not read or write. The rates were lowest among Egypt's youth, at just 6.5%, while among Egyptians 60 or older it was much higher—57%. Literacy is highest in urban areas, where children have better

access to education than their peers in rural areas. The poor, elderly, and women are the most likely to be illiterate.^{442, 443, 444}

The state educational system consists of 12 grades and is divided into three levels. The Islamic Al-Azhar University provides a mostly religious curriculum to Muslim students in primary, preparatory, and secondary educational programs; student enrollment represents about 4% of total school enrollment in Egypt. Schools in the state system are coeducational for grades 1-6; throughout grades 7-12, the sexes are segregated in both state and Islamic schools. For those enrolled in the state system, test scores at the end of ninth grade determine which type of high school students may attend. At the end of the 12th grade, eligible students can enroll in a university. For those not eligible to attend universities, technical schools offer training in areas such as hotel management and secretarial services.^{445, 446}



*Cairo University, founded in 1908
Wikimedia/Citadelite*

More than half of the country's young people have some level of post-high school education. The country's higher education system is made up of 20 public universities, 12 public non-university institutions, 23 private universities, and 115 private institutes. Egyptian security forces maintain a presence on university campuses. Present since the 1980s, police units have been accused of "interfering with university affairs." In recent years, they have been used to repress student activism and arrest students who protest the Sisi government.^{447, 448}

Health Care

Increased government spending on public health after the revolution in 1952 has improved health and life expectancy for many Egyptians. Life expectancy as of 2013 was 71 years, an increase of nine years since 1985. Infant mortality has dropped to half the world average, and maternal mortality has declined significantly, from 106 (per 1,000 live births) in 1990 to 33 in 2015. Despite these gains, there are significant disparities in access to health care and the ability



*Girl receiving a polio vaccination, Gharbia Governorate
Flickr/CDC Global*

to afford it. Mortality rates among infants and pregnant or new mothers in impoverished families is higher; this trend is mirrored in southern Egypt, where the mortality rate is higher compared to the north.^{449, 450} Poverty in the sprawling slums of Cairo has led to high rates of child malnutrition.^{451, 452}



*Pharmacist for Medicine for All
Flickr/Synergos Institute*

Medical care in Egypt is still generally of a lower standard than in the United States. Hospitals are not plentiful enough to serve Egypt’s quickly expanding population, and, for many Egyptians, access is difficult. In 2012, Egypt had only 0.5 hospital beds per 1,000 people; just two years earlier, there were 1.7 beds per 1,000 people.⁴⁵³ The best hospitals are privately run, connected to universities, and located in Cairo and Alexandria. Hospitals outside these urban centers are poorly equipped and understaffed. Most medical treatment centers require payments in cash.^{454, 455}

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

Exchange 20

The current health care system covers approximately two-thirds of the Egyptian population. Those not covered—the poorest Egyptian citizens—are entitled to free health care, although only a small percentage participate in this system.⁴⁵⁶ For those needing medical attention, there is a network of public hospitals in major towns and cities. But Egypt’s over-burdened public hospitals are often unable to adequately treat publicly supported patients because funds are lacking.⁴⁵⁷ The Egyptian constitution stipulates that the government spend at least 3% of GDP



*Nurse holds infant in neonatal hospital unit
Flickr/USAID Egypt*

on public health care, but actual spending in 2016 equaled just 1.6% of GDP.⁴⁵⁸ As of 2017, the state still spent almost 6% of GDP on wheat and fuel subsidies, which negatively impacted its ability to fund health care.^{459, 460}

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

Exchange 21

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

Exchange 22

In 2017, the Egyptian government established a new universal health care system that will be implemented by region starting in 2018. Within 15 years, the new system is expected to cover all Egyptians by contracting with health care providers. Funding sources will continue to include employer and employee contributions.⁴⁶¹

Sanitation

A chronic disease known as schistosomiasis (bilharziasis) has been documented in Egypt since the time of the pharaohs. Caused by parasitic worms, it is common among people who are exposed to Nile River water. Without treatment, people can die from the disease. The infecting parasites develop in certain kinds of freshwater snails that come into contact with people. While the country has had a control program in place for many years, the Ministry of Health adopted a five-year plan in 2016 to break the cycle of transmission and eradicate the disease.^{462, 463}



*Egyptian boy collecting water
Flickr/lafleur*

Unclean and unsafe water is an ongoing problem in Egypt. While almost all Egyptians have access to improved water, nearly 1 out of 4—mostly in urban slums and rural areas—lack access to clean drinking water.⁴⁶⁴ The quality of water is also generally poor, and it is partially responsible for kidney, intestinal, and other health problems.⁴⁶⁵ Poor water quality is partly attributable to decaying pipes, lack of steady water supply, and contaminants. These factors contribute to the number of deaths related to water pollution in Egypt, which is high among lower middle-income countries. Moreover, the Nile supplies the vast majority of Egypt’s water, and the UN estimates that the country will suffer critical water shortages by 2025.⁴⁶⁶ Visitors are advised to drink bottled or boiled water and to avoid eating raw fruits and vegetables that may have been washed in unsafe water.⁴⁶⁷

Transportation and Traffic



Nile Air A320 in special “Egypt Tourism” Livery, Cairo
Wikimedia/Dahab777



Alexandria train station
Flickr/Vyacheslav Argenberg

Not all modes of travel in Egypt are safe or reliable. State-owned Egypt Air provides both domestic and international service. Although the carrier is expanding its fleet and routes to make Egypt a major regional transportation hub, flights are often delayed and overbooked.⁴⁶⁸ Other charter airlines offer domestic air service. It should be noted that there is a heightened risk of terrorism with air travel in Egypt. In 2015, a flight from Sharm el Sheikh to St Petersburg was brought down by a bomb, crashing in North Sinai and killing all on board.^{469, 470}

Egypt has over 5,000 km (3,160 mi) of railway. The main line includes Alexandria, Aswan, and the Suez Canal. The intercity road network is well maintained and covers 48,000 km (29,826 mi), including the Nile River and Delta areas, the Sinai, the Western oases, and the Mediterranean and the Red seacoasts.⁴⁷¹



Waiting for the metro, Giza, Greater Cairo
Flickr/Edgardo W. Olivera

The Nile River system and its canals are used for local transportation. The Suez Canal, linking the Mediterranean and the Red seas, is an important domestic and international waterway used for commerce and navigation. Egypt's major ports are in Alexandria, Port Said, Ain El Sukhna, Suez, and Safaga.⁴⁷²

Numerous transportation options are available in the cities, including rental cars, buses, the metro, trams, taxis, tuk-tuks, and boats. Driving in Egypt can be stressful. Although Egyptians generally observe speed limits, drivers do not always follow traffic rules.⁴⁷³ Furthermore, rural roads are not well maintained and are often unmarked. Working-class Egyptians and students mostly take public transportation, which is reliable and inexpensive. Cairo and Alexandria have tram networks; Cairo also has a metro. Public minibuses and microbuses are not safe, but taxis are both convenient and inexpensive.^{474, 475}

Cars and Roads

Rental cars are available at many places in the major cities of Egypt, and foreign nationals can drive in the country with an international driving permit for up to 6 months.⁴⁷⁶ There are plenty of gas stations on the major roads; most are full-service and accept credit cards.⁴⁷⁷ There are fewer gas stations in less-traveled areas such as the Western Desert.⁴⁷⁸

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

Exchange 23

But driving in Egypt is not for the fainthearted, and visitors should consider other options, such as a taxi or hired driver. Road conditions are poor, and driving conditions are perilous. Traffic jams are common at all hours, but they are worse between 2 and 5 p.m. when schools and offices close. Vehicles travel at high speeds and the wrong way on one-way streets, divided highways, and connecting ramps. There are few, if any,



*Tuk-tuk driver waits for a fare, Cairo
Flickr/Christopher Michel*

road markings, and traffic lights often do not function. Drivers should be alert for tuk-tuks (three-wheeled motorcycle rickshaws), rickshaws, pedestrians, and animals in the roadway.⁴⁷⁹

In particular, driving at night should be avoided. Egyptians tend to not use their headlights except to flash at oncoming traffic. During the rare winter rains, driving is especially dangerous. Egyptian drivers are not familiar with driving in wet conditions, and roads may flood. The

World Health Organization estimates more than 10,000 people were killed in Egypt as the result of traffic accidents in 2013.⁴⁸⁰ Because of safety and security concerns, the U.S. Embassy prohibits mission personnel from driving outside the greater Cairo and Alexandria areas or driving to any part of the Sinai Peninsula or the Western Desert.⁴⁸¹

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

Exchange 24

Buses and Minibuses

Buses in cities are frequently crowded, uncomfortable, poorly maintained, and unsafe.⁴⁸² Getting on and off buses can be difficult. Because buses rarely come to a complete stop, passengers must jump off at their stop while buses are moving.⁴⁸³ Some consider minibuses a slightly easier alternative, but because there have been several accidents where bus passengers were injured, sexually assaulted, or killed, the U.S. Embassy advises personnel against their use. If traveling by bus or minibus, female travelers should avoid being the last passenger on board.^{484, 485}

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

Exchange 25

Cairo Metro and Alexandria Tram

Cairo’s metro system is the first such network in Africa and it has been operational since 1990. The network consists of two lines that cover the Egyptian capital from the north to the south, with several more lines planned. The Cairo Metro is the cheapest and most reliable of the city’s public transit services, and serves around 4 million passengers a day. The trains and platforms are densely packed, and pickpocketing is not uncommon.⁴⁸⁶ To reduce incidents of sexual harassment, the government introduced women-only compartments in 2007.⁴⁸⁷ Stations also have heightened security, with metal detectors at entrances, and police patrols and video surveillance cameras throughout.⁴⁸⁸ As of mid-2018, U.S. mission personnel are prohibited from traveling on Cairo’s metro system.⁴⁸⁹ Cairo and Alexandria both have tram systems. In Alexandria, the cars are slow and worn. If there are three cars, the middle car is reserved for women.⁴⁹⁰



Alexandria tram
Flickr/Jon Worth

Trains

Trains provide service throughout Egypt. Train travel is broken into first, second, and third classes. First- and second-class travel is comfortable, but third-class is crowded, with un-upholstered wooden seating. Train tickets must be purchased at the station prior to travel. It should be noted, the country’s railways are underfunded, mismanaged, and deemed “particularly unsafe” by the U.S. Embassy. There are regular accidents that sometimes involve mass casualties, including one in greater Cairo in 2018.^{491, 492, 493} Suspicious devices have been found at train stations and on the rail network. Although several of these have been false alarms, travelers should remain alert.⁴⁹⁴

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

Exchange 26

Taxis



Taxi in Cairo
Wikimedia/someone10x

Service taxis that seat up to 12 people are cheaper than regular taxis. They are usually faster than trains or buses and operate on a variety of planned routes. Taxis are usually safe, but women should ride in the back and avoid talking to or making eye contact with the driver.⁴⁹⁵

There are two main types of taxis, older unofficial cabs, known as “black-and-whites,” and the newer yellow or white taxis. While older cabs are cheapest, they lack air conditioning

or meters. Passengers should ideally know the fare in advance and pay it on arrival. If a passenger does not know how much the fare will be, the fare should be agreed on before the driver sets off. This does not mean that the driver will not try to haggle a higher price on the way to the destination.⁴⁹⁶

Where can I get a cab?		
Visitor:	mumkin arkab taksee meneyn?	Where can I get a cab?
Local:	henak	Over there.

Exchange 27

The newer yellow and white taxis have meters and air conditioning, though drivers may try to add on fees for the use of air conditioning. To hail a cab from the side of the road, point one (full) hand, palm down towards the road. As in minibuses, assaults and muggings have occurred in taxis. Visitors should take extra care when traveling alone.^{497, 498, 499}

Can you take me there?		
Visitor:	mumkin takhodny henak?	Can you take me there?
Local:	aywa, mumkin	Yes, I can.

Exchange 28

Ferries and Boats

Boats, including feluccas and *dahabiyas* (larger, multi-cabin sailing boats) travel up and down the Nile River. Motorized Red Sea ferries that also cruise on the Nile should be avoided as they are generally unsafe. Overcrowding and poor safety standards have led to several accidents. In 2006, an Egyptian ferry sank in the Red Sea leading to the deaths of around 1,000 passengers. In 2015, a ferry collided with a cargo vessel on the Nile, killing at least 21 people.^{500, 501}

Dining Out



Outdoor café seating, Cairo
Flickr/annemarieangelo

The notion of eating out is relatively new in Egypt, which is why the variety of food is relatively limited. In Cairo and at Red Sea resorts, there are restaurants that serve international food, from gourmet to inexpensive, any time of day.⁵⁰² Meal times tend to be later than in the United States, with lunch—the main meal of the day—in the middle of the afternoon or even after work (around 3 or 4 p.m.). Dinner may be served as late as 9 or

10 p.m.⁵⁰³ When going out, Egyptians do not typically socialize with strangers in restaurants or cafes, rather, they keep to their immediate group.⁵⁰⁴

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

Exchange 29

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

Exchange 30

Most towns will have at least one *kebabgi* or kebab house with a selection of salads and kebabs. Ordering à la carte is common in restaurants. A 12% surcharge is added to every restaurant bill. In addition, diners are expected to leave a small tip (*baksheesh*)

equal to about 10% of the bill.^{505, 506} This means that the total dining bill will be about 20% more than the menu price. Doorkeepers, bartenders, restroom attendants, and other service people also expect tips. Most restaurants serve wine and beer, especially if they cater to foreigners, even though Islam forbids alcohol.⁵⁰⁷ Credit cards are an accepted form of payment at many restaurants. Often, restaurants also offer delivery of food.⁵⁰⁸

Do you have dessert?		
Visitor:	'andukum Halaweeyaat?	Do you have dessert?
Local:	aywa, 'andina um 'alee	Yes, we have umm ali.

Exchange 31

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

Exchange 32

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

Exchange 33

Coffeehouses

The first public coffee houses, known as *ahwas*, opened in Cairo in the 16th century. Today, coffeehouses are on nearly every street corner and play an important role in everyday life. They are informal establishments that cater primarily to men, though Egyptian women will not be turned away. Women may frequent more modern *ahwas* but are generally not allowed to smoke a *shisha*, a water pipe with flavored tobacco that is synonymous with the Egyptian coffeehouse.⁵⁰⁹ In addition to drinking coffee, tea, and other nonalcoholic beverages, patrons play dominoes and backgammon, socialize, and talk politics in the safety of their circle of friends.^{510, 511}

The beans used in most neighborhood *ahwas* come from Yemen, where, in the Red Sea port of Mocha, the world coffee trade was born in the 15th century. Egyptian coffee is made Turkish-style, often blended with a bit of cardamom, and sweetened to different degrees when ordered: *zaida*, extremely sweet; *mazbout*, medium sweetness; *ariha*, just a little sugar; and *sadda*, black (and bitter).⁵¹²



A man smoking a shisha in a tea shop
Flickr/Mark Fischer

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

Exchange 34

Marketplace (Souk)

Buying and selling are highly ritualized events in Egypt. Bargaining over prices is a customary part of shopping, especially at souks (bazaars and street markets) where crafts and merchandise are sold. Buyers are advised to adopt their own bargaining tactics such as refraining from showing too much interest in an item when they ask questions about it. To get a reasonable price, customers 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.⁵¹³



Market area in Cairo
Flickr/CDC Global

Are there shops (a market) nearby?		
Visitor:	fi ai meHallat orayyeba?	Are there shops (a market) nearby?
Local:	aywa, henak 'ala eshshemal	Yes, over there on the left.

Exchange 35

In heavily touristed areas, such as around the temples at Luxor, shops with fixed prices are rare. Pressure to buy is more extreme than in areas without tourists, and visitors should expect to encounter aggressive vendors and be alert of overcharging. Some vendors will offer “free” gifts to tourists which, once accepted, lead to demands for money. Tourists who accept an offer from a taxi driver or tourist guide to assist with shopping may be charged a commission.⁵¹⁴



*Bargaining in a Nubian Village
Flickr/strudelt*

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

Exchange 36

May I examine this close up?		
Visitor:	mumkin abuS baSa ‘ala dee?	May I examine this close up?
Local:	Tab’an	Sure.

Exchange 37

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

Exchange 38

It is a very good idea to have the exact amount of money needed for a transaction; vendors may resist giving change. Credit cards are not commonly accepted in smaller shops and at bazaars. ATMs are common in large cities and at tourist destinations, but fees may be heavy. U.S. dollars are not accepted for any common transactions. The official currency is the Egyptian pound (££), which is frequently abbreviated as LE (*livre égyptienne*); it is divided into 100 piastres. In early 2018, it averaged ££17.66 to US\$1.^{515, 516}

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

Exchange 39

Beggars

Beggars sometimes follow visitors at tourist sites and ask for money or gifts. They include the poor and the handicapped, homeless children, and those who lack family support and connections.

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

Exchange 40



Woman selling tissues, Cairo
Flickr/Jenny

Official government estimates put the numbers of street children in Egypt at 16,000.⁵¹⁷ But international organizations estimate that in Cairo alone there are hundreds of thousands.^{518, 519} Unprotected, they are vulnerable to exploitation and violence.⁵²⁰

Beggars see tourists as sources of money that will help them survive. Giving money to even one person 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.⁵²¹ The number of beggars increases during the holy month of Ramadan. Many Muslims will give something to be seen as helping the poor.⁵²²

Crime and Safety

On the whole, Egypt has a low crime rate and few incidents of violence. The most common crimes are petty theft, pick-pocketing, and purse-snatching. There have

been armed robberies, muggings, sexual assaults, break-ins, and car-jackings in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez, especially in areas popular with expatriates.⁵²³ Harassment of women, including foreigners, remains a problem. It was one reason cited in a 2017 international poll that ranked Cairo as the most dangerous megacity in the world for women. Particularly serious incidents have occurred in crowded areas, at celebrations, and at demonstrations. Women should avoid walking alone at night.⁵²⁴

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

Exchange 41



*Aftermath of Palm Sunday church bombings, Alexandria
Wikimedia/Islam90*

Islamic terrorist and extremist groups pose dangers as well. In 2017 there were several attacks against a variety of targets. This included a bombing at St. George’s Church (Mar Girgis) in the city of Tanta, and attacks outside St. Mark’s Church in Alexandria on Palm Sunday. At least 45 people were killed in these attacks and more than 100 others were injured. The U.S. State Department recommends avoiding crowded places and gatherings, in or around religious

sites and during religious festivals, such as the month of Ramadan and the Christmas period up to 7 January (Coptic Christmas), when terrorist groups have sometimes called for attacks.^{525, 526}

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Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Chapter 4 | Urban Life

Assessment

1. Islamic customs prohibit women from entering *ahwas*, or coffeehouses.
2. Aggressive government programs have pushed slum dwellers out of the capital into rural towns and surrounding villages.
3. School attendance through grade nine is compulsory.
4. Public transportation in cities is safe.
5. Government offices, businesses, and most schools are closed on Fridays.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. False; 3. True; 4. False; 5. True



*Farmer outside of Luxor
Flickr/babeltravel*

Chapter 5 | Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Rural Life

Introduction

Over 95% of Egyptians live along the banks of the Nile. More than half of them lead traditional pastoral lives, and as such Egypt is still defined as a rural country.⁵²⁷ In stark contrast to dusty Cairo and the wide expanses of surrounding desert, the Nile Delta (Lower Egypt) and the Nile Valley (Upper Egypt) boast some of the richest farmland in the world. But these lush, green fields irrigated by the Nile River and its many streams and canals make up only 3% of the country's total land area. The vast majority of Egypt is desert, and the rate of farmable land per person is among the lowest on the planet.⁵²⁸



Agricultural technical high school, Luxor
Flickr/USAID Egypt

is home to about half of the population.^{530, 531, 532} Access to education, health care, and safe drinking water is severely limited; inadequate sanitation is also a problem.^{533, 534} Many roads are unpaved, and traffic is unregulated.^{535, 536}



Mosque near the Temple of Amun, Siwa Oasis
Wikimedia/VascoPlanet (tm) World Photography

fishing communities along the coasts and several oases frequented by Bedouins, the largest of which is Wadi Feiran.^{539, 540}

Social Organization and Local Politics

Egypt is made of 27 governorates (*muhafazah*, sing.) composed of thousands of districts, towns, and villages. The governorates are administered by a state-appointed governor and an executive council, which has elected members.⁵⁴¹ At the local level, town and village councils have elected members and a local mayor appointed by

the central government. Governorate and local councils perform a variety of functions in health, education, public utilities, agriculture, housing, and communications. Local councils have very little authority, serving mostly as administrators and advisory bodies. All important decisions are made in the capital or as directed by the national government.^{542, 543} The law requires that half these council representatives be farmers and laborers, but it has been impossible to realize this goal. The lack of free time and education within the rural population has stymied efforts to include this group in the governing body.^{544, 545} Men continue to dominate political life; as of 2016, no women were among the appointed governors of the 27 governorates. Egypt's first woman mayor was appointed in 2008.^{546, 547}



Map of Egypt's administrative divisions
Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division

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

Exchange 42

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

Exchange 43

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

Exchange 44

Land Distribution



*Land leveling before transplanting rice, Nile Delta
Flickr/Water Alternatives*

land distribution nevertheless occurred. By 1975, only 15% of landholdings were large amounts of land.⁵⁴⁹



*Balloon flight over farmland, Luxor
Flickr/Christopher Michel*

and charge whatever rents they wished.⁵⁵⁰ By 1997, 1 in 10 tenant farmers was once again an insecure sharecropper. This created even more poverty than had previously existed in rural areas, and contributed to heavy migration to urban areas.⁵⁵¹

By 2000, 7% of the population controlled 60% of the agricultural land. As the amount of arable land decreases in the country, feuds over precious farming areas and fresh water are not uncommon. It is estimated that 100 people are killed annually in Egypt due to conflicts over land.^{552, 553}

Egyptian law and social customs discriminate against women, who are often denied access to inheritance, especially if it is land or other property. Thus, most land is held by men, with women currently controlling only 5% of the land.⁵⁵⁴ According the Ministry of Agriculture, the decline in land ownership among farmers is the main cause of growing poverty rates in the countryside.⁵⁵⁵

Rural Economy

Agricultural and peasant society has formed the basis of Egyptian civilization for millennia. Even today, agriculture constitutes around 12% of GDP, employs 29% of the labor force—including 45% of all women—and is responsible for 20% of exports.⁵⁵⁶ In Upper Egypt, over 55% of the population is employed in farming of some kind.⁵⁵⁷

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

Exchange 45

Farming wages are low; only about 40% of rural income is generated by agriculture and rural poverty is endemic. The remaining 60% comes from other sectors, including trade and services. Rural families typically perform multiple activities, including agriculture, animal husbandry, and off-farm employment. There are very few industrial or service activities in rural areas.⁵⁵⁸ Some smaller villages are known for producing traditional products like colored textiles, carpets, marble, and glass. In those cases, the goods are transported to the cities for sale or export.⁵⁵⁹



*Weaver, Nile Valley
Flickr/Clarence*

Agriculture

Egypt has been described as “two deserts and a river.” Farming is limited to the areas along the Nile Valley and the Delta (with a few oases in the west and some arable land in Sinai). This green and fertile strip of land about 10 km (6.2 m) wide lies in stark

contrast to the desert hills on either side. Here, Nile flooding and irrigation allow Egyptians to grow cotton, wheat, beans, fruits, and vegetables.⁵⁶⁰

Agriculture is dominated by half-acre farms. Farmer’s use traditional practices and tools for cultivation, irrigation, and harvesting. Sugar cane and wheat, for example, are still planted and harvested by hand, as most farmers cannot afford the machinery that could help with such tasks. Most farm families have two cows or water buffalos on average. Other livestock include sheep, goats, and chickens.⁵⁶¹

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

Exchange 46

Most farming in Egypt is for commercial purposes rather personal consumption. Cooperatives help farmers by distributing fertilizer, seed, farm implements, and tractors and other machinery. Extended families, an integral part of rural Egypt, assist each other with food and material support if crops are poor or a farm animal is injured.^{562, 563}

To increase production and efficiency, agriculture was privatized and deregulated in 1986. Today, farmers are free to produce what they want and sell their produce at market prices. Field crops such as cotton, wheat, corn, rice, broad beans, and millet make up about three-fourths of the total agricultural production. The remainder comes from fruits, vegetables, and livestock products. Egypt has two cultivation seasons, winter and summer. The main summer field crop is cotton.^{564, 565}



*Selling carrots, Giza
Flickr/jay8085*

Cotton

Since ancient times, Egypt had been known as the country of flax and linen. While cotton was cultivated to a small extent in Upper Egypt, in what is now part of Sudan,

higher-quality seeds were introduced to Egypt in the early 1800s.⁵⁶⁶ These superior seeds, along with the country's climate and the fertile Nile Delta region, helped Egypt grow cotton that quickly earned the reputation as the finest in the world. The Egyptian cotton logo—a flower with three petals—became the international trademark of the highest quality cotton. Today, cotton is grown in Lower Egypt (the Delta region) close to processing centers in Alexandria and export facilities on the coast.⁵⁶⁷



*Bales of cotton, a resurgent crop, Cairo
Flickr/upvernoz*

Until the mid-2000s, cotton was a major export.⁵⁶⁸ When the Egyptian government decentralized the industry and privatized many public-sector gins and weaving mills, competition increased and prices fell. By 2009, cotton exports had fallen by 15%. Lower cotton prices and decreased sales forced many farmers to switch to other crops such as corn, wheat, and vegetables.⁵⁶⁹

To revive its historic crop, in 2016, the Egyptian government banned all but the highest quality cotton seed and focused on quality assurance and improved marketing. These steps dramatically reduced the cultivated area and restored quality.⁵⁷⁰ Within a year, cotton production doubled, exports increased by 20%, and cotton prices climbed by 116%. This trend is expected to continue.⁵⁷¹ In 2017, the textile industry, mostly cotton, accounted for 3% of GDP and employed about one-third of the workforce in Egypt.⁵⁷²

Food Insecurity

Only 3% of Egypt's land is suitable for farming, and the country faces crippling challenges in feeding its people. Traditional farmland is being squeezed by desertification, population growth, development, and rising sea levels. As a result, Egypt must import about 70% of its food, ranking as the world's leading importer of wheat for the last decade. This staple, an indigenous crop for thousands of years, is consumed per capita more than anywhere else in on the planet.

The reliance on food imports leaves the population sensitive to price fluctuations.⁵⁷³ As poverty in Egypt increases, the country's most vulnerable families, the urban and rural poor, are finding it difficult to feed themselves. One out five rural Egyptians

have poor access to food—more than twice the number in Egypt’s cities. Food insecurity is highest in rural Upper Egypt where 38.7% of the population struggle to feed themselves.⁵⁷⁴ This trend has contributed to malnutrition and rising rates of stunting among children.^{575, 576, 577}

Food subsidies, especially for the *baladi* bread favored by the masses, were a traditional way of addressing food shortages. Inadvertently, this created a black market for subsidized flour, leaving many poor without bread.⁵⁷⁸ In 2014, President Sisi initiated reforms to the subsidy program, leaving the low prices intact but rationing loaves to 150 per month per beneficiary.^{579, 580}



Egyptian man, Nile Valley
Flickr/James Buck

Water Concerns

Egypt faces severe water insecurity. While Egypt’s population is growing, the Nile’s water resources are more or less fixed. Egyptians use 85% of the Nile’s water for agricultural purposes, but the middle and northern sections of the Nile Delta have started to dry up, threatening Egyptian agriculture. There are concerns about the changing Nile River flows related to the construction of upstream dams, such as the Aswan High Dam. A 1959 accord between Egypt and Sudan allocates 87% of the Nile’s water yearly to Egypt, with Sudan receiving the remaining 13%.⁵⁸¹ Neither Egypt nor Sudan signed the 2010 agreement on water sharing between six upstream Nile nations; and talks are ongoing.^{582, 583} There is concern that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is under construction, will also adversely affect Egypt’s water access and increase the salinization of farmland.⁵⁸⁴



Outskirts of Aswan
Flickr/neiljs

Transportation and Roads



Road into Nuweiba, a coastal town in eastern Sinai
Flickr/Vyacheslav Argenberg

As in the cities, transportation is a challenge in rural areas. People in rural areas usually drive at high speeds and disregard traffic rules and signals—often at risk of running into pedestrians, donkey carts, and wandering animals. At night, drivers do not use headlights. Drifting sand, road obstructions, disabled vehicles, and roads washed away by flash floods are additional driving hazards. Bumpy dirt roads with deep potholes are widespread throughout the country.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸⁶ While Egypt’s rough, dry terrain lends itself to off-road driving, it should be avoided because of the danger of unmarked landmines and other security concerns.^{587, 588}

Buses run in rural and 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 and unsafe, and have standing room only.⁵⁸⁹ If traveling by bus, female travelers in particular should avoid being the only passenger on board.⁵⁹⁰

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

Exchange 47

Train travel to rural areas is possible and tracks run as far south as Aswan. Since fatal accidents have occurred, caution with train travel is advised. Train service to the Eastern or Western deserts is not available in Egypt or from neighboring countries into Egypt.^{591, 592}

Tuk-tuks, or three-wheeled vehicles, are an inexpensive means of travel. Used in cities, they are becoming increasingly popular in many villages though tuk-tuks can tip over easily and have a high accident rate.⁵⁹³

Health Care and Sanitation

Most doctors and nurses work in the cities and in the private sector, which pay more than public employment. Private hospitals have better facilities and better health care than public hospitals; however, the quality of service is still below Western standards.^{594, 595} Across Egypt, especially in rural areas, there is a severe shortage of trained medical personnel and clinics, and ambulance services are inadequate.^{596, 597, 598} Distance to clinics, the shortage of transportation, and the high cost of private care negatively affect access to health care for the rural population, especially those in Upper Egypt. In this region, women are more likely to need family permission to seek treatment and children under five have a markedly higher mortality rate than in urban areas.^{599, 600}



Medical fieldwork investigation, Aswan Governorate
Flickr/CDC Global

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

Exchange 48

Polluted water remains the most significant threat to public health in rural areas.⁶⁰¹ Tap water should be avoided.⁶⁰² Many rural villagers must rely on delivered water, and with growing water shortages, deliveries can be delayed and shortages are common. Moreover, the quality of delivered water is unreliable.⁶⁰³ Villages along the Suez Canal are particularly at risk because of unsafe levels of heavy metals and contaminants from waste.^{604, 605}

Only 27% of rural villages have solid waste collection services. Sanitation and waste disposal systems are generally primitive, and most rural areas lack proper sewage systems, creating serious environmental and health risks.⁶⁰⁶ Toilets are usually one or two pits with a rudimentary system for filtering the waste. These latrines may be in public places such as mosques or community centers. Households often have a simple hole in the ground.⁶⁰⁷

Education

The illiteracy rate in the countryside is about 30%, compared to 20% for the entire country.^{608, 609} Only about 6% of students regularly attend secondary schools (grades 7-9).⁶¹⁰ Because of a shortage of teachers and facilities, the primary school enrollment rate for rural areas is almost half that in cities. On average, rural children go to school for five and a half years. Parents may remove their children from school to work in the fields or help at home.⁶¹¹



Children in Asyut, a city on the Nile, central Egypt
Flickr/USAID Egypt

Are these your children?		
Visitor:	homma doal weladak?	Are these your children?
Local:	aywa	Yes.

Exchange 49

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

Exchange 50

Girls from poor families more often stay home, which contributes to higher illiteracy rates.⁶¹² Girls and women in rural areas are only half as likely to be literate as their urban counterparts. Only 53% of rural females are literate, and in rural Upper Egypt, the rate dips as low as 42%.⁶¹³

Is there a school nearby?		
Visitor:	fi aye madrasa orayyeba men hina?	Is there a school nearby?
Local:	aywa	Yes.

Exchange 51

Village Life

Typical rural settlements consist of villages surrounded by fields where crops are grown. Because of their heavy dependence on the Nile for water, many villages are built along its banks. Most villages are reached by unpaved dirt roads, unless they lie along a highway. Within villages, people get around using narrow, winding footpaths. Each village has a mosque and often a primary school, small shops, and government buildings. Other public areas in villages include guest houses—mainly used by men within an extended family to hold social gatherings. At weekly markets, both men and women buy, sell, and trade goods and exchange news.⁶¹⁴



Life in Edfu, north of Aswan
Flickr/zolakoma

The average household size in rural Egypt (consisting of 4.8 people in 2013) has been shrinking. Many young couples live in nuclear rather than extended families.^{615, 616} Although boredom is a common problem among the unemployed in rural areas, a wide range of entertainment and leisure activities is available. Internet cafés, which are frequented by men only, have become increasingly popular.⁶¹⁷ Village houses often have televisions connected to satellite dishes.⁶¹⁸

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

Exchange 52

Most rural houses are one-story dwellings. Older houses are made of mud and newer ones of brick, if the owner can afford it. Families needing more living space often enlarge their houses by building upward to preserve agricultural land.

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

Exchange 53

If a family has farm animals, a stable is attached to the house so that the animals, which represent a high investment, can be protected against theft. The roof of the family home may be used as an area for keeping rabbits or chickens. In the oases of the Western Desert, houses were traditionally built up to six stories high and close together for defense. More modern home are just two stories and lie farther apart.⁶¹⁹

Gender Roles in Rural Areas

In rural areas of Egypt, norms are especially conservative and traditional. Men are the head of the family and the central authority figure. The role of men is to provide financial support. Women take care of the children and care for the home.⁶²⁰ Rural women are more constrained by the expectation that they should be subordinate to the male family members and to traditional roles of caring for children.⁶²¹ Most rural women help with farming or selling goods, such as produce and fish, at markets.⁶²² Girls are often married at a young age. When women participate in community activities, it is primarily in gender-segregated areas. This is viewed as a way to preserve a woman's modesty, and therefore, the family's honor.^{623, 624}

Roles of men and women in rural areas are changing in response to economic realities. Typically, husbands move and send remittances back to the wife. In these situations, women must replace their husbands in the farming activity. This effectively raises the number of women who are self-employed or work outside the home. Furthermore, women's roles change with respect to handling such tasks as paying bills and attending to the education of their children. Some rural women whose husbands have moved elsewhere have more freedom to go out and enjoy leisure activities.⁶²⁵



*Meeting for Women's Safe Cities, a UN initiative
Flickr/USAID Egypt*



*Women transporting water, Nile Delta town of Al-Borollos
Flickr/REUTERS/Nasser Nouri/CC BY-NC-SA 2.0*

Border Crossings and Checkpoints

All border areas are under military control due to increased security issues. Nonmilitary personnel and vehicles are restricted, and in some cases they are prohibited in border areas. Permission from the Ministry of the Interior is required to travel to Egypt’s borders with Sudan, Libya, Israel, and parts of the Sinai.⁶²⁶ These border areas are easily penetrated, and armed groups are active. U.S. citizens should not travel in these border zones.⁶²⁷

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

Exchange 54

Along major highways and near towns and oases, soldiers stationed at security checkpoints check cars for weapons. These checkpoints are indicated by English “Traffic Station” signs. The Egyptian police and military pay particular attention to foreigners, who are required to show passports at the checkpoints.

Show us the car registration.		
Visitor:	wareena ruKhSet il ‘arabeeya	Show us the car registration.
Local:	HaaDir	OK.

Exchange 55

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

Exchange 56

Please get out of the car.		
Visitor:	law samaHt, iTIa’ min il ‘arabeeya	Please get out of the car.
Local:	HaaDir	OK.

Exchange 57

Violent clashes between militants and Egyptian security personnel at checkpoints in the Sinai Peninsula and in the Western Desert are on the rise.⁶²⁸ In 2014, militants attacked a checkpoint along the Farafra-Bawati road in southwest Egypt, killing 22 Egyptian security forces. There have been multiple incidents in the Western Desert district of Al-Wahat in recent years. In 2015, security forces mistakenly killed 12 Mexican and Egyptian members of a tour group; in 2017, 17 security personnel and 13 militants were killed in a shootout on Wadi Gadid-Wahat Road.^{629, 630}



Egyptian-Israeli border crossing—view from Taba
Wikimedia/smr shalaby

Are you carrying any guns?		
Visitor:	enta shayel ai selah?	Are you carrying any guns?
Local:	aywa	Yes.

Exchange 58

In recent years, ISIL-Sinai Province, an Islamic State affiliate, has gained a presence in regions of the Sinai Peninsula that border Israel and the Gaza Strip.⁶³¹ They have undermined Bedouins' profitable smuggling business, and armed clashes between them and members of the largest Bedouin tribe, the Tarabin, are ongoing.⁶³²

Landmines

Egypt is thought to have a large number of landmines and explosive remnants of war. The country, which has not signed any international mine ban treaties, produces, imports, and stockpiles cluster munitions. The Egyptian government indicates it supports efforts to protect civilians from cluster munitions, but sees them as militarily useful.⁶³³ The areas of greatest mine contamination are the northwest coastal and desert areas, near



New technologies for landmine detection, Western Desert
NATO



Explosive ordnance disposal training, Alexandria Wikimedia/United States Navy

the Mediterranean towns of El Alamein and Marsa Matrouh, and the village of Sallum near the border with Libya, which date back to the Battle of El Alamein in World War II.⁶³⁴

While the precise extent of contamination across Egypt is unknown, sources estimate there are more than 16 million landmines covering 248 sq km (96 sq mi) in northwestern Egypt. These minefields, which were at the heart of the Allied campaign against the Nazi Afrika Korps, were among the largest ever laid.⁶³⁵ There are an additional 5.5 million mines in the Sinai Peninsula and the Eastern Desert. Most of these are the legacy of the wars with Israel, though more recent mines may have been placed by antigovernment jihadist groups.⁶³⁶

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

Exchange 59

Minefields are sometimes marked by barbed wire, but signs indicating minefields are unreliable. Sand buildup on roads may hide mines that shifted during flooding. Demining and public awareness efforts have reduced the number of casualties in recent years, though deaths and injuries resulting from landmines were reported through 2017.^{637, 638}

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Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Chapter 5 | Rural Life

Assessment

1. Town and village councils make all important decisions for the members of their community.
2. Most of Egypt's extremely poor live in rural Lower Egypt.
3. Egypt grows enough wheat to fulfil domestic demand and export to neighboring Sudan and Libya.
4. When traveling within the country, government permission is required before entering areas bordering Libya.
5. Women in rural areas are more likely than those in cities to need family permission before seeking medical treatment.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. False; 3. False; 4. True; 5. True



*A family in Asyut, one of the largest settlements of Upper Egypt
Flickr/USAID Egypt*

Chapter 6 | Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Family Life

Introduction

In Egypt, social status and identity are closely linked to the family and kinship structure. The family takes precedence over personal needs or desires: choice of career and even spouse are often a family affair.⁶³⁹ Family members retain close ties throughout their lives, and unmarried children often remain at home regardless of their age.⁶⁴⁰ Families often gather on weekends and spend religious holidays together.⁶⁴¹

Families in Egypt are patrilineal. Primary allegiance is owed to one's paternal family, even if it means siding against one's husband and his family.⁶⁴² Egyptians use several words to refer to their families. The word *ahl* includes immediate blood relatives,



Boys, Al-Fayoum oasis
Flickr/Mohammed Shamma

members of the household, and individuals related through marriage. When this term is used, it refers to family that might number 100 to 200 people. *A'ila* is used to refer to family; it connotes a close relationship or mutual obligation. Depending on the context, *a'ila* can refer to family in the immediate household or to distant relatives connected through marriage or other ties.⁶⁴³ Relations with distant kin are maintained through frequent family gatherings. Thus, the concept of family is varied and not

limited to specific lines of genealogy.⁶⁴⁴ Given the emphasis placed on traditional family values such as loyalty to the extended family network, communal living and sharing, including nepotism, are widely prevalent in Egyptian culture.⁶⁴⁵

Typical Household Family Structure



Egyptian exporter with local handicrafts
Flickr/Synergos Institute

In most Egyptian families, authority lies with the eldest in the household, regardless of gender. Nevertheless, the typical household structure is patriarchal, with the most senior male making all major decisions for the family.⁶⁴⁶ The husband traditionally earns the income for the family, and the wife stays at home caring for their children and running the household. In more Westernized households, this scenario is changing; many women without children

work outside the home and are often the primary breadwinners. At some universities, women now outnumber men.⁶⁴⁷

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

Exchange 60

While smaller, nuclear households (consisting of just parents and unmarried children) are increasingly common, some version of the extended family still plays an important role in the daily lives of most Egyptians. In any city, extended families can be found living in the same building or neighborhood. Older, well-off Egyptians may buy apartments in their building for their married children to keep them close.⁶⁴⁸ The extended family may include unmarried relatives, such as widows, divorcees, or bachelors who would be stigmatized if they lived separately.⁶⁴⁹



*Egyptian mother and child, Cairo
Flickr/Jenny*

In the rural areas of Upper Egypt, villages are dominated by one or two large, extended families that can include hundreds of close and distant relatives.⁶⁵⁰ The strong bonds formed between generations serve as a social and economic safety net for these economically disadvantaged areas. The family patriarch or other prominent person in the family will serve as judge in disputes, help with loans and work opportunities, and represent the family to government officials.^{651, 652}

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

Exchange 61

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

Exchange 62

Male and Female Interactions within the Family

In Egypt, everyone is part of an interrelated community; men and women complement each other in terms of roles and responsibilities.⁶⁵³ This concept dictates the social structure of the Egyptian family. Men are responsible for caring for and overseeing the women in their families.⁶⁵⁴ Women are raised with a strong sense of their role as

caregivers and have an expectation that their economic security depends on their relationships with their husbands, fathers, and sons.^{655, 656} If a mother works outside the home, the care of children will fall to the other female members of the family or a female housekeeper.^{657, 658}

Status of Elders and Children



*Mother and infant, Giza, Greater Cairo
Flickr/USAID Egypt*

The tradition of respect for age and seniority is still strong. Islamic principles specify that the duty to care for one's parents is second only to the obligation of prayer, which means that there are very few homes for the elderly in Egypt.⁶⁵⁹ Female family members are the primary caregivers of the elderly.⁶⁶⁰ While most older Egyptian men and women live with their adult children and/or grandchildren, some elderly—particularly elderly women—live alone and impoverished.⁶⁶¹

All children are considered a blessing, though there is a preference for boys. Children are taught not to challenge their elders or raise their voice when speaking to them. Girls generally help their mothers with housework and care for younger siblings, while boys, especially those in poor families, learn a trade. Children of wealthy families can focus primarily on education.⁶⁶²



*Children weaving a carpet, Cairo
Flickr/Endlisnis*

Egyptian law prohibits children under the age of 15 from working, except in family business and domestic labor.⁶⁶³ Yet approximately 1 out of 10 children aged 5–17 (totaling 1.6–2.7 million children) work in Egypt, some of them under hazardous conditions.^{664, 665} Some families, especially in rural areas, may arrange for their daughters to be married very young. Child marriage is still prohibited. In 2017, the Egyptian Supreme Court repealed a ban against marriages for children under 18.⁶⁶⁶ An estimated 15% of girls are married before they reach 16.^{667, 668}

Marriage

Marriage and family are the center of social life in Egypt. Everyone is expected to marry and raise children.⁶⁶⁹ Within the Muslim community, Islamic law defines the rights and obligations of marriage.⁶⁷⁰ Marriages between relatives—usually a first or second cousin—are not unusual. This practice is more common in rural areas than in cities.⁶⁷¹ For Muslims, the process of finding a marriage partner begins with negotiations among family members, including the parties marrying. Most couples have some say before the marriage about whether to accept the prospective partner. In contemporary Egypt, couples more commonly meet through friends or university affiliations. The marriage contract traditionally includes a dowry (*mahr*) and gifts of jewelry from the groom-to-be (*shabka*).



Egyptian couple looking out over the Cairo cityscape
Flickr/dustinpsmith

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

Exchange 63

Because of social constraints against premarital sex, the *urfi*, or common-law marriage, is becoming increasingly popular, especially among university students.⁶⁷² Others may choose this type of marriage because it is less expensive than a traditional marriage. But *urfi* marriages, which are conducted by a cleric in the presence of two witnesses, do not provide the same rights or safety as a formal marriage. They are not legally registered and thus not officially binding. Until 2017, children of the *urfi* marriage could not be legally registered, leaving them without access to public health services, education, or the right to inheritance.^{673, 674}

When a woman marries, she generally moves into her husband's household. In urban areas, the couple may move out after a few years into their own home if they can afford it, or if a separate home is provided by family. Organization of the household around a nuclear family has become a modern trend in Egypt. 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 she owned before the marriage or any she acquires while married.⁶⁷⁵

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

Exchange 64

Divorce

Divorce has been on the rise in Egypt for decades, and the rate now ranks as high as in some European nations.⁶⁷⁶ Across Egypt, 40% of marriages end in the first 5 years, and in cities, the divorce rate is over 60%.⁶⁷⁷ Most of these divorces are among Muslims because the Coptic Church allows divorce only in cases of adultery or when one partner changes religion.⁶⁷⁸ The reasons for the surge in divorce rates are varied, and include financial troubles and reforms in the Islamic divorce laws. Additionally, education and employment has led Egyptian women to be more assertive and confident in their ability to cope alone.^{679, 680}



A woman in a niqab, Cairo
Flickr/Jay Galvin

Under Islamic legal provisions in Egypt, a husband has the right to a *talaq* divorce, which is a unilateral repudiation of the marriage. After the husband makes three declarations that he is divorced, it becomes an irrevocable separation and legal divorce. Women also have an option of unilateral repudiation known as *i'smah*. The man must consent to the option for this type of divorce at the time of marriage. A judicial divorce, or *khul'*, substantially liberalizes the acceptable reasons for divorce. The *khul'* divorce allows divorce by mutual consent. If the husband does not consent, however, a woman may still petition for a divorce by forfeiting all financial rights, including her dowry. A woman may be granted a divorce for any reason, including the notion that she finds life with her husband unbearable. The court's decision in such a divorce is final and may not be appealed.⁶⁸¹

Under Islamic law, the mother retains custody of young children following divorce. The woman's custody commonly ends when boys reach the age of 10 and girls the age

of 12. At that time, the father has the right to claim them. Custodial rights for the woman may be extended until boys reach the age of 15 or until girls marry.⁶⁸² While divorce rates are increasing, many women never remarry for fear their children will be taken from them by the court. By law, custody of the children of re-married mothers is given to the woman's mother or mother-in-law.^{683, 684}



*Beggar woman and her child, Cairo
Flickr/Mohannad Khatib*

Family Social Events

Weddings

Because family bonds in Egypt are highly valued, weddings are significant and joyful celebrations of a union between families. Marriages mark a rite of passage for the couple and create a social and economic contract between families. Marriage bestows prestige and the approval of society on the couple. Although many marriages are arranged, few people are forced to marry a spouse they do not like.⁶⁸⁵

Weddings in Egypt usually take place on a Thursday. The marriage itself may be as simple as an imam presiding over the marriage contract between the groom and the bride's father, who speaks on behalf of his daughter. Rural weddings tend to be more traditional, and urban weddings are more modern, with Western similarities.^{686, 687} Wealthier families may rent ballrooms at luxury hotels in Cairo. For Egyptians of all backgrounds, weddings are usually exuberant family events with abundant food, music, dancing, and several days of celebration.^{688, 689}



*Nubian wedding near Aswan
Wikimedia/chmouel*

The *Laylat al-Hinna*, or henna party, takes place the night before the wedding, as the bride gathers with female friends who apply henna to her hands and feet for good fortune.⁶⁹⁰ In Bedouin traditions, a colorful procession takes the bride to the groom's house. The bride, hidden in a tent-like covering, rides on a camel led by the groom's family.⁶⁹¹



Bedouin wedding celebration
Wikimedia/Elshamy78

By tradition, everything needed by the new couple must be purchased before the wedding, including the apartment in which the couple will live. The rising cost of living and housing in Egypt has led to longer engagements and older marital ages.^{692, 693} The high cost of marriage has also led to changes within the Egyptian family; women are increasingly involved in marriage finances and more women are working outside the home. Marriage

below one's financial or educational level is increasingly common, a practice long regarded as unacceptable.⁶⁹⁴

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

Exchange 65

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

Exchange 66

Funerals

Many funeral customs are similar for Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt. Both try to bury the body on the same day that death occurs. Mourners immediately pay their condolences to the family, and then again after 40 days and at the end of a year following the death. Both religious traditions believe in an eternal soul that exists before birth and after death.^{695, 696}

Muslim burial rites are universal, regardless of ethnic affiliation. In a traditional Muslim funeral, the body is buried as soon as possible after death. Islamic law requires that the body be ritually bathed (*ghusl*) and covered before burial. Those who prepare the body (often close relatives of the same sex) traditionally wrap and tie the body in pieces of white fabric.⁶⁹⁷ Male family members carry the body on a bier or in a wooden

casket on their shoulders as they walk to the burial site. Muslims prefer to bury their dead without a coffin; no covering is added aside from the white shroud. In some cases, Muslim women do not attend funerals. The men in attendance cover their heads as a sign of respect for the deceased. Family members toss or shovel earth into the grave. After the funeral ends, guests visit the deceased’s family to express condolences. The grieving period continues for 3 days, and during this time family members pray for the deceased. Only Muslims can perform the acts of *ibadah*, which include washing the body, wrapping the body, offering prayers, and lowering the body into the grave. Relatives and friends of the deceased who are not Muslim may attend the funeral.^{698, 699, 700}



*Funeral procession, women follow in distance, Cairo
Flickr/upyerno*

Some customs in Egypt seem to have survived from ancient times. For example, *al-Arbeiyin* is a ceremony that occurs 40 days after death. On this occasion, the family of the deceased takes food to the grave, and it will be given to any poor people who have gathered there. The 40-day interval may have been the time required to mummify the body.^{701, 702}

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

Exchange 67

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

Exchange 68

Naming Conventions

In Arab culture, a person's family name and ancestry are important as a marker of social identity. Many Egyptians do not have a common surname or family name that is shared by all family members. Instead, each person receives a unique name followed by the given names of his or her father and other male ancestors; this practice establishes the paternal lineage. Three or more names may be assigned to an individual. For example, a typical male name might be "Hakim Ali Abdallah." The first name, Hakim, means "wise" and "insightful" in Arabic. It is the personal name used by family and friends. The last two names are the father's and grandfather's, respectively.⁷⁰³



Children in Nasr City, east of Cairo
Flickr/CDC Global

The use of a family name is becoming more widespread. Some family names reflect geographic locations, such as al-Masri (the Egyptian) and can indicate a family's origins. In such cases, the structure is the individual's personal name followed by the personal name of the individual's father and then a family name, as in Ahmed Abdul-Aziz al-Shammari. If a man's first name is very common, such as Ahmed, he may be called instead by his family name or his father's name, whichever is more unique. If a person's name is unknown, Egyptians will use a general term of respect, such as *ustaaz* (sir), *ukhui* (brother), or *ukhti* (sister).⁷⁰⁴

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 Kulthum.⁷⁰⁵ A married woman is often identified by a respectful title followed by the name of her first son. She often keeps her maiden name, while children of the marriage take the father's ancestral name as part of their name.^{706, 707} A married woman may also be referred to using the honorific *hurma* (wife of), as in Hurma Kareem Hussain (wife of Kareem Hussain). Alternately, the honorific term *ibn/bin* or *bint*, meaning "son of" or "daughter of," may be used.⁷⁰⁸ The name Hasan ibn Faraj means "Hasan, the son of Faraj." The female name Ghazala bint Faraj means "Ghazala, the daughter of Faraj."⁷⁰⁹

Egyptian names, both Muslim and Christian, can be religious or secular and have origins in several languages, including Arabic, old Egyptian, and Greek. Christians are often given names that reflect their faith, including the names of saints.⁷¹⁰

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Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Chapter 6 | Family Life

Assessment

1. Egyptian women take their husband's name upon marriage.
2. Women may initiate divorce under some circumstances.
3. Nursing homes are not the acceptable solution for the aging population of Egypt.
4. Women are rarely granted custody of young children after a divorce.
5. Authority in a family belongs to the most senior male.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. True

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Arabic-Egyptian Cultural Orientation

Final Assessment

Arabic-Egyptian Final Assessment

1. President Hosni Mubarak's negotiations for peace with Israel led to the 1979 Camp David Accords.
2. Egypt became a republic in 1953.
3. The 1973 conflict with Israel is referred to as the Suez Crisis.
4. A strong police presence and severe penalties helped eliminate harassment of women on the streets of Cairo.
5. Religious political organizations are banned in Egypt.
6. The Eastern Desert, also called the Arabian Desert, is part of the Sahara Desert.
7. Increased military presence has eradicated incidents of terrorism in the Western Desert.
8. The military controls much of Egypt's economy.
9. Graduating from college in Egypt increases a person's chances of finding a job.
10. Egypt has a high crime rate.

11. Egypt's Bedouin tribes consist of nomads who live in the desert.
12. Blood feuds (cycles of murder and revenge to maintain honor) are uncommon in Egypt.
13. The divide between the rich and poor in Egypt is growing.
14. All Muslims are obligated to observe the fast of Ramadan in Egypt.
15. The Egyptian constitution guarantees Christians and Jews the freedom of worship.
16. Umm Kulthum was a famous Egyptian singer.
17. *Kushari* is a traditional head covering worn by Coptic brides.
18. Divorce is common in Egypt.
19. After the war in 1967, the Suez Canal was closed for 25 years because of the presence of unexploded ordnance.
20. The poor economic situation in Egypt has changed family dynamics and attitudes toward the family.
21. Taxis are a safe choice for travel in Egypt.
22. A successful campaign by the government in the 1950s eradicated the practice of honor killing from Egypt.
23. Cairo's Al-Azhar University is the dominant religious institution for Sunni Muslims in the Middle East.
24. Coptic Christians fast every week.

25. Arabic-Egyptian is the most widely understood dialect of Arabic in the Middle East.
26. Sham al-Naseem is the oldest mosque in Alexandria.
27. Egyptians do not make eye contact when shaking hands.
28. Arabic-Egyptian is mostly spoken, not written.
29. People must remove their shoes before entering a Coptic church.
30. The Western Desert is also known as the Sudanese Desert.

Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. False; 4. False; 5. True; 6. True; 7. False; 8. True; 9. False; 10. False; 11. False; 12. False; 13. True; 14. False; 15. True; 16. True; 17. False; 18. True; 19. False; 20. True; 21. True; 22. False; 23. True; 24. True; 25. True; 26. False; 27. False; 28. True; 29. False; 30. False