



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▲ AFRICA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Covering an area of 386,662 square miles (1,001,449 square kilometers), Egypt is just larger than the states of Texas and New Mexico combined. Most of Egypt is dry and arid desert, spotted with small, inhabited oases. Part of the Sahara Desert (also called the Western Desert) is in southwestern Egypt. The Nile River, Africa's longest river, runs north through Egypt into the Mediterranean Sea, providing a fertile delta area and the lifeblood for the country.

Before the Aswan Dam was built in southeastern Egypt, the Nile Delta was subject to seasonal flooding. Now the dam regulates water flow and allows for more predictable crop planting, although it has also caused some environmental problems. Summers are hot and humid with daily high temperatures reaching 108°F (42°C) in some areas. Winters have a moderate climate, with lows near 40°F (4°C). Annual rainfall ranges from virtually nothing in the desert to about 8 inches in the Nile Delta. In the spring, the *Khamasiin* (a hot, driving, dusty wind) blows.

History. The earliest recorded Egyptian dynasty united the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt around 3000 BC. Today's Egyptians are proud of the Pharaonic heritage that followed. In 525 BC, Egypt came under Persian control. Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BC brought Greek rule and culture to Egypt. As one of the first nations visited by Christian missionaries (the apostle Mark), Egypt was Christianized within three centuries and followed a Coptic patriarch. Because of Byzantine religious persecution, Egyptians welcomed the Muslim invasion that began in AD 642.

By the eighth century, Egypt had become largely Muslim. For centuries, it was ruled by successive Islamic dynasties, including the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century. France's

Napoleon invaded in 1798, but Egypt was still associated with the Ottoman Empire until World War I.

France and Britain vied for influence over Egypt throughout the 19th century, during which time Viceroy Muhammad Ali successfully governed and reformed Egypt (1805–48). France and Britain exerted increasing control over Egyptian affairs after the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, and Britain made Egypt a protectorate in 1914. Although given official independence in 1922, the Egyptians regard 1952 as the beginning of their real independence. In that year, a revolution overthrew the British-supported monarchy. Gamal Abdel Nasser ousted the first president of Egypt in 1954 and became an influential leader and statesman. Nasser was responsible for a number of reforms, including land reform, universal education, nationalization of major industries and banks, and Egyptian leadership of the Arab world. He governed until his death in 1970.

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

Fundamentalists, led by the Islamic Brotherhood, began pressing in 1991 for an Islamic state that would shun Western art, music, literature, and values. They have pressed the secular government to restrict freedom of expression, liberal education, and secular law; have committed violent acts against

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Coptic Christians, Western tourists, and government installations; and have made assassination attempts. Although crackdowns have been harsh, this group remains the greatest threat to the government.

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

THE PEOPLE

Population. Egypt's population of 80.3 million is growing by 1.7 percent annually. The majority (90 percent) descends from both native Egyptians and Arabs who conquered Egypt in the seventh century. The rest of the population is composed of Nubians (who live in southern Egypt), Bedouin nomads, Greeks, Italians, and Syro-Lebanese; Berbers inhabit the Siwa Oasis in the Western Desert. Nearly all Egyptians live on the arable land along the Nile River because the rest of the country is mostly desert. Cairo, the capital, has between 16 and 20 million inhabitants. An exact count is impossible due to migrants, informal residents (as many as 5 million), and other factors. Alexandria claims more than 3 million residents.

Language. Arabic is the official language. Written Arabic differs from the dialects spoken in daily life throughout the country. Egyptians are enormously proud of their rich language. Wordplays, jokes, clichés, and riddles are an integral part of Egyptian culture. Arabic is the language of instruction in schools. English is also a part of the national curriculum.

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

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

Coptic Christians, whose religion dates back to the first century AD, are Egypt's largest religious minority. Their population is estimated to be more than seven million.

General Attitudes. Egyptians generally prefer a relaxed and patient life, characterized by the phrase *Ma'alesh*, meaning roughly "Don't worry" or "Never mind." This term is used to dismiss concerns or conflicts that are inevitable or not serious. Both business and leisure activities are governed by the con-

cept of *Insha'allah* (If *Allah* wills), which dominates all aspects of Muslim life. Patience also influences life, as the people view events in an expanded time frame.

Egyptians are expressive, emotional, and are known for their sense of humor, which has helped them endure difficult living conditions with great composure. Part of Egyptian humor is a love for riddles (which are especially common during the Muslim holy month of *Ramadan*), jokes, and sarcasm. Egyptians often identify with community groups to the point that personal needs become secondary to those of the group. Generosity is an integral part of this sense of community.

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

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

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

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

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

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

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

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

LIFESTYLE

Family. Families are extremely important in Egypt. In most homes, a young woman is protected by her brothers and may even be accompanied by them in public. Traditionally, a man's honor is based on how well he protects the women in his care. In rural areas, a young woman may discontinue her schooling when she comes of age.

It is customary for extended families, including families of brothers and sisters, to live under the same roof. However, increased urbanization is changing this tradition toward a home with only a nuclear family. Still, families maintain close ties, and cousins of the same sex are often as close as siblings, while those of the opposite sex may even marry. The thought of putting the elderly in a rest home is repulsive to most Egyptians; children (especially the oldest son) expect to support their parents in old age.

Parents often play a key role in planning the future of their children; their influence ranges from the choice of profession to the selection of a mate. Egyptians value this support as a source of emotional security.

Housing. The wealthiest Egyptians occupy large, elegant villas filled with classical European-style furniture, religious art, calligraphy, and family portraits. Meanwhile, poor people tend to live in unattractive and dirty apartment buildings. Though these buildings may be unappealing on the outside, the interiors are almost always well-maintained. Egyptian women are proud of their homes and work very hard to keep them clean and welcoming. Egyptian cities are densely populated, and new urban migrants are increasingly living in unsafe shanty towns. Some of the poorest migrants have created homes in the huge cemeteries surrounding Cairo. Whole communities of cemetery dwellers have risen up, with entire families illegally inhabiting old tombs. In rural areas, homes tend to be built as close to each other as possible, thereby freeing up as much land as possible for growing crops.

Dating and Marriage. Though attitudes are changing in Westernized circles, dating is not widespread. Public displays of affection are frowned upon. Moral purity is highly valued in a woman and is usually a key requirement in the marriage con-

tract. Traditionally, marriages were arranged between heads of families, often with little input from the couple involved. Now, individuals have more say in the process. Because marriages join not just two people but two families, both families are heavily involved in wedding preparations. Housing is expensive and hard to acquire in the cities; engagements may last until the couple saves enough money for their own apartment and furnishings. Men must also save for a dowry. Weddings are lavish and costly, lasting up to three days.

A family-reform law enacted in 2000 allows women to initiate divorce on grounds of incompatibility; previously, it was nearly impossible for women to get a divorce on any grounds. Under the law, women are not entitled to alimony and must return any money given at the time of marriage. Obtaining a divorce remains nearly impossible for Coptic men and women.

Life Cycle. Seven days after a baby's birth, Egyptians hold a *sobou'*, a celebration dating back to ancient Egyptian rituals. During the celebration, the mother places her baby in a sieve decorated with candy and ribbons. Guests place their gifts for the baby in the sieve. A special event in the lives of teenagers occurs when (or if) they memorize the *Qur'an*. Their success is celebrated at a massive party attended by many family members and friends. When people die, they are wrapped in a white shroud and, as required by Islamic tradition, buried within 24 hours. After the burial, a professional *Qur'an* reciter reads *Qur'anic* verses for several hours.

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

Recreation. Soccer is the national sport. Sport clubs offer wealthy urban residents tennis, swimming, and horseback riding. Many urban Egyptians enjoy going to the movies; a wide variety of Egyptian and foreign films are shown. In the Middle East, Egypt is well-known for its dedication to cultural arts—evident in its cinema and television programming. Many enjoy watching television, even in rural areas. While wealthy men socialize in private clubs, men of all other classes go to coffee shops to play table games such as backgammon and dominoes, have refreshments, and relax with friends. Many coffee shops cater to specific groups or professions (barbers, plumbers, etc.). Women socialize in the home and in public places, such as at work or the market.

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

Egyptians have always loved poetry. Genres such as the short story and novel emerged following a literary renaissance in the early 1900s. Contemporary writers, such as 1988 Nobel Prize-winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz, continue Egypt's

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rich literary tradition. Artisans practice traditional crafts such as carpet weaving, calligraphy, metalwork, glasswork, and woodwork. Egypt is a major producer of Arabic-language films and television shows.

Holidays. The Western (Gregorian) calendar is used for all business and government purposes, but the lunar calendar is used to calculate the dates of Muslim holidays. The lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the Western calendar year, so the Gregorian dates for holidays differ from year to year. During the month of *Ramadan*, Muslims go without food or drink from sunrise to sundown and eat only in the early morning and evening. *'Eid al-Fitr* is a three-day feast held at the end of *Ramadan*. Another major religious holiday is *'Eid al-Adha* (Feast of the Sacrifice), which commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Muslims also celebrate the prophet Muhammad's birthday (*al-Mawlid al-nabawi*). National holidays include Labor Day (1 May), Anniversary of the Revolution (23 July), Armed Forces Day (6 Oct.), and the lunar New Year. The celebration of *Sham el-Nasseem* marks the beginning of spring.

SOCIETY

Government. The Arab Republic of Egypt is divided into 26 governorates. The president (currently Hosni Mubarak) is chief of state. The prime minister (currently Ahmed Nazif) is head of government. The president serves terms of six years and appoints the prime minister. The legislative branch consists of a 454-seat People's Assembly and a 264-seat *Shura* Council. Because the *Shura* Council acts as a consultative body, the People's Assembly is the primary legislature. Ten representatives in the People's Assembly are appointed by the president; the remaining 444 are elected to five-year terms. In the *Shura* Council, 176 members are elected to six-year terms and 88 are appointed by the president. Citizens are required to vote at age 18. Mubarak's party (the National Democratic Party) dominates the People's Assembly, but some opposition parties and independents also hold seats. Religious-based political parties are banned.

Economy. More than one-third of Egyptians are employed in agricultural pursuits, such as growing corn, wheat, cotton, rice, barley, and fruit. Egypt also produces cheese and dairy products. Chief industries include food processing, textiles, chemicals, cement, petroleum, and metals. Egypt exports cotton, petroleum, yarn, and textiles. Important natural resources are oil, natural gas, lead, and other minerals. The Suez Canal is a vital source of income. Tourism is the country's most important industry. Threats and acts of violence have occasionally shaken tourist confidence, but the government has renewed an emergency powers law that gives security forces expanded powers. With economic reform Egypt has lowered inflation and improved the climate for international investment. Still, large sections of the population remain impoverished. Women earn only one-fourth of the nation's income. The currency is the Egyptian pound (EGP).

Transportation and Communications. The River Bus (water taxi) is a common means of public transportation along the Nile River. In urban areas, people travel by car, bus, and taxi. Cairo has a modern, efficient subway, the first in the Middle East. Unfortunately, with such a large population, Cairo's transportation system is still overburdened. The Nile River is

POPULATION & AREA

Population	80,335,036 (rank=15)
Area, sq. mi.	386,662 (rank=29)
Area, sq. km.	1,001,149

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	112 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$4,337
Adult literacy rate	83% (male); 59% (female)
Infant mortality rate	28 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	69 (male); 73 (female)

used for transporting goods and people as well as for recreational tours. Egyptians often travel between cities by train, bus, and even taxi. There is also a domestic airline. In both urban and rural areas, some still travel by donkey, horse, or camel. Applying for and getting a phone are expensive and take a long time; people without phones make calls from a central phone office. Mobile phone access is widely available; internet access is growing. There are five main television stations and seven radio networks.

Education. The government subsidizes free education through the university level, although not everyone is able to take advantage of these subsidies. In 1962, Nasser abolished fees for state-run institutions and guaranteed employment to all university graduates. These policies have significantly increased the number of students and college graduates. But they have also strained resources (physical facilities, textbooks, equipment, and teachers) already in short supply. Many college graduates are unable to find work outside the government, which is currently the nation's largest employer. Commonly, men (even those working in government) have to learn a trade to supplement their family's income.

Most children who begin primary schooling now also complete it. A significant number go on to secondary school. The building of more schools in rural areas has opened some educational opportunities to the poor. Universities are located in most urban centers, and nearly half of all students are women.

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

AT A GLANCE

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