



EGYPT

Area: 386,662 square miles

Population: 105 million **Capital:** Cairo

Ethnic Groups: Egyptian, 98%; Amazigh (Berber), Nubian, Bedouin, Beja, 1%; Greek, Armenian, other, 1%

Language: Arabic (official); French and English

Religions: Sunni Muslim, 90%; Coptic Christian, 9% **Literacy:** 80.8%

Life Expectancy: 71.48 years

Economy: Agriculture (cotton, rice, corn, wheat, beans, fruit); Industry (food processing, textiles, tourism, chemicals, petroleum);

Exports (crude oil, petroleum products, cotton yarn, raw cotton, textiles)

Gini (Income Inequality) **Index:** 31.5 (2017 World Bank est.); rank #129/159

Gender Inequality Index: 0.449 est. (rank #108/162)



Ancestral Crossroads

Ancient Egypt was the gatekeeper of global connections along more than 2,000 miles of the Nile River and between North Africa, the Mediterranean, Levant, Red Sea, West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Its monumental architecture, written language, astronomical knowledge, mathematics and technology, agricultural wealth, early state system, religious life, and urban cultures -- all literally defined what it meant to be a world civilization. For more than 15,000 years, Africans settled along the Nile, creating complex societies that were "gifts" of the river.

Around 3400 BCE, the kingdoms of lower and upper Egypt were politically united under the pharaoh (divine ruler) Menes, beginning the first of many dynasties that ruled for more than 2,000 years. The Nile was a watery avenue that linked the commercial centers of Africa to many parts of the ancient world. Pharaoh Hatshepsut was among the most memorable leaders during the eighteenth dynasty of Egypt's New Kingdom period (c. 1570 BCE – c. 1069 BCE). Hatshepsut contributed to reimagining Egyptian concepts of kingship by implementing a program to construct temples and other monumental buildings. The ruler (first a royal wife and then regent) remains most famous for their gender creativity in the displays of their public image, which has inspired lively ongoing scholarly debates. Inscriptions frame the ruler as divinely chosen and refer to the Pharaoh as both female and male in deliberate acts of gender manipulation.

The last thousand years of Egyptian history were marked by periods of foreign invasion and occupation by the Kushites, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks (Alexander the Great and the Ptolemies), Romans, and Byzantines, pushing Egypt into a major role in the history of 'western civilization.' Around 735 BCE, the armies of Kush (from Nubia between today's southern Egypt and northern Sudan) briefly united the Nile Corridor all the way to the Mediterranean. Egypt was one of the first lands to accept Christianity, which, according to legend, was brought to the region by the Apostle Mark in the 1st century CE. Known as Coptic Christians, they were (and still are today) characterized by a belief in Monophysitism, which asserts that Christ has one single nature that unites the divine and human. Their liturgy is still conducted in Coptic, the Afro-Asiatic language that evolved from ancient Egyptian around the 2nd century CE.

In 642 CE Arab Muslim invaders overtook the ruling Byzantines after a series of battles throughout Egypt. By the 8th century, a large majority of Egyptians had converted to Islam and adopted the Arabic language. Arab caliphs ruled Egypt until 1517, when the Turks seized the country for the Ottoman Empire. Napoleon initiated a brief occupation between 1798 and 1801. In 1805, Mohammed Ali, leader of a band of Albanian soldiers, became Pasha of Egypt, successfully reforming and governing Egypt until 1848. After completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, the French and British took increasing interest in Egypt's strategic location. British troops occupied Egypt in 1882. In 1914, Egypt became a protectorate of Britain.

Modern Politics

Although Egyptian nationalists forced Britain to declare Egypt an independent state on February 28, 1922, most Egyptians regard 1952 as the beginning of real independence. In that year Egyptian revolutionaries overthrew the monarchy, forcing the abdication of King Farouk, whom the British supported. They proclaimed a republic on June 18, 1953, with General Mohammed Naguib as president until his ousting by Gamal Abdel Nasser, who became president after a referendum on June 23, 1956. Upon Nasser's death in 1970, vice-president Anwar el-Sadat became president. Sadat liberalized the economy, distanced Egypt from the Soviet Union, and signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979 that returned the Sinai to Egypt. Two years later, in 1981, Muslim fundamentalists assassinated Sadat. His Vice-President Hosni Mubarak succeeded Anwar el-Sadat. Ruling under "Emergency Law," Mubarak focused on combating Islamic extremists. Although human rights activists increased their criticism of Egypt, in September 2005, in the first multiparty elections in Egypt's history, Hosni Mubarak was re-elected to his fifth six-year term.

In the wake of the successful Tunisian protests that ousted that country's government, Egyptians began their own popular uprising on January 25, 2011, now known as the Revolution of 25 January. Millions of protesters from a wide variety of socio-economic and religious backgrounds participated in anti-government demonstrations, marches, acts of civil disobedience, and labor strikes that took place in Cairo, Alexandria, and other cities. Grievances focused on police brutality, state of emergency laws, lack of freedom of speech and free elections, corruption, high unemployment, food prices, and low wages. Protesters' demands called for the end of the Mubarak regime, the end of emergency law, freedom, justice, a non-military government, and a voice in the management of Egypt's resources. Despite the mostly peaceful nature of the demonstrations, there were violent clashes between security forces and protesters that resulted in over 800 deaths and 6,000 injuries. On February 11, 2011, Mubarak resigned as president and turned power over to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. In November 2011, protesters returned to Tahrir Square in Cairo, accusing the military of trying to hang on to power.

Following the fall of Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood pushed for early elections, making it difficult for the dozens of newly formed political parties to organize in time. On June 24, 2012, Mohammed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, narrowly won the presidential election that many of the protesters boycotted. No other Egyptian political opposition party was as cohesive and well organized as the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, which won popular support in rural regions through social service programs. Founded in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood sponsored a military battalion that carried out a series of terrorist attacks and bombings in the 1940s. Although the Brotherhood eventually abandoned its military activities, it never shook the stigma of those early acts. After it was banned and experienced imprisonment by three regimes, the Brotherhood became a clandestine organization.

To this day, a large part of Egyptian society, including the police and the army, oppose the Muslim Brotherhood. In response to mass protests calling for the removal of Mr. Morsi, the military, led by General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, stepped in on July 3, 2013, removing Morsi from power and suspending the Constitution. Months later, Sisi was elected president and took office on June 3, 2014. He was overwhelmingly re-elected in 2018. While President Sisi remains popular with some (largely through his calls for nationalism and promises of maintaining security), many of the younger generation view him as a step backward from the ideals fought for in the revolution. Yet even many critics view Sisi as key to maintaining stability. His strategy for economic growth has been largely focused on grandiose projects including an attempt to transform 2,400 square miles of desert into a fertile agricultural region. From the ancient irrigation system that made possible the world's most famous "hydraulic civilization" to the Suez Canal and Nasser's ambitious Aswan Dam (1970), water technologies of the past and present have shaped the region's destiny. Today both Egyptians and Sudanese remain fearful that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam built on the Blue Nile 2,000 miles upriver could constrict their own water supplies. Egypt, one of the driest countries on the earth, depends on the waters of the Nile for its existence as much today as it did in ancient times.

The modern Egyptian film industry also claims deep roots. Since its beginnings in the first decades of the 20th century, more than 3,000 films have been made in Egypt in the past century. Today, the nation supports more than a dozen vibrant film festivals that showcase the work of Egyptian filmmakers and provide the world with a view of Egyptian life through an African lens. --- Candice Goucher, 2022

Further Reading

Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, Vol. I. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

Diamond, Kelly-Anne. 2020. "Hatshepsut: Transcending Gender in Ancient Egypt," *Gender and History* 32, no. 1 (2020): 168-188.

Dunn, Ross E. and Laura J. Mitchell, *Panorama: A World History*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2015.

Meguid, Ibrahim Abdel, *No One Sleeps in Alexandria* (translated by Farouk Abdel Wahab). Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999.

CFAF Country Notes are provided to audiences through the CFAF Endowment Fund and are to be used for educational purposes only.