

## **Egypt: FAST FACTS**

### **Area**

386,662 square miles, just over half the size of Alaska  
Cairo is the capital and largest city in Egypt.

### **Population**

84.5 million (U.S. is 308.7 million)  
Two-thirds of the world's Arabs live in Egypt.  
Large share of the population is under 30.

### **Jobs**

College-educated adults under 30 face an unemployment rate of 30 percent.  
Most Egyptians currently live on about \$2 a day.

### **Language**

Arabic

### **Main Exports**

Oil, petroleum products, cotton

### **Religion(s)**

Islam, Christianity

### **Life Expectancy**

69 for men, 73 for women (current world average is 67)

## **DETAILED BACKGROUND**

Egypt is a nation located at the northeastern corner of Africa, where Africa and Asia meet. It links the Muslim countries of southwest Asia with those of North Africa. The country is bordered by Libya on the west and by Sudan on the south. It is bounded on the north by the Mediterranean Sea and on the east by Israel and the Red Sea. With over 80 million people, Egypt is the world's most populous Arab country. It is the second most populous nation in Africa, after Nigeria.

Egypt has lengthy coasts on both the Mediterranean and Red seas. So it has long been an important center of trade and communication for Asia, Africa, and Europe. Its location became even more important when the Suez Canal was opened in 1869. The canal makes the long voyage around the southern tip of Africa unnecessary.

Egypt is a modern nation in an ancient land. The Nile River runs like a ribbon through the length of the country. The Nile Valley was the birthplace of one of the world's earliest civilizations. Reminders of Egypt's glorious past dot the landscape. For example, the Great Pyramid at Giza was one of the wonders of the ancient world. It is the only one that has survived.

Egypt has one of the longest histories of any nation. It came into being about 3200 B.C. King Menes (also called Narmer) united the cities of northern and southern Egypt under one government. During his time, the giant statue known as the Sphinx was built. It appears part human and part beast and has fascinated travelers for centuries.

Beginning about 1000 B.C., Egypt's power declined and different peoples ruled it. In 331 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered Egypt. Other rulers followed, including Roman and Byzantine emperors. And Egypt became mostly Christian. This changed in A.D. 640, when Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula conquered Egypt. (The Muslims were members of the newly formed religion of Islam.) Egypt has remained Muslim since that time. Britain took control of Egypt in 1882 and then granted the country independence in 1922. However, British troops remained in the Suez Canal area until 1954.

In the 21st century, Egypt is modernizing its economy to better serve a growing population. Egypt still depends on its traditional cotton growing and tourist industries. But resources such as oil and natural gas are growing in importance. To make further progress, the government must ensure that many more new and better jobs are created each year. Other priorities include reducing poverty and improving education, especially in rural areas.

### **People**

Most Egyptians are descended from the Arab settlers who followed the Muslim conquest in 640 and from the descendants of the ancient Egyptian pre-Islamic population. The typical Egyptian reflects a mixture of the two heritages. The Egyptian Copts, a sizeable minority, date back to pre-Islamic times. They are members of one of the earliest Christian churches. There are also some people of Armenian, French, Greek, and Italian ancestry.

### **Language**

Arabic is the official language of Egypt. Classical Arabic is the written language. It is used for conducting official business. Colloquial (informal) Arabic is the spoken language of the street. Both forms are used by the media, for business transactions, and in schools. Colloquial Arabic is widely used on television, which is very popular, and in the film industry. It is also used in songs and folk literature and popular poetry.

English and French are spoken among the more highly educated and by those who work in the tourism sector, where Italian and German are also heard.

The Coptic language developed from ancient Egyptian. It was spoken in Egypt until the 1100's but is now used only in ceremonies of the Coptic Church. Nubian is spoken by the Egyptians who live south of Aswan. Beja is the language of the nomads who live along the Egyptian-Sudanese border east of the Nile. Berber is spoken by the people of Siwa, an oasis of the Libyan Desert. Nubian and Beja are not written languages.

### **Religion**

Most Egyptians are Sunni Muslims. (Muslims are followers of Islam, a religion based on the teachings of the prophet Muhammad.) Coptic Christians are the second largest religious group. There are also small groups of Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Protestants. Egypt's cities are filled with mosques (Muslim houses of worship). Five times a day, the voice of the muezzin (prayer-caller) calls the faithful to prayer. Traditionally he did so from the mosque's tower, or minaret. But now the call is often amplified by a public-address system or broadcast by radio.

## **Education**

Egypt has two systems of education. One is public and the other is private. All levels of public education in Egypt are free. Five years of primary and three years of secondary school are required for all children. Three additional years of secondary school are needed for college or university. With over 200,000 students, Cairo University offers a wide range of studies. These include medicine, engineering, and law. The American University in Cairo is also a well-respected center of learning. Al-Azhar University in Cairo was established in the 900's. It is considered by many people to be the oldest university in the world. It was founded as a center for teaching Arabic literature and Islamic law and theology. It now includes technical subjects along with its traditional course of study.

One of Egypt's major challenges is its low level of literacy (the ability to read and write). Although eight years of education are required, girls and women tend to receive less education than boys and men. The government is working to enroll more children—both boys and girls—in primary school and some progress has been made in recent years.

## **Rural Life**

About half of Egypt's people live in the countryside. The rest live in cities, which are rapidly growing in population.

The country people, or fellahin, live in thousands of small villages. Each village has a mosque, a few shops, a religious school, and sometimes a church. The villages lie along the Nile River or near irrigation canals. The fellahin farm the land that they own or rent. They wear traditional dress. For a man, or fellah, this consists of an ankle-length cotton robe, called a galabia, and a skullcap or turban. The fellaha, the wife of the fellah, wears dresses with long sleeves and a black veil, which she sometimes uses to cover her face. On market days and other special occasions, the women wear earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. Both village men and women work in the fields. Children tend donkeys or water buffalo. And they herd sheep or goats, if the family is wealthy enough to own them. The staple foods are bread made from corn flour and a dish made of beans, called ful. Meat is usually reserved for special holidays.

## **City Life**

Life in Egyptian cities has been strongly influenced by modern European culture. There are broad, paved streets and well-tended parks. Major cities are linked to the national network of highways and railroads. Many government offices and the courts of justice are located in urban

centers. Most secondary schools and all universities are in cities. Many cities, particularly Cairo, are overcrowded and housing is in short supply.

Egyptian city-dwellers live in modern apartment buildings as well as crowded tenement districts. Or they live in private homes in the suburbs, an extension of the city. City dwellers dress mostly in Western-style clothing. However, traditional Islamic dress has become more common among women. If a man still wears the galabia, it is usually of a better quality than the one worn by the fellah.

In the cities, many adults return home from work for the main meal of the day. It is served at about two o'clock in the afternoon. The midday menu may include rice, vegetables, and lamb, broiled pigeons, fish, or poultry. Fruit is the most popular dessert. The meal usually ends with a tiny cup of strong, black Turkish coffee.

### **Sports and Recreation**

Soccer is the favorite sport of most Egyptians. Others include tennis and squash. Because of the temperate climate, swimming is also popular. The country was once well known for its long-distance swimmers, especially those who mastered swimming across the English Channel.

## **Land**

### **Land Regions**

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus called Egypt "the gift of the Nile." He was referring to the life-giving water and rich silt that the river carries from equatorial Africa to the desert of Egypt. Almost all of Egypt's people live on less than 5 percent of the land, on the fertile soil that borders the Nile River. Most of the rest of Egypt is desert inhabited largely by nomadic Bedouin.

Egypt consists of four geographical regions: the Nile River valley and its delta (the fan-shaped plain at its mouth); the Libyan, or Western, Desert in the west and south; the Arabian, or Eastern, Desert in the east; and the Sinai Peninsula. The Sinai Peninsula lies in southwest Asia. It is the site of Egypt's highest mountain, Gebel Katherina. Gebel Katherina rises to 8,651 feet (2,737 meters).

The Nile River valley is about 930 miles (1,500 kilometers) long. From the capital city of Cairo to the north, the valley merges with the fertile delta. The Arabian Desert is an extension of the Sahara. It consists of a plateau that slopes upward from the Nile to heights of roughly 2,000 feet (600 meters). The region is sparsely populated. It has a few oases. (An oasis is a small desert area that is fertile because it has a source of water.) The Sinai Peninsula is also part of the Arabian Desert.

The Libyan Desert is a great arid plain. Most of it lies below 1,000 feet (300 meters). The southern part of the Libyan Desert has no oases or settlements. To the north, the Qattara Depression covers about 7,000 square miles (18,100 square kilometers). It is 436 feet (133 meters) below sea level.

## **Rivers**

The Nile is the world's longest river. It travels over 3,000 miles (4,800 kilometers) through Africa before it enters Egypt. Then it flows northward through Egypt for over 900 miles (1448 kilometers) before it empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

In Upper, or southern, Egypt, the Nile River flows between high sandstone cliffs. The mammoth Aswan High Dam was opened in 1971. It doubled Egypt's power capacity and expanded the land used for farming by providing water for irrigation. From Aswan the Nile flows north to Cairo. Just below Cairo the river splits into two major branches, the Rosetta and the Damietta. This area is known as the Delta, or Lower Egypt.

## **The Suez Canal**

The canal links the Mediterranean Sea with the Gulf of Suez, an arm of the Red Sea. Because it shortens travel time between Europe and Asia, the canal is one of the world's chief commercial waterways. The canal and the Isthmus of Suez are the traditional boundary between Africa and Asia.

## **Climate**

Egypt has a generally warm, dry climate. Summers are hot. In the south, daytime temperatures may reach 107°F (42°C), but nights are cool. Winters are usually mild. Rainfall is limited and is heaviest on the Mediterranean coast.

## **Natural Resources**

Egypt has deposits of petroleum, natural gas, iron ore, phosphates, manganese, limestone, gypsum, talc, asbestos, lead, and zinc.

## **Vegetation and Animal Life**

Egypt's desert climate limits most vegetation to the Nile Valley and Delta and the oases. The most widespread native tree is the date palm. Others include the carob, tamarisk, and sycamore. The lack of forest and grazing areas limits wild animal life. But Egypt has foxes, jackals, boars, and hyenas. And crocodiles inhabit the Upper Nile. Egypt has more than 300 species of birds and 100 species of fish.

## **Economy**

Egypt's economy has several strong resources to draw upon. These include energy resources, including oil; income from the Suez Canal; and a profitable tourist industry. But for many years the country's economy performed well below potential. In 2004 the Egyptian government began to reduce the state's role in the economy. It sold some state firms to private investors and made it easier for private firms to invest. These and other factors helped the economy grow.

Many challenges remain, however. Higher growth is needed to provide jobs for the over 1 million Egyptians who enter the economy each year. Poverty is a problem, especially in rural areas. The government has made progress in reducing poverty among the poorest Egyptians. But 20 percent of Egyptians still fall below the poverty line. That means that they earn or consume less than they need to achieve adequate nutrition, shelter, medical care, and other necessities. Better jobs will require better education for Egypt's young people, especially women.

## **Services**

Service industries contribute over 50 percent of Egypt's yearly gross domestic product (GDP). (GDP is the total market value of all final goods and services produced in a country in one year.) Over half of Egypt's workers are engaged in service industries, including government and tourism.

### **Manufacturing**

Egypt's manufacturing sector contributes about one-third to GDP each year. It includes firms that produce textiles, food products, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, cement, metals, and light manufactures.

## **Agriculture**

The Nile Valley is one of the most intensively cultivated and productive farming regions in the world. Agriculture contributes less than 20 percent to GDP. But it employs about 30 percent of Egypt's workers. Cotton is the major export crop. Egypt is also an important producer of rice, wheat, corn, beans, fruits, and vegetables. Livestock raising includes cattle, water buffalo, sheep, and goats.

Historically, Egyptian farmers depended on the yearly flooding of the Nile Valley. This provided water for their crops. The Aswan High Dam and its reservoir, High Dam Lake (formerly Lake Nasser), provide a more regular source of water for irrigation. But at the same time, Egypt is losing agricultural land to its growing cities and to the sands of the desert. Egypt depends on imports for much of the food needed to feed its growing population.

## **Mining**

Mining is increasingly important to Egypt's economy. Crude oil and petroleum products are among the country's top exports. Egypt also produces natural gas, salt, phosphates, iron ore, and coal.

## **Energy**

Egypt relies mostly on fossil fuels, such as oil, to meet its energy needs. Its energy sector produces oil and natural gas. And the country is a rapidly growing supplier of liquefied natural gas, which is exported. Hydroelectric power is supplied by the Aswan High Dam.

## **Trade**

Egypt exports crude oil and petroleum products, cotton, textiles, metal products, and chemicals. Among its main export partners are the United States, Italy, Spain, Syria, France, Germany, and Saudi Arabia. Its major imports are machinery and equipment, foodstuffs, chemicals, wood products, and fuels. Its main import partners are the United States, Germany, China, France, Italy, and Saudi Arabia.

## **Transportation**

The Nile River and the Suez Canal are Egypt's major transportation arteries. The Suez Canal and Sumed Pipeline are important routes for Persian Gulf oil shipments. Egypt's railroad system is state controlled. Egyptair, the state-owned airline, flies locally and abroad.

## **Communication**

Egypt's large telephone system was upgraded in the 1990's. It offers land-based as well as cellular service. There are several million Internet users.

## **Major Cities**

Cairo (Al-Qahirah, in Arabic) is Egypt's capital and largest city. It is also a major commercial and cultural center. With nearly 7 million people, it is the largest city in Africa.

Alexandria, with over 3 million people, is Egypt's second largest city. It is a busy port on the Mediterranean Sea. Founded by Alexander the Great in the 300's B.C., it was long a cultural center of the Mediterranean region. It was famed in ancient times for its Pharos, or lighthouse, and for its great library. Opened in 2002, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina is a modern replica of that library. It also features museums and a planetarium.

Giza is a suburb of Cairo. It is the site of Cairo University. The Great Pyramid and the statue of the Sphinx sit on the Plateau of Giza. (The pyramids served as tombs for the early Egyptian kings.)

Port Said is one of Egypt's principal ports. It is located at the northern (Mediterranean) end of the Suez Canal.

The ancient city of Luxor is one of the country's major tourist attractions. Its historical sites include the Temple of Luxor, the Temple of Karnak, and the Valley of the Kings.

## **Cultural Heritage**

Arabic literature traces its roots to the A.D. 500's. Poetry, novels, and plays are the offshoots of this rich legacy. From the mid-1800's to the present, Arabic literature interacted with Western influences. Muhammad Husayn Haykal wrote one of the earliest novels in modern Arabic, *Zaynab* (1914). One of the first Egyptian writers to be known outside of the Middle East was

Taha Hussein. He wrote *Al-Ayyam* (1929-30), which was translated into English in 1943 as *The Stream of Days*. The novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim is known as the father of modern Arabic drama.

Other famous modern Egyptian writers include the playwright and short story writer Yusuf Idris and the poet Salah Abd al-Sabur. The novelist Naguib Mahfouz was the first Arab author to win (1988) the Nobel Prize for literature. His works, most notably the *Cairo Trilogy* (1956-57), have been translated into hundreds of languages.

Egypt is also one of the region's main filmmaking and publishing centers.

## **Government**

The constitution was amended in 2005 to allow the president to be elected by popular vote. The president serves a 6-year term. There are no limits to the number of terms the president may serve. The legislature consists of the People's Assembly and the Advisory Council. The Supreme Constitutional Court heads the judiciary.

## **History**

### **Ancient Egypt**

There is disagreement about early Egyptian dates. But it is thought that Egypt came into being about 3200 B.C. At that time a king named Menes united Egypt. Some of the most impressive structures known were built before 2200 B.C. The Great Pyramid was constructed by King Khufu, or Cheops, perhaps about 2600 B.C.

The Hyksos were an eastern people about whom little is known. Around 1675 B.C., they conquered Egypt, bringing the first horses and chariots ever seen in Egypt. By about 1500 B.C. the Egyptians had driven the invaders out.

About 1375 B.C., Amenhotep IV, later Akhenaten, became king of Egypt. He abolished the worship of the many ancient Egyptian gods. He introduced the worship of only one god. But after Akhenaten's death the believers in the old gods regained power, and Akhenaten's ways were discarded. Ramses II (1292-1225 B.C.) is best known for his monuments and temples at Karnak and for the temple he carved out of the cliffs on the bank of the Nile at Abu Simbel.

Around 1000 B.C., Egyptian power declined. Between this time and 331 B.C., Egypt was ruled in turn by the Libyans, Nubians, Assyrians, and Persians. In 331 B.C., Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great. On Alexander's death one of his generals became ruler of Egypt, as Ptolemy I. The dynasty (ruling family) of the Ptolemies ended in 30 B.C. Cleopatra was the last of the Ptolemies. She was famous for her love for the Roman Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony). When the Romans defeated her armies, she took her own life. Egypt then became a Roman province.

For the next 670 years Egypt had a succession of rulers appointed by Roman and Byzantine emperors. The Persians also ruled it briefly.

### **The Arab Conquest: Muslim Egypt**

In A.D. 640, Muslims came from the Arabian Peninsula and conquered Egypt. They founded the city of Cairo in 969 and made it their capital. One of the most famous of the rulers of Egypt in this era was Saladin (Salah El Dine). He fought the Christian Crusaders at the end of the 1000's.

### **Mameluk and Turkish Rule**

Egypt was ruled by the Mameluks from 1250 until 1517. That year it came under the domination of the Ottoman Turks. In 1798 the French general Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt. His expedition aroused European interest in Egypt. And it led to the discovery of the Rosetta stone, which provided a long-sought key to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.

Napoleon's troops were forced to withdraw from Egypt in 1801 by British and Turkish forces. In 1805, Mehemet Ali was made viceroy, or royal governor, of Egypt by the Ottoman sultan. Seizing power for himself, Mehemet Ali ruled until 1848. He undertook a remarkable program of reforms, modernization, and military conquest.

### **British Colonization**

Egypt's prosperity declined under Mehemet Ali's hereditary successors. They borrowed large sums of money from the British and French. In 1875 the British government bought Egypt's shares in the Suez Canal. The canal had been built by the French and opened in 1869. To collect their debts, the British and French set up a commission to oversee Egyptian finances. A nationalist revolt in 1881-82 was put down by British troops, who occupied the country. In 1914, Egypt was officially declared a British protectorate.

Britain granted Egypt independence in 1922. But during World War II (1939-45), Egypt and the Suez Canal served as vital links in Britain's empire and as the gateway to India.

### **The 1952 Revolution: Nasser**

After World War II, discontent and resistance to the British colonizers grew. The Egyptians resented Britain's continued control of the Suez Canal. The government of King Farouk, who had come to the throne in 1936, was corrupt and inefficient. The military blamed the government for losing a 1948-49 war with the new nation of Israel. In 1952 a group of army officers began a revolt that overthrew the king, and in 1953, they set up a republic. A leader of the revolution, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, became Egypt's president in 1956.

In 1956, Nasser nationalized (took state control of) the Suez Canal. When Israel was denied use of the canal, its forces attacked. They occupied most of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. At the same time, British and French troops landed in the canal area. After the United

Nations (UN) intervened, the three nations withdrew. The support of the United States for the UN intervention earned appreciation for the United States in Egypt.

Arab unity was one of Nasser's main goals, and in 1958 he merged Egypt with Syria in a federation called the United Arab Republic. But Syria withdrew in 1961 because of political differences. (Nasser also worked, along with Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, and Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia, to get countries that were not aligned with the United States or the Soviet Union to form a separate, nonaligned movement. They hoped it would be powerful enough to have its interests promoted by the United Nations.)

The removal of UN forces in the Sinai at Egypt's request and Egypt's closing of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli ships led to war with Israel in 1967. Israel again invaded the Sinai, reaching the Suez Canal itself, and retook the Gaza Strip.

### **Sadat: War and Peace**

In 1970, Nasser died and was succeeded as president by Anwar el-Sadat. In 1971, Egypt changed its name to the Arab Republic of Egypt. Determined to regain the lost Sinai, Sadat, in 1973, launched an attack on Israeli positions on the east bank of the canal. Following a cease-fire, UN forces were again stationed in the area. Israel withdrew from the canal, which was reopened to shipping in 1975. Israel was allowed to use the canal for nonmilitary cargoes.

In 1977, Sadat visited Israel to discuss the question of peace in the region. His historic journey led to a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Israel agreed to a gradual withdrawal of its forces from the Sinai Peninsula. A formal peace treaty was signed in 1979.

### **Mubarak as President**

In 1981, Sadat was assassinated by members of a group that opposed his peace policies. His successor as president, Hosni Mubarak, supported the peace treaty. The last Israeli forces withdrew from the Sinai in 1982, and the area was returned to Egypt.

Mubarak was re-elected several times. As president, he restored Egypt to its position as one of the leaders of the Arab world. Egypt was formally welcomed back into the Arab League in 1989. This was ten years after it had been suspended for signing the peace treaty with Israel. During the Persian Gulf War (1990-91), Egypt provided one of the largest forces to the U.S.-led military coalition against Iraq.

In 2005, the People's Assembly amended Egypt's constitution to allow multiple candidates to run for president. In September 2005, Mubarak was re-elected to a fifth term as president.

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