

The development of the Egyptian society through the history

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Abstract— Egypt is the one of the oldest and strongest civilization, if not the oldest one. She was the world leader in all the fields, as medicine and agriculture, attracting immigrants from around the world, creating the Egyptian identity from mixed races, sharing the same culture, traditions, values and beliefs. Egypt had passed through difficult times, as it seemed to magnetize several colonists, yet it always influence other cultures more than she gets affected. It holds on to its identity, which had developed over the time, till it reached a stage of floundering in the last century. In this paper, we will study the Egyptian history, analyze it, trying to understand our societies' past.

Keywords: History, Egypt, society, development, ancient, Islamic, contemporary.

1 INTRODUCTION

EGYPT has the most strategic location centered between Europe, Asia, and Africa. It has a documented history of 5000 years that obviously affected the surrounding civilizations. Since the Islamic history, it has been the leader in the political matter, trading, education, architecture and television. Although in the last few years this image started to change. Goldschmidt, 2008 [1]

The People: Egyptians are strong, patient, generous, friendly and funny. Family is the one most important thing to them, they are loving, devoted and caring for one another. They are a proud nation, with three identities, Muslim, Arab and Egyptian. As they share almost the same values, culture and historical struggles with the European colonization and the American intervention. Egypt as the trading center, became a home to temporary and permanent immigrants that has been assimilated into local people, making Egypt today a mixture of Nubians, Libyans, Persians, Syrians, Romans, Greeks, Italians, Armenians, Circassians, Macedonians, Arabs and Turks. Goldschmidt, 2008 [1]

Language and Religion: The Ancient Egyptian language survived through Christians in the religious services. Modern Egypt speaks Arabic, as the language of the Islamic religion. Egypt gave up all the religious beliefs of pharaohs for the Coptic Christianity, which has been given away gradually with no force to Islam. Egyptians no matter their religion, celebrate some holidays together like the spring holiday -Shamm al-Nasim-, and the festivals of irrigation and harvest as a sign of Egypt's unity. Goldschmidt, 2008 [1]

Economy: Agriculture was the base of economy in Egypt through most of the history, by exported cereal grains. Cotton became the main export in late 19th century, then tobacco, and sugar. In the late 20th century the arable land has shrunk comparing to the population. Egypt recently has turned to industry and services, like transportation, construction, oil and

natural gas extraction. Tourism industry employs millions of Egyptians, but instability and terrorism disrupted the international tourism. Goldschmidt, 2008 [1]

▪ **Geography:** Egypt can be divided into five sections, differing in characteristics: the Nile river valley, the Nile delta, the Western desert, the Eastern desert, and the Sinai Peninsula (Fig. 1).

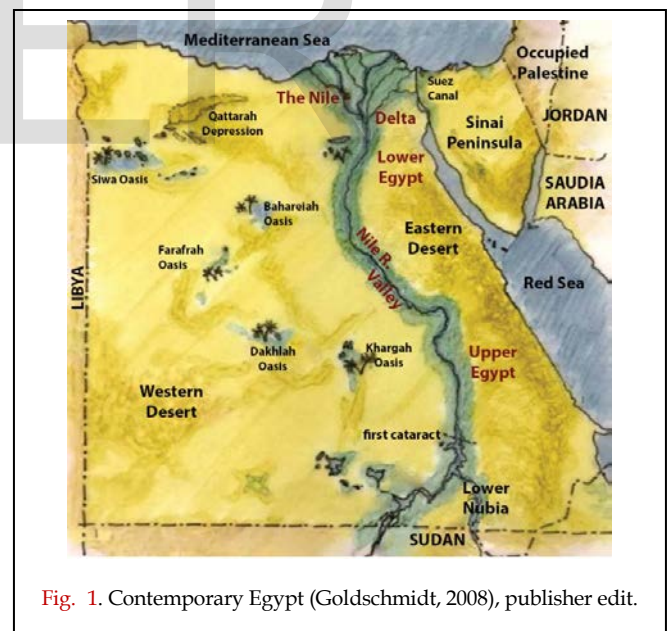


Fig. 1. Contemporary Egypt (Goldschmidt, 2008), publisher edit.

1. The Nile Valley holds the world's longest River, not the biggest in volume. It enters Egypt from the south. The flood inundated the agricultural lands, leaving behind a layer of fertilized mud for the next harvests. Egyptian built dams and basins, channels to store the river waters. The water amount differed from one year to another. It swept away houses if increased, left the land hard and cracked if decreased, unable to grow the crops.
2. The Nile Delta lies in northern Egypt, where the Nile pours into the Mediterranean Sea. It has more than half of the

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Egyptian farmland, intensely cultivated, it includes thousands of villages and cities.

3. The Deserts are more than two-thirds of Egypt's area, but they hold a tiny percentage of the population, in the five inhabited oases depending on spring water: Siwa, Farafra, Bahriya, Dakhla, and Kharga. The uninhabited Qattara Depression lies in the northwest. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

To understand the characteristics of the people, and how the Egyptian culture was formed, we need to know what happened along the history, studying the important events and how did the society respond.

2 THE PHARAONIC AND ROMAN PERIOD

2.1 The Historical Outline (Up To C.A. 640 A.D.)

Egyptian chronology is far from exact, so the dating system was related to the Greek and Persian calendars depending on the mentioned solar eclipse in the Egyptian papyrus and the correspondences.

▪ Pre-dynastic Period (Late 6th millennium-3100 B.C.)

Egyptians farmed, baked, sailed boats, founded cities, sat up a political system and started writing. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#) And the Unification of Egypt was achieved by the King of Upper Egypt 'Menes' around 3200 to 3000 B.C. He made Egypt the first national organization. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

▪ Archaic Period 'The Dynasties Start' (3100-2650 B.C.)

The Pharaoh became the absolute ruler and the army served him, but Egyptians were not a warlike race, they were preoccupied more with keeping internal order. The hieroglyphic scripts were carved on stone, wood or papyrus. Art and architecture made great advances. Brick was the main building material. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

▪ The Old Kingdom (2650-2150 B.C.) 'The Pyramids'

They were known in the ancient world for their geometry, mathematics, medicine, and bodies' mummification. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#) and building pyramids became a drain on the resources.

▪ First Intermediate Period (2150-2040 B.C.)

The central government had weakened and the provinces struggled for individually, while the people suffered from food shortages. [Watts et al., 1998, \[3\]](#) Semitic peoples entered Egypt from Asia, seeking refuge and trading opportunities, and they overrun the delta. Yet Egypt extended her power into the surrounding lands. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

▪ The Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 B.C.)

One of the great periods of Egyptian art and literature. Egypt had conquered Lower Nubia, [Watts et al., 1998, \[3\]](#) and Mentuhotep I, expelled the Asians from the delta. Nubia and Palestine, became a source of slaves for wealthy Egyptians. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

▪ Second Intermediate Period (1640-1550 B.C.)

The Palestinian Asiatic Hyksos controlled most of Egypt, adopting the Egyptian title of pharaoh, till Ahmose expelled them. [Watts et al., 1998, \[3\]](#) It was a great blow to the Egyptian self-satisfaction, as they had regarded themselves as a race apart, superior to all, but they realized that the peoples of western Asia were not to be despised. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

▪ New Kingdom 'The Empire' (1550 - 1070 B.C.)

Egypt reconquered Nubia ([Fig. 2](#)), and became the world first empire, but Libyan and Mediterranean invasions forced Egypt to withdraw from Palestine and Nubia. Egyptians often blame invaders for the misfortunes, but it was them who ended the New Kingdom. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#) Yet despite the corruption of nobles and priests, Egypt had enjoyed wealth and luxury.

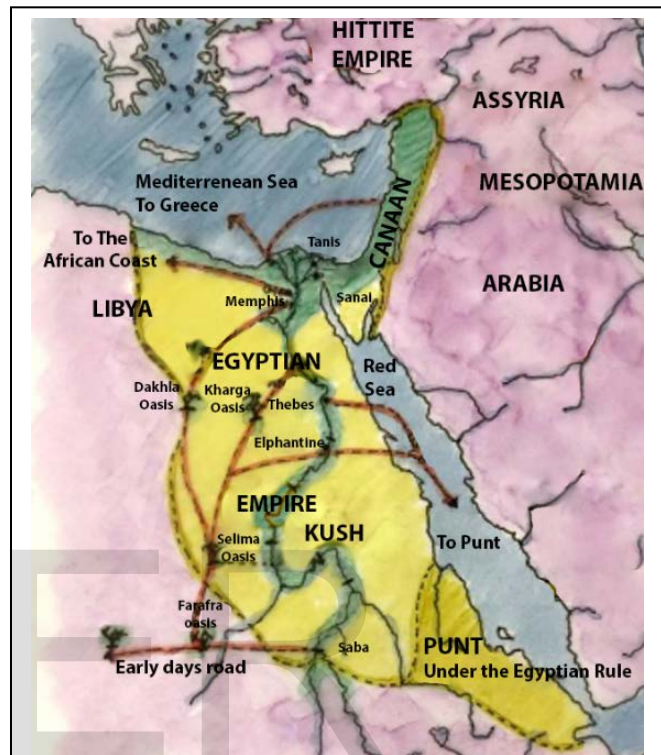


Fig. 2. The Egyptian Empire, 15th century B.C. [Breasted, Ancient Times, 1916 \[8\]](#), publisher edit.

▪ Third Intermediate Period (1070-712 B.C.)

Egypt was divided to the Nile Delta dynasty, and the Thebes' priests of Amun. [Watts et al., 1998, \[3\]](#) It faced invasions by Libyans, Nubians, Assyrians and Babylonians. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#) It was recovered as an independent nation and the world's leading civilization. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

▪ The Late Period 'Persian Rule' (7th-4th Century B.C.)

Persians invaded Egypt, ruled through an important period that asserted the Egyptian identity in art and architecture. Cambyses, became a pharaoh, kept the Egyptian rituals, built temples, strengthened the economy and improved agriculture, but Darius made Egypt a Persian province.

Egypt overthrew Persians away, but they reconquered again, till the Alexander the Great -who claimed Amun to be his father- freed Egypt, and created port Alexandria, that linked Egypt with the Mediterranean world. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

▪ Ptolemaic Period (332 - 30 B.C.)

Alexander died and his friend Ptolemy declared himself king. Ptolemies were resented, for not marrying Egyptians, nor speaking their language and imposing high taxes. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#) Their administration, and army, were com-

posed of Greeks and Macedonians, who also came to Egypt for scientific investigations, as Alexandria's Library contained 700,000 books, in Greek, which was also spoken by educated Egyptians. Jameson, 2008 [2] Native rebellions and Seleucids attacks, were prevented by the Roman intervention, till Cleopatra VII, who got rid of her two brothers, and got the support of Caesar then Antony to become the Pharaoh, yet she lost Egypt to Octavian. Jameson, 2008 [2]

- **Roman and Byzantine Empire (30 B.C.-640 A.D.)**

Egypt was a part of the Roman Empire (Fig. 3), but it was exploited for the benefit of Rome, as one-third of Egypt's annual grain harvest fed the whole Empire, though sometimes the Nile failed inundation, resulting misery and revolt. Egyptians were persecuted and murdered for converting to Christianity, thus they took refuge in the desert monasteries. Constantine the Great, adopted Christianity, and it became the predominant religion, yet those who still worshipped the ancient gods went in terror of Christian monks. Though emperors confirmed only Trinity, Egyptians asserted Monophysism calling themselves Copts. Jameson, 2008 [2]

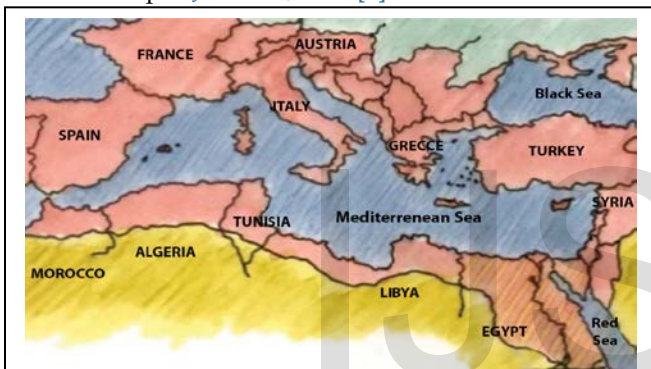


Fig. 3. Egypt as a part of the Roman Empire, 69 A.D. Ancient World Mapping Center 2011 [9], publisher edit.

2.2 Who Were the Ancient Egyptians?

There were much interaction between Egypt, Nubia, and southwest Asia, by migrations, inter-marriage and trading, so they could not be classified by "race" because there is no observable genetic characteristics, except that, they spoke one language and adapted culturally and physically to this unique environment.

Foreign men were mercenaries and policemen, females worked as weavers or house servants, other people worked as craftsmen, or in institutions, as royal state, or temple estates, or even owned a private land, but they paid taxes and served some time for the royal projects. Some women could read and write, some were priestesses, others held office related to weaving, medicine, singing and dancing.

Prisoners of war and criminals were slaves, sold and bought, but they had rights as marriage and ownership. Watts et al., 1998, [3]

- **Social Hierarchy**

The lowest class were farmers, as they were just serfs with no land, then came bakers, brewers, butchers, clothiers, cobblers, miners and quarrymen, herders, hunters and fishers, then the craftsmen, such as builders, carpenters and cabinet-makers,

pottery, sculptors, painters, jewelers, and metalworkers. The scribes, enjoyed higher status, becoming local governors, departmental ministers, or diplomats, even higher, were tradesmen, priests, soldiers, and government officials. At the top of the non-royal hierarchy were the pharaoh's viziers, and at the apex was the royal family. Bell, 2005 [4]

- **The Religion**

Ancient Egyptians were not preoccupied with death. In reality, they were obsessed with life, thus they built temples and pyramids to extend the existence of their deceased rulers by preserving their bodies, so they could still take care of them in their afterlife. As the religious system included a multitude of gods who controlled every aspect of life and afterlife, and the human pharaoh is the connection between the mortal and the eternal, as the pharaoh alone could worship the gods, to avoid a low Nile and bring a beneficent flood and a bountiful harvest. Goldschmidt, 2008 [1]

3 THE ISLAMIC AND KHDIVE PERIOD

3.1 The Historical Outline (640-1879 C.E.)

This period had a major influence on the architecture of the Egyptian society and the construction of its identity.

- **Arab Conquest, (640- 969 A.D.)**

Arabs conquered Egypt, married Egyptians, and only Muslims could join the army or high administration ranks. They cared for arts and sciences, and Arabic became the official language. Jameson, 2008 [2]

- **Early Arab (Umayyad rule)**

Egypt was ruled by governors appointed by the caliphs in Baghdad (Fig 4), The Coptic resistance against the Arab rule increased, along with the government taxes and demands. Goldschmidt, 2008 [1]

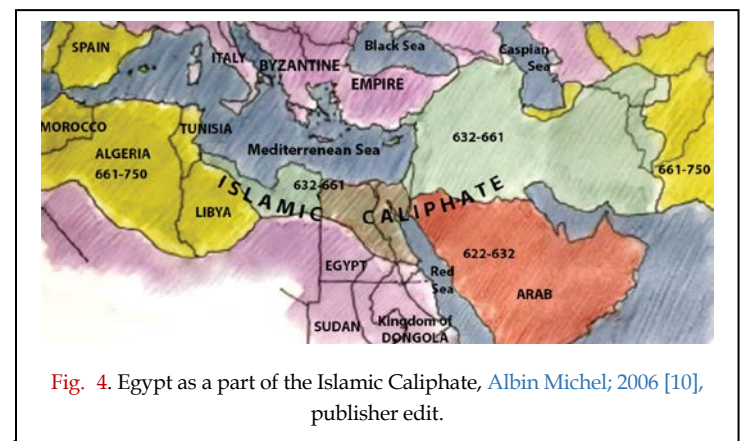


Fig. 4. Egypt as a part of the Islamic Caliphate, Albin Michel; 2006 [10], publisher edit.

The internal conflicts reduced the Abbasid Empire, until the Turkish Ahmad Ibn Tulun - son of a slave- founded 'The Tulunid' dynasty and became Egypt's independent ruler, he extended his rule, but failed to move the caliphate to Egypt. His son wasted their inheritance, and Egypt suffered invasions, till Muhammad Ibn Tughj became 'The Ikhshidid' governor, but low Nile floods brought famine. Goldschmidt, 2008 [1]

- **The Fatimid Rule (969-1171)**

The Fatimid Shia'a, defeated Kafur's soldiers, then they built

the Capital Cairo -the largest city in the Muslim world-. They were devoted to arts, architecture and they were tolerant with Copts and Jews. The Abbasid Caliphate and the Seljuk Turks, faced the foe of Crusaders, who were driven out by Nur-ed-din and his nephew Salah-ed-din. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

▪ **The Ayyubids rule and the Crusades (1171-1250 A.D.)**

Salah-ed-din restored the Sunni Islam, and stretched the Muslim state from Tunisia to the recaptured Jerusalem. And to defend Egypt against Crusaders, the Ayyubids built a corps of Turkish slave-soldiers called The Mamluks, who gained power and controlled Egypt. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

▪ **The Mamluks Rule (1250- 1517 A.D.)**

The second Turkish slave dynasty, after the Tulunids, but this time, they spoke Arabic, and shared the same values.

- **The Bahri Mamluks** did not succeed the throne, they appointed who made a reputation on the battlefields. Egyptians' lives were centered on religion. Christians and Jews were protected, but could gain no wealth or power, yet the Military officers were housed in Roda Island, and received and lands high salaries. Egypt was the richest Muslim state, till the plague outbreak.

- **Many Circassian Mamluks** were incompetent or corrupted, but some were capable sultans, as Qait Bey, who fended off the Ottoman Turks. The economic state deteriorated due to excessive taxation on peasants and merchants, and losing the spice trade. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

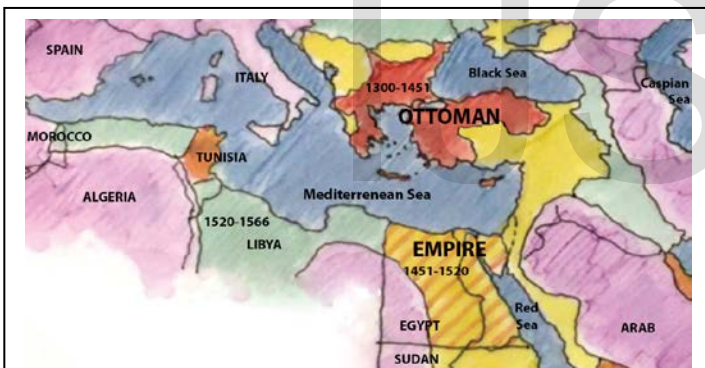


Fig. 5. Egypt as a part of the The Ottoman Empire, [Palmira Brummett, Mapping the Ottomans, 2015 \[11\]](#), publisher edit.

▪ **The Ottoman Turks Rule (1517-1798 A.D.)**

The Ottomans ([Fig. 5](#)), didn't impose their language, so the Turks would be distinct from the native Egyptians as the superior race. The Mamluks maintained governors, and kept importing slaves to gain power and restore the Empire. The Turkish rule achieved tranquillity, but not prosperity nor well-being of the people. As Egypt lost its trade and was barely self-supporting in food. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

▪ **Starts of the European Intervention (1798-1801A.D.)**

The well-armed French soldiers defeated the sword-wielding Mamluks. Napoléon sat up a diwan to administrate the provinces, and sent scholars to explore Egypt, hiding the main aim of conquest, but locals were offended by the French's drinking and accosting local women. A rebellion was started against them. The Anglo-Ottoman army forced the French to leave, followed by the British, and the Ottomans stayed to restore

order. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

▪ **Mohammed Ali (1805-1849) and His Reforms**

The Albanian, Mohammed Ali ruled Egypt by a coup, consolidated his position by the Mameluks massacre and he was recognised by the Ottoman Sultan as Pasha. He subjected central Arabia, Sudan, the eastern Red Sea coast, Syria and Anatolia under Egyptian rule ([Fig. 6](#)). The Ottoman Empire, Prussia, Britain and France, forced him to withdraw from Anatolia, and Syria, in return for inheriting Egypt. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#) He re-organised the government on European lines, he managed to increase the cultivated area, but his idea of industrial Egypt failed, and all the productivity was not for the people, but to support the army. However, He left Egypt free from debts, and started modernizing Egypt. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

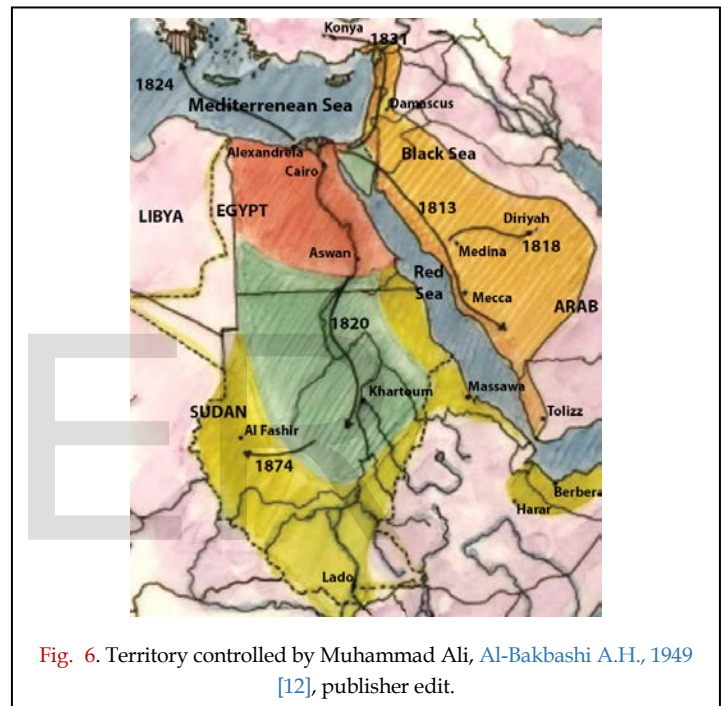


Fig. 6. Territory controlled by Muhammad Ali, [Al-Bakbashi A.H., 1949 \[12\]](#), publisher edit.

▪ **Khedive Ismail (1863-1879 A.D.)**

Cotton industry thrived the economy and attracted bankers and moneylenders to Egypt. Ismail pasha invested in schools, bridges, canals and railroads, and he inaugurated the Suez Canal. But these changes benefited only the small upper class, and most Egyptians were still living in abject poverty. He also borrowed money for reforms, but instead, he built palaces, bribed the Ottomans for the title of khedive, causing the debt to skyrocket, thus, he sold the government share of the Suez Canal Company to Britain, and allowed the British and French dual financial control over Egypt's revenues and expenditures to protect their bondholders. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

3.2 What Have Affected the Egyptian Society?

▪ **The Religion**

Most of the Egyptians converted to Islam, believing in the existence of angels, prophets, sacred scriptures and the Day of Judgment, committing to the Five Pillars, which are witnessing that Allah is the only god and Mohammed is his messenger, the five daily prayers, fasting the month of Ramadan, pay-

ing a fixed share of one's wealth for the needy, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

▪ **Social Hierarchy**

All the rulers, though foreigners, respected and followed the community's values as privacy, and separating the genders, but the Egyptian citizen always came second to either a Mamluk slave, or an Ottoman immigrant, turning the Egyptians to be the illiterate, poor farmers, who were treated as if they were the slaves of their own country.

Women also became a second degree citizen, after men, they were less educated, and their job was to raise the children and prepare the house, that culture were exported from outside, and not even related to Islam.

▪ **The Egyptian currency**

In Ottoman Egypt the standard coin was the silver para, 40 of which made the main unit of currency, one piaster. Money was backed with gold and silver until 1885, Egypt based its currency on only gold, each pound containing 8.5 grams of the finest gold.

4 COLONIZATION AND INDEPENDENCE

4.1 The Historical Outline (1879-2018 A.D.)

The last period that formed our present and structured our current situation.

▪ **British Control of Egypt (1880-1922 A.D.)**

- Britain postponed the withdrawal from Egypt, Cromer was the virtual ruler and the Khedive had no real power, yet the Aswan Dam was completed, the agricultural area increased, and peasants had the elementary rights of free men, but even Educated Egyptians, were banned from the administration and took firm measures against agitations. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

- **The First World War:** Britain declared Egypt a British Protectorate, ending the Turks nominal authority, but Egyptians called for independence. The British partially agreed, and Egypt was ruled by King Fouad, with Britain's interventions. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

▪ **Negotiations for the Independence (1923-1936 A.D.)**

- The Anglo-Egyptian treaty agreed on the independence, but with a military alliance in any international threat.

- **The Second World War:** Egypt co-operated with Britain and declared war on Germany and Japan, only to attend the Peace Conference and become one of the United Nations members, seeking the international support for the British withdrawal. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)

▪ **Egypt Becomes an Independent Republic.**

- **King Farouk** was forced to abdicate after the free officers' coup, the British left for President **Nasser** to rule Egypt as an independent republic ([Fig. 7](#)), and after about 2,500 years of rule by Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, Circassians, Albanians and Britons, Egypt was at last ruled once more by Egyptians. Nasser controlled the government and appointed all ministers. Israel invaded Sinai, Britain and France introverted, yet the United Nations, pressured the three invaders to withdraw. But Nasser had wasted his forces in unnecessary wars, thus, Egypt lost Sinai. [Jameson, 2008 \[2\]](#)



Fig. 7. Egypt among the Arab world, Philippe Rekaecwicz, 1994 [13], publisher edit

▪ **From Al- Sadat till the end of Mubarak's era**

- **Al-Sadat** had spent 8-9\$ billion to re-build his forces, yet Washington ignored his notification of the Arab-Israel war. Syria and Egypt attacked the occupied territories, and Egypt crossed the canal and pierced the Bar-Lev Line. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

- **Peace with Israel:** Egypt and Israel accepted the Soviet-American invitation to Geneva peace conference, and all forces were separated. Israel agreed to evacuate Sinai, for full diplomatic relations with Egypt, the Arabs offered Al-Sadat 2\$ billion, not to sign the treaty, for not including Palestine, but he refused.

Al-Sadat jailed about 1,500 opponents, religious and intellectual leaders. He was assassinated, leaving a country at peace with Israel, but not with its neighbors, nor itself. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

- **Mubarak** ruled with no vice president, focused on the socio-economic problems and freed most leaders, except the Islamists, who could seize control. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#) January 2011, a massive Revolution against him erupted, pressuring his overthrow, thus, Omar Suleiman was appointed the first vice-president, and the military announced Mubarak's forced resignation, moreover, the Egyptian court sentenced him to life imprisonment, for corruption, embezzlement, abuse of power and killing the protesters, but the Cassation Court ordered several retrials.

▪ **After the Egyptian revolution in January 2011**

- **Mohamed Morsi** was Egypt's first democratically elected civil president, he named Abdel Fattah El-Sisi the new defense minister and declared drafting a new constitution, but liberals and secular groups walked out of the Constituent Assembly, which led to violence throughout Egypt, and he left after protesters broke through the presidential palace. [Takayuki, 2017 \[5\]](#) The Muslim Brotherhood protested against the military coup, but they were crushed in the August 2013 Rabaa massacre, and Morsi sought the death penalty for various crimes, a move denounced by the Amnesty International as a charade based on null procedures. However, he is still currently imprisoned.

- **Abdel Fattah El-Sisi** retired to run for presidency and won. The military had unchecked power, protests were banned and he imprisoned approximately 40,000 people, and sentenced 529 members of the Muslim Brotherhood to death, since Morsi's overthrow, thus, many have labeled him the Egyptian dictator. However, he initiated the new Suez Canal, and started building a new capital city.

4.2 Major Changes That Influenced the Contemporary Society

▪ Socialism and the agriculture reforms:

Nasser had nationalized private Companies, redistributed the agricultural lands between landless peasants, and the state showed interest in the low income society, for the first time along the Egyptian history. Mubarak privatized most businesses and agricultural lands, and unemployment became rampant, forcing skilled Egyptians to immigrate to the oil-exporting Arab countries. [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#)

▪ Social changes

Under Nasser's rule, the military started accepting not only pashas' sons, but also secondary-school graduates. The school fees were abolished, and the social insurance program was set up for widows, orphans, disabled and aged people. [Selim, 2015 \[6\]](#) The population increased rapidly. The Egyptian social structure had changed, as they couldn't afford apartments, thus, the number of delayed or ended marriages increased. The economic and social problems predict no future for youth in middle and lower classes, due to the huge gap between the community classes, corruption, injustice, and lack of integrity. [Emad-EL-Den , 2003 \[7\]](#)

▪ The Egyptian currency

The National Bank of Egypt began issuing paper money in 1898, and with World War I, the currency was no longer redeemable with gold, and Egypt was on a sterling exchange system. It managed its own currency in 1949, and the Egyptian pound value had fallen from 4.20\$ since, to 16 cents in 2003, [Goldschmidt, 2008 \[1\]](#) it kept decreasing with the floating moves, till it reached about 6.95\$ in 2013, and 17.80\$ in 2018.

5 CONCLUSION

Egyptians are strong and patient, they suffered a lot from invasions, colonists and dictator leaders, since pharaonic times. They hold out through unbearable situations and suppressions. However they turned to be a friendly, kind society. But, some became angry, and the number of immigrants increased, they even try to have another nationality to insure their kids' future or to guarantee safety in their own country, as Egyptian citizens, if not from the sovereign entities, or the wealthy community, they have no value, as if their lives do not even matter. They started preferring the foreign life type, even if not suitable, and their identity became floundering, which clearly can be seen in the community.

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