

DEREK HOPWOOD

EGYPT

POLITICS AND SOCIETY 1945-90



THIRD EDITION

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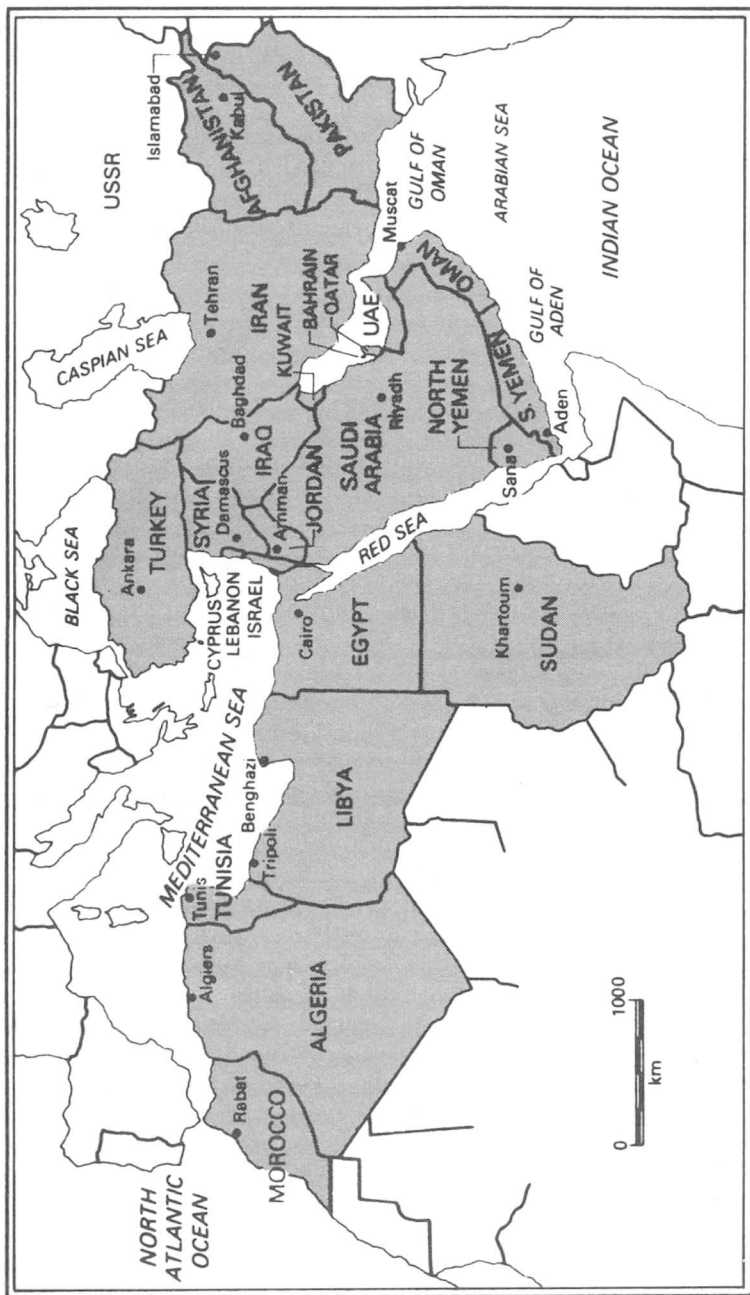
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Contents

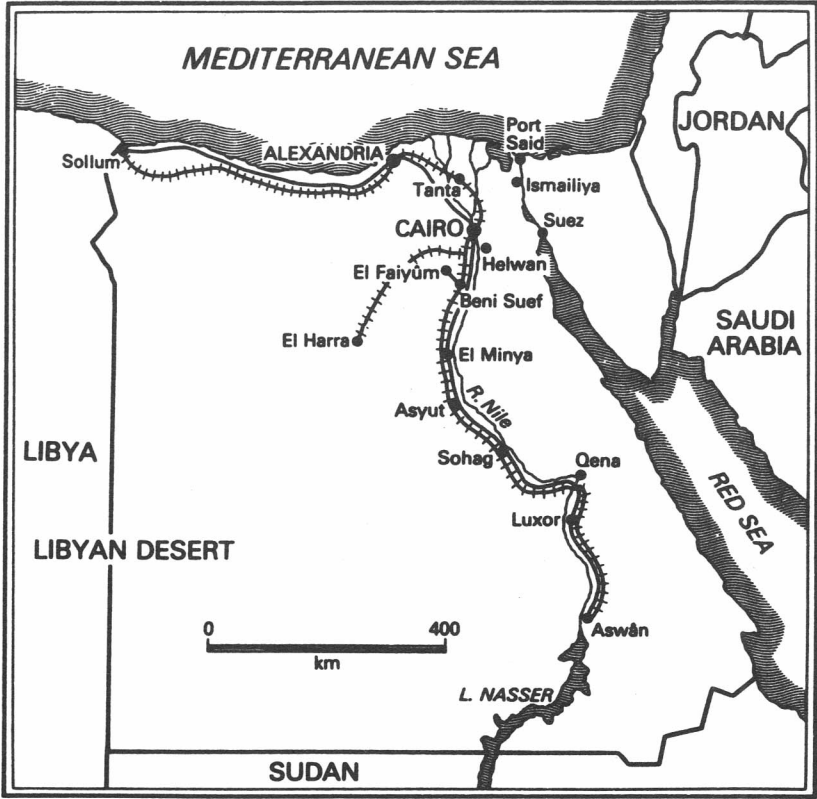
List of Maps	<i>page</i> viii
Maps	ix-xii
Preface to the Third Edition	xiii
1 Egypt and the Egyptians	1
2 The End of the Old Regime: 1945–1952	20
3 The First Years of the New Government: 1952–1956	34
4 The Unfinished Revolution: 1956–1970	58
5 Nasser's Ideology	84
6 Sadat's Revolution of Rectification	105
7 The Search for Economic Progress	122
8 Education and the Growth of Culture	136
9 The Life of the People	161
10 Mubarak's Middle Way	183
11 Conclusion	195
Notes	198
Bibliography	199
Index	203

List of Maps

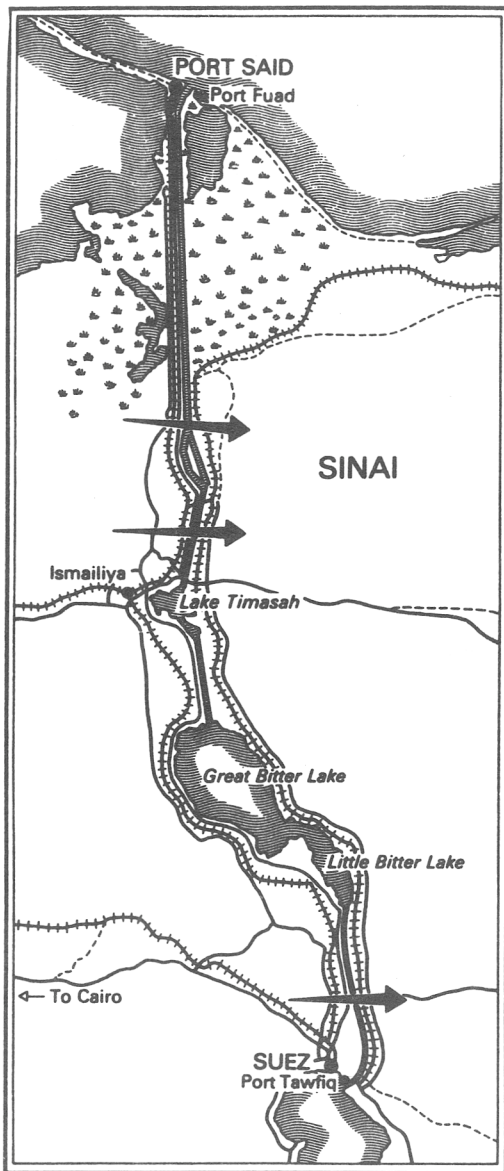
Map 1	Egypt's neighbours	ix
Map 2	Egypt	x
Map 3	The Suez Canal	xi
Map 4	Areas occupied by Israel after the 1967 war	xii



Map 1 Egypt's neighbours



Map 2 Egypt



Map 3 The Suez Canal (arrows denote the first Egyptian crossings in October 1973).



Map 4 Areas occupied by Israel after the 1967 war: Egypt's 'setback'.

Preface to the Third Edition

It is surely legitimate to ask why an outsider should write about Egypt. An Egyptian must by definition know more about his own society and he would be able to write one kind of book, an authoritative picture from the inside. There is also room, I believe, for the outsider's point of view, a view possibly not accepted or even recognised by the Egyptian, which should try to interpret what the observer sees with a sympathy and understanding which do not blind him to faults and short-comings. The problem for the British writer attempting such a study is to clear away the legacy of the Anglo-Egyptian imperial relationship, to grasp what British domination meant to the Egyptian and to understand how he tried to emerge from this shadow. This can on occasions be a sobering experience.

The British came and went in Egypt and they distorted the course of politics and society for over seventy years. The Egyptians are a forgiving and a tolerant people and, politics aside, welcome the stranger in their midst. This book could not have been written without the help, perhaps unconsciously given, of innumerable Egyptian friends and colleagues. I have also been fortunate enough to visit Egypt regularly since 1959 and have been offered endless hospitality. I have benefited from talking to Egyptian and other colleagues and students in Oxford and elsewhere and from listening to them lecturing, discussing and arguing or just conversing. I would mention a few of the many: Roger Owen, Robert Mabro, Nazih Ayubi, Samir Radwan, Muhammad Wahby, Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab and especially Mustafa Badawi a stimulating companion in Egypt and Oxford, and George Scanlon, a tireless host and a fund of knowledge in Cairo. Their views, written and spoken, are reflected in these pages and I hope they are not unfairly distorted. In the end, however, they are transmitted through my personal focus and the resultant work is my responsibility.

This book was written for the person who may have no previous knowledge of the Middle East or Egypt, whether university or college student or general reader interested in history, politics or social studies, to help him to gain an impression of a non-European country developing and changing in the face of great odds. It may also help in the study of Third World politics and development in general or be an introduction to further study of Egypt itself. If written in French it might claim to be a work of 'vulgarisation' with not much to say to the specialist. With some misgivings, I have omitted footnotes, feeling academically naked and hoping that the bibliography will partially remedy the omission. It is intended both to list the sources used and to point to further study. It should be clear in the course of the book how much I have relied on the original research of other scholars and the inclusion of their studies in the

bibliography is meant as acknowledgement. Egypt has occasioned the production of numerous excellent pieces of research. Although Arabic sources have been consulted they are not included unless translations exist, especially of literary works. Wherever possible I have quoted the words of Egyptians themselves writing about their own problems.

In the third edition it has been possible to extend the period of coverage up to 1990 in a section on the first years year of office of President Mubarak. The achievements and failures of Sadat's regime are now clearer and it is possible to make a firmer judgement that it was three years ago. I have not been able to alter the main text of the book very much although I am grateful to colleagues and critics who have made suggestions for improvements and corrections. As I feared I have been taken to task for omitting footnotes and I apologise to those readers who may have wished to trace the source of the quotations.

The history of any country is incomplete. More than ever, decisions being made now in Egypt will influence both future developments and the interpretation of the past. We can only wait to see whether Mubarak's policies will bear fruit.

Derek Hopwood
Oxford 1990

Egypt: Politics and Society 1945–1990

1 *Egypt and the Egyptians*

They have worked their way through history by tenacity. (Louis Awad)

Our Egyptian civilization—which dates back 7000 years—has always been inspired by man’s love of, and attachment to the land. (Anwar Sadat)

Geography and Society

Egypt is a country overburdened with history and geography—a history overwhelming yet inspiring, a geography restricting yet lifegiving. She cannot develop as a nation without looking back over her shoulder at the past, nor develop as a country without taking the Nile into account. Egypt has been the prisoner as well as the gift of the Nile. Historically, the Egyptian people have been led to the Nile valley and delta and have drawn their sustenance from the waters of the river. The Nile valley was rather closed and self-contained and although foreign rulers have come and gone, the people have preserved themselves and a way of life for thousands of years without much break in continuity. Egypt has often participated in Middle Eastern events and has been affected by them but has never lost an essential Egyptian identity, integrating whatever was received or imposed, asserting continuously her own character. Egypt is part of Africa linked physically to Asia by the Sinai peninsula. A long coastline and the port of Alexandria have drawn her into the Mediterranean world. The Nile pulls her down into Africa and the control of its head-waters has been of primary concern to Egypt’s rulers. The country is thus uniquely situated to participate in several worlds, the African, the Arab and the Mediterranean.

Lower Egypt consists of the area from Cairo northwards which includes the Delta where the Nile splits into several branches. This is the most fertile, populous and cultivated region. To the east and west lie deserts and further east Suez and Sinai leading to the frontiers of Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Upper Egypt is mainly the river with cultivated strips of land on either side varying in width from two to fifteen miles. The cultivated area stops abruptly and is replaced by arid desert which on the eastern side reaches the Red Sea and in the west merges into the Sahara. There are five scattered oases in the Western Desert. The area of the whole country is some 385,000 square miles of which less than 5 per cent is cultivable land. On the map this resembles a flying kite—the triangular delta attached to the long string of the Nile. The climate is

mostly arid and hot with little rain except on the Mediterranean coast. The desert is virtually rainless; Cairo has about 1.3 inches of rain a year. Aswan which was once rainless now on occasions experiences mist and cloud and even rain caused by the proximity of the artificial lake formed behind the High Dam.

Apart from the northern coast the seasons vary little, except for the intensity of the heat. Far more important and central to Egyptian life was the annual flooding of the Nile in autumn. This was a sign that Egypt could live a further year; a low flood could mean a 'lean' year. Life centred round the river, a benefactor which bestowed or withheld an annual bounty. It provided the rhythm of life and rarely could the thoughts of the peasant have been far from the Nile and the incessant work it demanded. Whereas ancient Egyptians worshipped the Nile, modern Egypt calls it 'the sea' as a token of its greatness, and the cultivable land on its banks is 'the mud'. Prayers were said to encourage the annual flooding and when this was too low prices rose, land dried up and a general feeling of malaise easily spread. The river together with its canals also provided a convenient means of transport, while from its mud were made bricks to build dwellings. Now because of the High Dam the river will no longer flood; water is released regularly and 'scientifically'; the old flood levels are pointed out, the fall in the height of the river is wondered at. Can such a radical change fail to affect the attitude to life itself?

Extreme heat is an inescapable feature of life in the Middle East. The sun, which to Northern Europeans is something to be welcomed and enjoyed, is something to be shunned and escaped from into shade or air conditioning. It is a constant factor of life which can enervate and lead to indifference, or fray tempers. The lack of rain causes an all pervasive dust in most Middle Eastern towns and a wind raising the dust on a hot day can make life well nigh unbearable. Heat determines modes of life, regulates the day's work and its effects must be reckoned with in an account of Arab society. Egypt is not the hottest of Arab countries, but summer temperatures in Cairo rise to 40°C and in Upper Egypt to 50°C. For those who can afford it the Mediterranean coast is a welcome relief in summer. Another escape is the shuttered, curtained house or flat which keeps out the worst effects of heat and light.

Whereas the Nile and its villages have been a very slowly changing aspect of Egypt, the capital city, Cairo, bears witness in stone to a long involvement with other peoples and cultures. Most foreign rulers and dynasties have left some evidence of their stay in civil, military and religious architecture. Cairo (the name is the European version of the Arabic, *al-Qahira*—'the victorious'—given to celebrate the entry of a new ruler), founded in 969 near the site of another city more than three centuries older, is sited just south of the barrage (completed in 1861) that regulated the flow of water into the Delta through the two branches

of the lower Nile. It stands astride the gateway to the Delta and has controlled its destiny but is open to attack from the north, east and west and has been subject to a long series of invaders from the Arabs to the British. It has dominated the country as its capital and one out of every six Egyptians lives within the metropolitan area which also contains most industry, universities and colleges, and central government and financial offices. It is the centre of economic, cultural, religious and intellectual life and acts as a magnet to the rest of Egypt and to parts of Africa and Asia. It is a great and lively city and a city having to struggle with all the modern problems of housing, servicing and transporting a multitudinous population.

The original Arab city of Fustat was founded as a military encampment in about 640 on the eastern bank of the Nile by invading Muslim forces. A series of other invading forces gradually moved the focus of the city, the most important being the Fatimids from North Africa. Their city of *al-Qahira* took over from Fustat, which gradually fell into ruin. Their most notable monument is the university mosque of al-Azhar. Great city walls and a citadel were built under the rule of Saladin in the twelfth century, while all the time urban domestic and economic quarters were growing, usually in the traditional Middle Eastern manner of grouping trades together. The following centuries, dominated by other foreign rulers, Circassian and Turkish, added other monuments which still stand today—mosques, houses, mausoleums, bazaars. In the fifteenth century Cairo was probably greater in extent and population than any city in Europe and excited the wonder of European visitors.

A change was brought about when Egypt fell in 1517 to Ottoman Turkish rulers from Anatolia. Cairo became a provincial capital subordinate to Constantinople, which attracted to itself the intellectual and artistic talents of the Ottoman Empire. Arab civilisation and Arabic fell into the doldrums. Cairo declined in population and to some extent economically. The city in a sense withdrew into itself until Napoleon arrived with his army in 1798. While the French were there too short a time basically to alter the face of the city, the invasion so disrupted the existing state of affairs that it can justly be considered a turning point both in the history of Cairo and of Egypt. The French withdrawal led to the establishment of a new dynasty of Albanian origin which ruled Egypt until 1952. Avowedly westward looking, they were responsible for introducing into the country ideas of westernisation and modernisation. As far as Cairo was concerned a new city patterned on European lines was built alongside the existing mediaeval one. The French had begun to impose a new street system on the city, mainly for military reasons, but it was two rulers from the new dynasty, Muhammad Ali (1805–48) and Ismail (1863–79) who undertook the development of Cairo. By the end of the nineteenth century the city consisted of two parts which symbolised the new departure in Egyptian history. The western type city was growing separately from the

older eastern Islamic, just as new ideas were entering the country and developing alongside deeply held older convictions. Moreover the population of the new areas held a large proportion of European immigrants whose presence was to affect subsequent Egyptian history.

In the new city which stretched to the Nile streets were widened, paved and lit, new bridges built across the river, swamps, ditches and ponds filled in. Paris was the model emulated, with its boulevards, squares and parks, opera house and hotels. New quarters were developed for residential, business and government purposes, and until the end of the century Cairo grew largely in the way determined by the planners of Ismail. The population reached about 600,000, still split into two fairly separate entities. The mediaeval city gradually filled with immigrants from the countryside, while the new European style city spread outside its boundaries remaining socially and physically distinct from the old.¹

The new century brought great changes. New tramlines opened up new areas which gradually coalesced into the city. The population increased dramatically until it had reached 6 million by 1970. The city spilled over into surrounding districts engulfing villages and rural areas, creating new districts such as Heliopolis, a middle class suburb, and continually crowding more people into existing ones, imposing strains on all the existing municipal services.

Egypt's life is tied to the Nile, and much urban development outside Cairo is also on the Nile. In the far south Aswan has developed around the dams built there. Luxor is chiefly a tourist centre built near the sites of ancient Thebes and Karnak. Of the numerous other towns between Luxor and Cairo, Asyut, Minya and Sohag are among the largest. The Delta from Cairo to the coast is a densely populated and cultivated area. The Delta road north from Cairo is a complex mix of local rural traffic, donkeys, bullocks and carts, and lorries and cars on inter-city journeys.

Egypt's second largest city, Alexandria, lies off the Nile and was for long a city of the Mediterranean rather than of Egypt. Built on a Greek site, its population was a mixture of Greeks, Italians, Maltese, Lebanese and others, together with the Egyptians. The foreign minorities tended to predominate in many aspects of the city's life such as trade, banking, tourism and culture and it developed a way of life described as 'Levantine'. Manners, customs and taste were based on an imitation of certain aspects of a European life-style implanted in an Eastern Mediterranean setting. It has been best described in the novels of Lawrence Durrell and it produced at least one poet of international reputation, the Greek Cavafy. Since the revolution of 1952 the foreign population has gradually left Alexandria leaving it to the Egyptians whose numbers have been swollen by large-scale immigration.

The remainder of the urban population is concentrated in new industrial complexes such as Helwan and Mahalla al-Kubra, in one or two Mediterranean coastal towns, in the el-Arish oasis in Sinai, and in the towns on the Suez Canal. These latter were abandoned and partly destroyed when

Israeli forces were on the east bank of the canal but are now being rapidly repopulated and developed. There are also plans to build new cities in various parts of the desert, which are slowly taking shape.

The geography of Egypt has moulded the way of life of most Egyptians which has changed only slowly over the centuries. For over 5,000 years peasants have drawn water from river and canal to irrigate their plot of land. Their lives have been days in the field and evenings in the village, the women working alongside the men. Life has been harsh and the earth indifferent. Their society has been formed by the twin influences of Egypt and Islam which have imposed on them a pattern of existence resistant to change. Not totally isolated but often remote from the centre of authority, the changes of ruler have left them largely unaffected. This and a long history have given the Egyptian a certain melancholy and lack of excitement in the face of change, as though few were ready to plunge the country into chaos to risk the anxiety of facing a new unknown life. The weight of history, which may sometimes provide an excuse for inertia, also gives to Egyptian life a compassion lacking in other nations. A leading critic and journalist, Louis Awad, has written of the fundamentally moderate temper of the Egyptians who

...look with suspicion on all forms of extremism, fanaticism and intoxication. They have worked their way through history by tenacity and not by passion or violence. This is what gives the stamp of permanence and indeed timelessness to our life and institutions... We have known the weariness of longevity and the drabness of immortality, but at least we have shunned the follies of more youthful nations which burn themselves to ashes with the fire of fickle fantasies and follow the paths of glory though they lead to the grave.

Presumably the peasant in the field does not view life in terms formulated by an intellectual but perhaps he senses that he is part of a greater whole that has had a long historical existence and that his life is shaped by forces over which he has little control. Despite large-scale migration to the cities the peasants still form just under 60 per cent of the population and further migration must harm Egypt's agricultural production and add to the urban pressures. Despite quoting Awad above, such generalisations must be taken with caution. Some Egyptians are impatient with inertia and the constraints of history. The urbanised élite has often followed the 'follies and fantasies' of other nations and has been in the van of those demanding change and reform. The members of this élite and the intelligentsia have had an ambivalent attitude towards the peasant, as was the case in nineteenth-century Russia. They see him as part of the soil, the authentic expression of the land, but have an aversion to the dirt and poverty of the village. They have despised and misunderstood him, having little patience with his acceptance of his lot and his apparent 'stubbornness'.

It is in the towns that the élite has flourished, government officials, military officers, businessmen, intellectuals and, until recently, big landowners. Wealth, occupation and education have fixed a gap between rich and poor, well-to-do city dweller and the urban and rural poor, widened by the greater contact of the city with Western techniques and education, which tended to disrupt those traditional values which had provided a point of contact between the two. It is in the towns that the ‘isms’ of our time have blossomed—fascism, Marxism, fundamentalism—and more importantly where the concepts of nationalism have been nurtured, abused and glorified. No modern nation can tolerate this division of the people by wealth, education or culture and it will be shown later what efforts have been made to create a unified nation and to try to eliminate such a gap.

Another feature of life given to Egypt by its geography has been a centralised government. In a society based on a river—a hydraulic society—the ruler is indispensable for controlling the supply of the water. In such a society he is the intermediary between man and the river. The people’s lives depend on water and proper irrigation and on order imposed by the government. A bureaucracy imposes itself to oversee the development and maintenance of canals and ditches. Only in a centrally organised bureaucratic society could such supreme monuments as the pyramids have been built. But life also depended on co-operation. Water had to be shared and had to flow from the river to irrigate the land of all. No peasant could monopolise the supply or prevent its passage to land of neighbours. The need for co-operation and strong government could easily lead to an acceptance of despotism and to servile submission. An Egyptian student has written: ‘He does not know Egypt’s history who denies that despotism and oppression from one side, submission and flattery from the other, are among the deepest and worst features in Egyptian life throughout the ages, that they are the sad leitmotiv in the drama of Egyptian history’. Submission, a belief in the futility of opposition, and the other side of the coin, the moral value attached to patience, have given rise to a number of proverbs which express the peasants’ feelings, such as ‘Water will not run uphill’. At the same time complaint is a constant feature of Egyptian life. In Egyptian songs ‘complaint’ is expressed with deep sadness and an awareness of the futility of the complaint. ‘To whom shall I complain, when all are suffering injustice?’ Nevertheless the peasant has not always accepted his lot and when driven too far has risen in revolt, although the geography of the country and a strong government has made the suppression of revolts relatively easy.

Islam

The influences on Egyptian society discussed above have themselves been modified by another important factor—the Islamic religion. Islam was first proclaimed by the prophet Muhammad during the early years of the seventh