HISTORICAL PROFILES / Egypt

Modern Egyptian society

Egyptian society is connected with a number of national and international events that in many ways express the peoples' true spirit of loyalty to the country. Generally, Egyptian society is considered patriotic, with positive interactions among its citizens benefiting the country. Several remarkable historical events express Egypt's spirit of patriotism and loyalty. The British occupation of 1882 was fiercely opposed by Colonel Ahmad 'Urabi's supporters, whose struggles and battles against British occupation are well documented (the clashes in Alexandria on 11 July 1882; the conflict at Kafr al-Dawwar; the battles at Rashid (Rosetta) and Abu Qir in August of that year; the first battle at Qasassin and then the second at Tell el-Kebir, where Egyptian forces were defeated on 13 September, and which culminated finally with the trial of 'Urabi and his supporters). Other aspects of Egyptian society relate specifically to cultural concerns, particularly in the arts and sport. Egyptians enthusiastically embraced the establishment of the Egyptian Opera House (1869) and welcomed both radio in the 1920s and television in the 1960s; hence, the cinema and theatre industries have a long history in Egypt. Furthermore, the history of sport and sporting clubs in Egypt represents another significant trait in the Egyptian character.



Colonel Ahmad 'Urabi Pasha



Opera House, 1869

1869



Alexandria Sporting Club



Women in the Revolution of 1919

March 1919

Revolutions and wars

During the modern era, Egypt witnessed several wars in which Egyptians were ordered to battle by the Ottoman Sultan. Egyptians fought in the Wahhabi Wars (1811–18) and in the Greek War of Independence (1821–32). In addition, Egyptians fought at the request of the Khedive of Egypt Muhammad 'Ali, whose expansionist ambitions provoked wars in Sudan and the Levant. Egyptian forces also participated in wars during the reigns of Muhammad 'Ali's successors, some of which were fought in order to support the Ottoman Sultans at the Topkap# Palace, or to put down revolts that took place in other areas under Ottoman rule. Other wars were fought to support France in Mexico and to support expansion into Sudan, the latter of which resulted in tense relations between Egypt and Abyssinia, leading to a war between them, and the expansion of Egypt into East Africa. Egyptian forces also supported Palestine and Arabism, by participating with Arab forces in an attempt to bring down the Zionists in 1948. The Egyptian Army continued to defend Egyptian lands during the wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973.



Muhammad 'Ali Pasha

19th century



House of Mohammed Ali

Construction: between 1750 and 1770; restoration: 2001–2004

Mohammed Ali Museum

Foreign affairs

Egyptian foreign policy is characterised by plurality and conflict due to the difference of interests among the countries of the region. Egypt has been and remains a key player politically in the Arab region, and has also taken a decisive lead culturally both in the arts and media. Egyptian foreign policy concerning the African continent has been cautious, but the African Levant was important to leaders of the 23 July Revolution of 1952. The French campaign in Egypt raised awareness among the population of the need for the restoration of their heritage and a return to their glorious civilization according to modern tenets. This was the dream that Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, the Wali of Egypt, turned into reality when he declared Egypt’s independence from the Ottoman Empire and escalated Egypt’s scientific, cultural and economic relations with Europe. In doing this ‘Ali Pasha was able to establish a powerful nation, although in turn Egypt’s success threatened the empires that existed during the period. For this reason Britain occupied Egypt and the country remained under British rule until 1954, despite the unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence of 1922.

The Suez Canal

The Suez Canal was constructed in order to connect the Mediterranean with the Red Sea. Construction of the canal began in the reign of Sa‘id Pasha, who negotiated the land deal with the French diplomat and administrator Ferdinand De Lesseps. De Lesseps began to implement the project on 18 November 1862; works continued until finally the Mediterranean ran through the canal to al-Timsah Lake (Crocodile Lake). Sa‘id Pasha died two months after work had started on 18 January 1863. The Suez Canal was inaugurated in 1869, with Egypt owning 44 per cent of the shares. The Canal led to important strategic changes in Egypt, especially concerning her relationship with Britain whose route to colonial interests in India had been directly improved by the canal’s construction. Then, as Egypt’s debts began to accumulate, in 1875, Khedive Isma‘il sold off Egypt’s shares in the Canal.



The Suez Canal

1864

Culture, literature and the arts in modern Egypt

Egypt has witnessed many different cultural and artistic innovations. Chief among these are in the cinema and theatre industries, which have blossomed in Egypt since the 1970s. The Egyptian actor, director and writer Mohammed Karim was the first star of Egyptian cinema. Mohammed Baioumy is another celebrated cinematic personality in Egypt whose film studio in Alexandria was established in 1923 in order to manage the production of his own films. On 14 March 1932 the first Egyptian film was launched: Awlad el-zawat (Sons of Aristocrats) directed by Mohammed Karim.



Najib al-Rihani