

Egypt's Ills Offer No Easy Fix

By Rudy Brueggemann
April 2005

Historically, few places on the planet can rival Egypt's cultural patrimony. The banks of the Nile gave rise to the some this planet's most complex and important civilizations, whose influence is still felt today. More recently, Egypt gave birth to Pan-Arabism that swept through North Africa and the Levant after World War II. During the 20th century, Egypt's colonial struggles also spawned the Muslim Brotherhood, an anti-secular revolutionary group created after World War I. The Brotherhood's radical Islamic preachings have inspired a militant global Islamic theology now embraced by one of the most important and violent ideological movements in the world, al Qaida.

At the start of the 21st century, Egypt remains the most influential Islamic country in all of the Middle East, even though 10 percent of the 70-million-person country are Christians, mostly Copts. Islamic thinking emanating from the country's historic Islamic universities and mosques, mostly in Cairo, still shape and shake the world. Osama Bin Laden's No. 2 lieutenant, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, received his doctorate of theology at Cairo's historic al-Ahzar Mosque (whose image is seen in my photo essay on my Web site). Zawahiri matured politically



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The pyramids at Giza, Egypt, are perhaps the world's greatest known monuments and a beacon for global tourism, Egypt's chief money-making industry.

within the Islamic Jihad, or the Jihad Islami organization. It is blamed for the murder of President Anwar Sadat, was tied to the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, and launched a revolution in 1981, peaking during the 1990s when 58 tourists from the west were slaughtered in Luxor in 1997.

The terrorist bombing in Egypt's historic Muslim Quarter in Cairo on April 7, 2005, which killed two visitors from France and one from the United States, once again drew attention to the radical Islamists battling the nation's virtual dictatorship. The attack also followed a series of unprecedented demonstrations across Egypt to press for the lifting of the 24-year-old state of emergency and constitutional and political reforms – a huge blow against the current and unpopular government. This most recent attack will certainly undermine a recovering tourism industry, the country's largest money maker. These

tensions hung thick everywhere in the country during my two and a half week stay in November and December 2004. You could feel it, particularly around the heavily guarded roadside check points and on the security caravans that escorted foreigners in buses to and from tourist sites, notably Abu Simbel, in southern Egypt.

Sadat's successor, President Hosni Mubarak, has become a president for life and has battled the Islamists since taking power. His political model borrows mostly from god-like pharaohs of millennia gone by. He continues to suppress dissent and the radical Islamists through torture and arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, according to human rights watchers. Based on what I could see, the country's vast and poorly paid military seem to guard every street corner, roadway, bank, government facility, office building, and Coptic Christian facility. Coptics Christians in particular have faced persecution from the Islamic radicals. Overall, international tourism has bounced back since the 1990s, with planeloads of Western Europeans, Japanese, and now Russians visiting the region's many historic tourist sites. (The Giza pyramids at midday is a weird spectacle all itself – scores of tour buses, thousands of foreign and local visitors, hundreds of touts selling kitsch and camel rides, police on camels acting as if they cared.)

However, the entire middle region of the Nile is off limits to tourists due to threats of possible violence and political instability. Any effort to go out of restricted areas is halted by police at checkpoints on all highways, bus stations, and trains stations. Talk from expats based in Cairo indicates the middle Nile area is still highly unstable and dangerous to Western visitors.

I visited the standard tourist sites: the

pyramids of Giza, Chefren, and Darshur; Luxor and the Valley of the Kings; Aswan and Abu Simbel; and Cairo and the Muslim Quarter of Cairo, where the latest terrorism attack occurred. I also struck out for out of the way places, such as the Monastery of St. Anthony, in a barren desert region 50 kilometers inland from the Red Sea, and St. Catherine's Monastery, in the middle of the beautiful Sinai peninsula. I spent much of my time photographing Egypt's historic and still functioning Christian monasteries.

Overall, I found Egyptians to be extremely friendly to me, an American, even with the religious-tinted violence in Iraq overshadowing current events. Many smiling young soldiers and I used pigeon English to swap criticisms of our current commanders in chief. The photographs I am providing, however, do not focus on Egypt's most pressing problems. These ills include the control of public discourse by conservative Islamists, the organized and pervasive oppression of women under a conservative and patrilineal Islamic society, the lack of population control largely because of religious views espoused by Islam, extreme poverty and the lack of economic opportunity, and the rapid degradation of the environment due to population pressures on the fragile Nile Valley, which forms the nation's breadbasket.

Instead of documenting these problems, I am presenting some nice moments, mostly of special places. I will leave the debate about Egypt's gloomy future to the think tanks, U.S. and international policy-makers, Middle East correspondents, and Egyptians themselves. I truly wish the Egyptian people the best correcting the course of the nation.