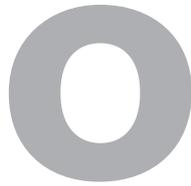


# Modern Egypt: What Everyone Needs to Know

*By Patricia Sloane-White*

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*Reviewed by Lucia Ardovini*  
*Research Fellow at the Middle East and North Africa Programme,*  
*Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI)*



On January 25th, 2011, approximately 20,000 people gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo, demanding “bread, freedom, and human dignity”.

Over the course of the next 18 days, popular protests spread through Egypt leading to the deposition of long-standing dictator Hosni Mubarak, and to an unprecedented opening up of political space and opportunities. Yet, eight years on, it seems like Egypt has gone back to square one. Nevertheless, the toppling of the authoritarian regime that had been ruling over the country for over 30 years, together with the events that followed, quickly put Egypt back on the radar of the general public and scholars alike. However short lived, this brief interlude emphasised just how significant the country is for the wider balance of power in the region, and for making sense of broader developments in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

Egypt’s size and historical importance make it one of the most influential countries in the Middle East and North Africa, meaning that studying modern Egypt is essential to understanding the region’s recent and future trajectories. Bruce Rutherford and Jeannie Sowers’s comprehensive and accessible book makes such a task perfectly achievable even for the more novice reader. Assuming no previous knowledge, the authors’ stated aims are those of “introducing non-specialists to Egypt”, “leaving the reader with a sufficient appreciation of Egypt to understand its current challenges and opportunities” and “to spark the reader’s interest in this fascinating country”. In this book they manage to do exactly that, without neither over-simplifying basic concepts nor deeply delving into the huge body of academic literature on the topic.

*Modern Egypt* is structured around eight chapters that cover the key themes and events necessary to understand the significance of the country, ranging from history, geography, religion, economy, role of the military, foreign policy and society. The fact that each chapter is based on straightforward, well-formulated questions, also makes its development easy to follow. Further, the authors’ choice to structure the book around core themes rather than chronological events is an excellent approach to introduce a more general audience to the complex

history of this country. The first four chapters begin with an introduction to the events of 2011 and the political developments that followed, up through al Sisi’s rise to power and the current socio-economic conditions. This is followed by an expert historical coverage of Egypt’s post-colonial era through the regimes of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak, skilfully unpacking the changing role of the military through the decades, which is a necessary exercise to make sense of the current state of affairs in the country. Similarly, the chapter on Human Development and Human Welfare provides a very accessible insight into Egypt’s long-running domestic and social issues, which are still at the core of contemporary social and human rights concerns.

The next four chapters focus on Environmental Issues, Religion, Foreign Affairs, and conclude with a sobering analysis of Egypt’s future challenges and prospects. It is indeed refreshing to see that half of the book’s focus is on pivotal contemporary issues, such as natural resources and environmental concerns, which are also central to understanding recent developments in the country. Similarly, the discussion of religion and of the role that it plays within institutions and in shaping societal relations is fundamental to get an insight into the complex questions that lay at the heart of discontent and activism in contemporary Egypt. The discussion of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy also allow the non-expert reader to get a sense of why Egypt is at the heart of so many crucial geopolitical alliances, including the ongoing relationship with the United States. Finally, in the course of the final discussion on Egypt’s current challenges, the authors end with a recognition of the historical tendency of the Egyptian population to remain united, optimistic, and resilient in moving forward despite the harsh conditions that they might be facing.

One of the biggest strengths of this book is the wide range of audiences it appeals to: undergraduate students; lay readers with an interest in the Middle East; policymakers and advisers looking for an accessible resource on Egypt; and scholars and researchers looking for a concise account of the development of modern Egypt. As far as criticisms go, a more specialist reader would argue that the book lacks a deep analytical insight into the country’s most recent developments, and that some chapters could

have delved deeper into the historical developments that are now shaping Egypt's domestic and foreign policy. However, doing so would misrepresent what the stated aims of the book are: introducing the non-expert reader to the significance of such a vast and influential country. Indeed, *Modern Egypt* manages to present an impressive and accessible summary of how and why the country got is where it is today. More importantly, the authors openly acknowledge the high unpredictability of future developments in Egypt, and do not write as if they have the last word. Egypt has a long history of surviving against difficulties and rising against the odds, and it is not wise to try and speculate about what might happen in the near future. Nevertheless, *Modern Egypt* presents an accessible and important account of all the forces that have made Egypt into what it is today, which is a necessary starting point to look towards the future.