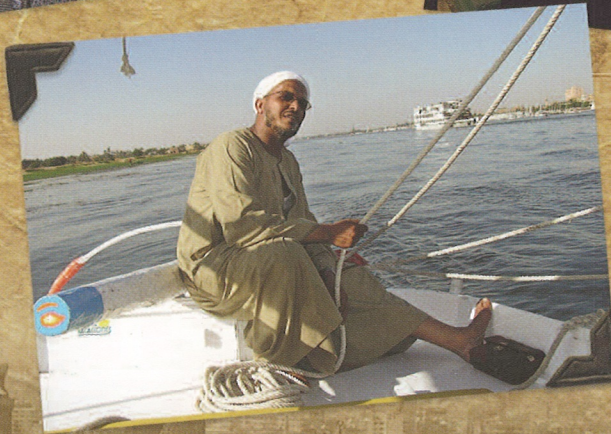


INTERNATIONAL REPORTING PROJECT

Covering the

ARAB WORLD

2006 IRP Gatekeeper Editors
Trip to Egypt





why egypt?

Louise Lief

Deputy Director, International Reporting Project

Many people know that Egypt is one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid, one of the few Arab countries to have a peace treaty with Israel, and home of one of the world's great ancient civilizations.

But Egypt today also provides a window into the many religious, ideological and societal battles now raging in the Arab and Muslim world, struggles that pit traditionalists versus modernists, religious extremism versus tolerance, peaceful reform versus violence and terrorism – all of which have immense consequences for the United States.

Many of the most influential Islamist political movements in the world today began in Egypt and still thrive there. Islamic reformers who sought to reconcile Islam and the modern state were based in Cairo. The Muslim Brotherhood, which seeks to establish a political order based on a strict interpretation of Islamic law, was founded in Egypt. Its philosophy has inspired offshoots and supporters throughout the world, and it is now Egypt's largest opposition group. Even al-Qaeda, responsible for the September 11 attacks, assumed its present form when Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri merged his militant Egyptian Islamic Jihad organization with Osama bin Laden's group and became his deputy.

The International Reporting Project's 2006 visit to Egypt enabled editors to experience the diversity of belief within Islam today, and relations between the majority Muslim population and the country's Coptic Christian minority. Gatekeepers visited el-Azhar, the world's oldest Islamic university, and debated with some of the hundreds of young men who train there each year to be Muslim clerics in Egypt and over a dozen other countries. They questioned the Grand Mufti, Egypt's most senior Islamic jurist, who issues 7,000 fatwas or legal rulings each month on everything from suicide bombers to displaying statues in the home. They met with leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, liberal Islamic reformers, and with Amr Khaled, the Arab world's most popular televangelist.

The group also explored the impact of President George W. Bush's 2003 call to Egypt to "show the way toward democracy in the Middle East." It was U.S. prodding that helped propel Egypt into the most important political opening of



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's 25-year rule, an opening that was already beginning to close when the group visited in May 2006. The editors met with senior government officials, and the family of jailed Egyptian presidential candidate Ayman Nour. They spoke to judges fighting for an independent judiciary, and witnessed street demonstrations where the judges' supporters were arrested. They heard from newspaper editors and human rights activists agitating for a stronger civil society, and filmmakers and novelists who drew searing portraits of Egypt's social order today. In the end, the Gatekeepers came away with a more complete picture of the challenge of democratic reform in Egypt and in the region.

Finally, to balance the perspectives of political elites, the editors spent time with ordinary people – villagers coping with environmental pollution, working-class families struggling to make ends meet, and most importantly, young people, who represent the fastest growing segment of the Arab world's population and are the driving force for change in the region.

The editors gained more insight into what motivates inhabitants of the region and how they view the policies and pronouncements emanating from Washington. We at IRP hope the visit will strengthen an already strong determination to, in the words of Michael Tackett, trip participant and *Chicago Tribune* Washington Bureau Chief, "think bigger, look farther, and deepen our understanding of the global world." ❁