

# Introduction



“I am not a Greek of Egypt!” This is how I’ve answered the most frequent question put to me by Greeks since I started the research for this book. I knew about the Greek presence in Egypt from my schooling and gradually assimilated the collective conventional wisdom of post-1960s Greek society regarding it, which can be summarized thus: the Greeks of Egypt (also called the Egyptian Greeks or Egyptians) lived in Alexandria; they were rich and knew many foreign languages and, therefore, were cosmopolitans; they left Egypt because Gamal Abdel Nasser threw them out. Another assumption, common not only in Greece but also elsewhere, is that the Greek presence in Egypt had existed uninterrupted since the arrival of Alexander the Great and the foundation of the city of Alexandria in 331 BC. In a similar way, the mass departure of Egyptian Greeks is somewhat framed within the context of the biblical exodus. According also to a commonly encountered scenario, the definitive departure of the Egyptians was provoked by the Arab-Israeli conflict and decolonization. Therefore, similarities are sought with the definitive departure of Jews or the expulsion of British and French citizens in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis.

As I delved into the issue and heard more and more stories about the Greek presence in Egypt, many of these perceptions increasingly appeared partial or erroneous. In fact, it was my first visit to Egypt in 2008 that drastically changed my view and made me conscious of what my research was about. There, I met some of the few remaining Egyptians. All of them were in agreement that the Greeks had not been expelled, otherwise they would not be there talking to me. An old Alexandrian, Alekos Vlachos, who had been caretaker of the city’s most important Greek school since the early 1950s, reacted strongly when I asked him some questions that betrayed the latent power of the stereotypes: “But, what do you think? That they were all rich big shots here? Most of them were poor people!” As my research progressed, I visited Ismailia, where I met Ioannis Misrekis, a former Eyp-

tian Suez Canal Authority employee and then president of the city's still active Greek association. He talked to me about the lack of solidarity among Greeks in the 1950s and 1960s, the position of the Greeks of the Suez Canal area who were caught between the Egyptians and the French and British, the prevailing feeling of uncertainty among them at the time regarding their future in Egypt, and the briefings that "some Alexandrians" had organized in his city in order to "push" them into leaving for Australia, but not Greece.

A historical study, this book follows the path of the Greek community from the late 1930s to its exodus in the early 1960s, which peaked in 1962. This path was not linear; nor was exodus the only outcome. At the beginning of the period under study, in 1937, the Capitulations, which provided special rights and tax and judicial privileges to foreigners, were abolished. Over the following years Greeks, along with other foreigners, experienced the rapid transformation of Egypt in political, social, economic, and cultural terms. The Egyptian bourgeoisie controlled the Greek population's most influential and representative institutions, the Greek Koinotita of Alexandria (henceforth GKA) and the city's Greek Chamber of Commerce (GCCA). Many of the members of the GCCA administrative board also served on the GKA administrative committee and maintained close contacts with Greece's political elite and diplomatic authorities in Egypt. They constituted, in fact if not in name, the leadership of the Egyptian Greek population.

The Egyptian leadership collaborated closely with the Greek state in developing various political, economic, and cultural strategies, not only to ensure the long-term presence of Greeks in Egypt but also to promote their departure. Their often contradictory and ambiguous strategies were strongly opposed by the social and political forces of the Egyptian Left, which was controlled by the Communists but also comprised Socialists and several progressive people. The Egyptian Left had its own proposals regarding the long-term sustainability of the Egyptian population. In hindsight, the various strategies of the Greek state and the Egyptian leadership that aimed to keep the Greeks in Egypt appear to have been both insufficient and ill-conceived or were simply not adopted by all Egyptians. It is a fact, though, that when the exodus commenced in earnest in 1960, the Greek presence had already decreased by almost one-third (see table 1) compared to what it was in the late 1930s. In the 1960s most of the Greeks residing in Egypt left the country that they almost unanimously called their "second country."

This study discusses the residence and departure of Egyptians, either as repatriates to Greece or as migrants to other destinations. My interpretation principally rests on research in the community archives of the GKA and GCCA, the diplomatic archives of Greece, France, and the United Kingdom, and the records of Geneva-based international organizations such as

**Table 1.** Population of Egypt, 1907–60

	1907	1917	1927	1937	1947	1960
Egyptians*	11,189,978	12,512,106	13,952,264	15,734,170	18,966,767	25,984,101
<b>European nationals</b>						
Greeks	62,973	56,731	76,264	68,559	57,427	47,673
Italians	34,926	40,198	52,462	47,706	27,958	14,089
British/Maltese	20,356	24,354	34,169	31,523	28,246	} 25,175
French	14,591	21,270	24,332	18,821	9,717	
Others	—	—	—	—	16,664	
<b>Other communities</b>						
Jews	38,635	58,581	63,550	62,953	65,639	8,561
Armenians	7,747	12,854	17,145	16,886	—	—
Syrians, Palestinians, and other Arab nationalities	33,947	31,725	39,605	38,692	—	56,375

*Sources: Annuaire statistique, 1910* (Cairo: Imprimerie nationale, 1910); *The Census of Egypt Taken in 1917*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Government Press, 1921); *Annuaire statistique, 1927–1928* (Cairo: Imprimerie nationale, 1929); *Annuaire statistique, 1937–1938* (Cairo: Imprimerie nationale, 1939); *Annuaire statistique, 1947–1948* (Cairo: Imprimerie nationale, 1951); *Al-Qiraa al ‘ama li soukan: jadawil ‘ama* [General population census of Egypt: General tables] (Cairo, 1960); Floresca Karanasou, “Egyptianisation: The 1947 Company Law and the Foreign Communities in Egypt” (Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1992), 11.

\* The numbers refer to the sedentary population.

the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM)—the precursor to the International Organization for Migration. These three different kinds of sources provide three respective views, which are often entangled. The elites of the Egyptian community and Greek state produced most of this archival material, which consequently reflects their views.

As regards terminology, when referring to the Greeks in Egypt the study uses the term “Egyptiot Greeks,” or simply “Egyptiot,” regardless of the citizenship individuals may have held. The term is derived from the translation of the Arabic word *mutamassirun*, literally the “Egyptianized,” into Greek and describes Greek people in Egypt. The *mutamassirun* were Egyptianized because “they recognize[d] both an affinity and conformity with the Egyptian way of life and yet, at the same time, a certain detachment from it.”<sup>1</sup> To avoid more transliterations and to simplify matters, the text employs the term “community” used in the British Foreign Office records to collectively describe the Greeks in Egypt. All the Greek archival records consulted for

this study described the movement of Egyptians toward Greece as repatriation (*epanapatriamos*). This does not imply that the movement was forced; rather, the term is used to differentiate this movement from the emigration of Egyptians to third countries. Lastly, the study does not use the term “exodus” in its biblical sense, which would necessitate a persecutor and a promised land, neither of which existed in the context under study. The term is used to describe the mass departure in the early 1960s.

Those Greeks who left Egypt during the period under scrutiny or their ancestors had arrived in the country from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. Initially, this movement essentially concerned big merchants and traders who were part of the Greek merchant diaspora around the Mediterranean and Black Sea. In Egypt they established nodes of their extensive commercial networks, encouraged by Muhammad Ali, the leader of Egypt from 1805 to 1848, who favored their settlement. Subsequently, migrants arrived and became engaged in a wide range of economic activities. Migration to Egypt even took the form of a mass labor movement, as was the case of thousands of Dodecanese islanders who came to work on the construction of the Suez Canal. The newly arrived Greeks not only settled in Cairo and Alexandria but also inhabited the old town of Suez and the newly founded cities across the Suez Canal area, Port Said and Ismailia, and penetrated the interior, namely the cities of the Nile delta such as Mansoura, Tanta, and Zagazig, and also Upper Egypt.

The Egyptian population was a mosaic in terms of its origins: they came from many different regions of the Balkan Peninsula, Asia Minor, and the islands of the Aegean and the Ionian Seas. The push factors for this movement should be sought in the specific economic and social conditions prevailing in each of these areas. Migrants from the Peloponnese, for instance, were part of the successive waves of emigration at the end of the nineteenth century caused by overpopulation and unemployment in the mountainous parts of the region. Anti-Semitism pushed many Greek Jews from Epirus and the Ionian Islands to Egypt. After a decrease in numbers between 1907 and 1917, which was mainly due to the economic crisis in Egypt and the mobilization of Greeks during the Balkan Wars and World War I, the Greek population reached its peak in 1927, that is, after the influx of refugees in the aftermath of the defeat of the Greek Army in Asia Minor in 1922.

The migration of Greek people to Egypt was not an isolated phenomenon. Migrants from different areas and of different origin arrived in Egypt during more or less the same period. Italians, Maltese, and other non-Egyptian communities, namely Jews, Syrians, and Armenians, whose presence was largely linked to the Ottoman *millet*s,<sup>2</sup> were also part of the so-called *mutamassirun*, or Egyptianized. They were socioeconomically diverse, middle

to lower class in the majority, which distinguished them from the nationals of colonial powers, essentially the British, who were mainly military personnel, administrators, and businesspersons, and the mostly bourgeois Belgians and French when these were of metropolitan origin. A foreign economic elite, comprising members of almost all the above-mentioned groups, dominated economic activity in Egypt and exerted considerable control over its political system. This was mainly due to the British presence, which began in 1882, and the extremely favorable conditions for foreigners created by the Capitulations regime.

Even though Egyptians were not in their majority citizens of a colonial power (see table 4), most of them benefited directly or indirectly from the semicolonial conditions created by the Capitulations and British protection. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Greeks constituted the largest foreign ethnic or national community in Egypt. Their principal unifying elements were language, the idea of common cultural origin, and, to a lesser extent, the Orthodox Christian religion. At the same time, they constituted a multifaceted entity in terms of local origin, citizenship, geographic settlement across Egypt, political beliefs, professional activities, social stratification, and economic status. While this book deals with the Egyptian population as an entity, its limits were not tightly defined but fluid and constantly changing. Whether someone was considered a member of the community depended not only on all or some of the above criteria being met, but on who set the definition and how.

Throughout the period under scrutiny, the Greeks in Egypt found themselves entangled in different worlds that shaped the specificity of their presence. First, Egypt was a meeting point of two different kinds of Greeks living abroad. On the one hand was the diaspora that presupposes migration from a common national center, Greece, as was the case for many Egyptians. On the other hand, there was the broader notion of *homogenia*, whose members never lived in Greece but migrated to Egypt from Asia Minor and other regions of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Second, the Greek population constituted an imaginary meeting point of two states: Egypt and Greece. Their name, “Egyptian Greeks,” ideally attributes their position between two geographically close countries and their hybrid identity, a characteristic of all diasporas. The Egyptians also found themselves at the transition point from empire—Ottoman and British—to the Egyptian nation-state. This transition triggered Egyptian nationalism, which would generate it further, and concerned many aspects of political, social, economic, and cultural life. Finally, after World War II, the Egyptian Greeks were at a flashpoint between imperialism and the communist “threat” in the Middle East, a determining factor for the Cold War alliances in the region, which became more complex after

the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. These new alliances affected, to a great extent, the policies of both the Egyptian and Greek states and were also reflected in the political, social, and cultural realities of the Egyptian population.

The book's historical narrative is structured around chronological and thematic axes in order to avoid the teleology inherent in the term "exodus." The division of the book into parts and chapters takes two distinct factors into account. First, the Egyptian departure is examined as a product of the interaction between individual initiative and structural characteristics and change (such as the abolition of the Capitulations, conditions in the labor market, education, Egyptian legislation, and so on), which had short-, medium-, and long-term effects on the movement of Egyptians. The examination of the individual initiatives is not restricted to the Egyptian departees but also concerns people representing state, community, or international organizations. The book also takes into account that a historical study of migration requires the examination of practically all aspects of human activity: political, diplomatic, social, economic, and cultural. These two separate but also interrelated factors are reflected in the parts and chapters of the book.

Part 1 explores the political historical context beginning with the abolition of the capitulatory privileges—a major structural change—through to the eve of the exodus. It focuses on the policies that aimed to ensure the long-term presence of Greeks in Egypt despite the end of the economic advantages from which the community had benefited. The two chapters in this part discuss the policy of the Greek state toward its nationals abroad and the different strategies proposed by the Egyptian leadership and the Left opposition to deal with the multiple transformations taking place at the local and international level. Chapter 1 focuses on the period from the abolition of the Capitulations in 1937 to the end of the transitional period in 1949 and the Free Officers coup in 1952. Chapter 2 deals with the period under the new military regime until Nasser's visit to Athens in June 1960.

Part 2 analyzes the efficiencies and deficiencies of the Egyptian population in labor and education as well as the existing (or non-existing) efforts to adjust to the changing Egyptian context. Chapter 3 examines socioeconomic changes, through an analysis of the labor market, and chapter 4 focuses on the community's education system, its cultural and professional adjustment until the exodus. Part 3 deals with individual initiatives to leave Egypt. Chapters 5 and 6 address the different forms of mobility and emigration until 1960.

Part 4 is dedicated to the exodus that was triggered in late 1960. Chapter 7 addresses the immediate reaction of the Egyptians to the socialist legislation enacted in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Taking a different and

autonomous chronological focus than the previous six chapters, it argues that the exodus as a crisis situation was the expression and partly the culmination of a complicated process that had been developing over the previous decades. In other words, I devote the first six chapters to the period preceding the exodus to suggest that even before the exodus started, Egypt, for many Greeks, had already been “lost.”

## NOTES

1. Anthony Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics in Twentieth Century Egypt: Contesting the Nation* (London: Routledge, 2003), 174–75.
2. In the Ottoman Empire the term *millet* described confessional communities, which were allowed to administer themselves under their own set of rules. The main *millets* were the Greek Orthodox, namely the *millet-i-Rûm*, the Armenian and the Jewish.
3. Lina Venturas, “‘Deterritorialising’ the Nation: The Greek State and ‘Ecumenical Hellenism,’” in *Greek Diaspora and Migration since 1700: Society, Politics and Culture*, ed. Dimitris Tziouvas (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 125.