

AROUND THE WORLD



BISHOY CHOOSES BRAVERY



Welcome to Egypt

The Nile is the world's longest river, and one of the most famous bodies of water on Earth. It flows from the highlands of Northeastern Africa, through the mighty Sahara Desert, and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. Groups of people have lived together along the banks of the Nile for as long as humans have kept records, and for thousands of years, those occupying the northern half of the river's shores have been known as Egyptians. In ancient times, the Egyptians were ruled by kings they called pharaohs, who built magnificent monuments and pyramids up and down the Nile River Valley.



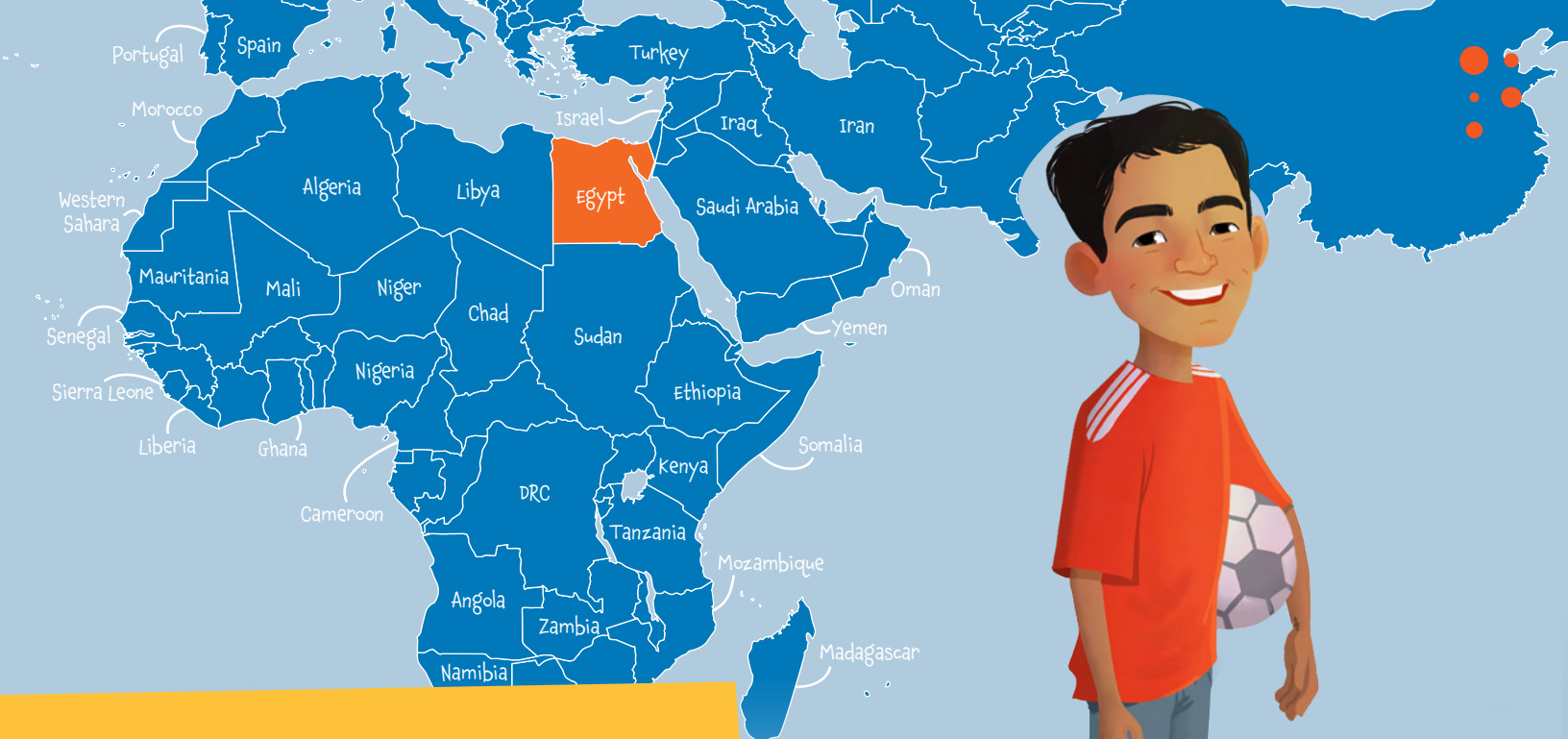
Copt:

A native Egyptian in ancient times, but in more recent times, a member of the Christian Coptic Orthodox Church.

Today, there is an independent country named Egypt, but from 332 BC until 1952 AD, outsiders ruled the land where Egyptians lived and worked. From 30 BC until around 640 AD, the land of the Egyptians was controlled by the Romans, and during this time a new religion spread throughout their empire.

According to church tradition, Christianity arrived in Egypt around 42 AD through the Apostle Mark. He started a church in the port city of Alexandria, and the religion began to spread. The Romans eventually lost control of Egypt to invaders from Arabia, and the new ruler's name for the Egyptian people was **Copt**. Local Egyptian customs and traditions were called Coptic, and the kind of Christianity that had developed in Egypt became known as the Coptic Orthodox Church.





Meet Bishoy

This is Bishoy. He lives with his family in Egypt's capital city, Cairo. Like many Egyptian boys his age, Bishoy is obsessed with soccer. When he's not playing, he's either watching matches on TV or trying to steal his older sister's phone to watch soccer highlights on YouTube. The top Egyptian professionals play for clubs in Europe, and Bishoy collects their jerseys, but most days he can be found wearing the jersey of the Egyptian national team—nicknamed the Pharaohs. Until recently, Bishoy mostly played soccer with his friends and neighbors in unorganized games on the street, but last year he tried out for a prestigious youth club team and made the squad. It took him a while to adjust to having coaches and playing with referees, but he's now the starting striker and his team's top goal scorer.

When Bishoy decided to try out for his club team, many of his friends and neighbors were surprised, and some were even concerned. They thought he had no chance of making the team, not because he isn't talented—Bishoy is tall for his age, has blazing speed, and has a powerful shot with either foot. Their doubt had nothing to do with Bishoy's ability—it was because he and his family are Coptic Christians.

Invasion of a New Religion

In the year 639 AD, another new religion arrived in the Nile River Valley, but this time it was brought by an army. Guided by their faith, soldiers from neighboring Arabia invaded Egypt with goals to rule over the Egyptians and spread the teachings of a man named Muhammad and his religion, **Islam**. By 646 AD, the Muslim Arabs won and ended Roman rule. Egypt was now ruled by **Muslims**, the name of the followers of Islam.

At the beginning of Muslim rule, most Egyptians were Christians, but over the centuries, that changed. Today, the population of Egypt is roughly 100 million, and most Egyptians are Muslims, but there remains a significant minority group of Christians who have kept the Coptic Orthodox Church beliefs and traditions. At the beginning of Muslim rule, all Egyptians were known as Copts, but as the number of Muslims grew, the name Copt began to fade. Today, the only Egyptians called Copts are the Coptic Christians, and while they are the largest non-Muslim religious group in any Islamic country, no one knows for sure how many there are. There could be as many as 20 million Copts in Egypt. There could be as few as 8.5 million. It is difficult to keep track, because after centuries of **discrimination** and oppression, many Copts feel the need to hide their religion.

Islam:

A religion founded by a man named Muhammad in the 7th century in what is now Saudi Arabia. With about 2 billion followers worldwide, it is the world's second largest religion.

Muslim:

A person who believes in and practices Islam.

Discrimination:

The unjust treatment of a category of people.



History of Oppression

Bishoy's dad is named Ash. He loves soccer, too and once dreamed of being a member of the national team and playing for the Pharaohs. The older men in Bishoy's neighborhood like to remind him that when Ash was his age, his father was the better player. But Ash never played for a prestigious youth club team—very few Copts ever do. Even though Egypt is a nation where citizens are free to choose their religion, there are very different customs, expectations, and even laws for non-Muslims. If an Egyptian chooses not to be Muslim, they are often treated differently, and sometimes treated very badly. A result has been that in certain areas, Copts don't participate except in rare situations. It is very uncommon for Copts to participate in government or the military, and it is extremely rare for Copts to work as police or play high-level soccer.

After the Muslim takeover of Egypt was complete, Copts were allowed to choose between converting to Islam or continuing as Christians. Egyptians who chose to become Muslims changed their religion, but were allowed to continue living similarly to the way they did before the Arab takeover. Copts who chose Christianity were forced to pay higher taxes and follow new laws. Coptic Christians were not allowed to build new churches, and damaged churches were not allowed to be repaired. Christians were not permitted to speak about their faith in public, but they were not allowed to dress like Muslims and needed to be easily identified as different. Their homes were not to be larger than those owned by Muslims, and if a Muslim wanted to sit in a seat occupied by a Christian, the Christian had to give the seat up. Christians were forbidden from owning weapons, and they were not allowed to lead, govern, or employ a Muslim.



In return for following the rules, Christians received protection from violence. They were not included in the military, and Muslims were not supposed to physically attack them. Muslims and Christians were permitted to live together in Egypt, but the law treated them very differently.

Over the centuries, some of the differences have relaxed, and some no longer exist, but what hasn't changed is that if Egyptian Christians (the modern-day Copts) follow their special set of rules, then their government rulers are required to protect them from violence. Since the Muslim takeover, Egypt has been led by a long list of different governments—sometimes these governments have protected the Copts and sometimes they haven't.



Rami Malek

Academy Award-winning actor born in California to Egyptian parents. Because he speaks Arabic, Malek is often inaccurately referred to as Arab, but he is not. He and his family are among the hundreds of thousands of Coptic-Americans who live in the USA.





Modern Violence

Ash quit playing soccer when he was not much older than Bishoy is today. Like many Copts, he decided to focus on academics, business, and his Christian faith. In part because they were kept from the military, Copts have a long tradition of valuing education and entrepreneurship. Today's Copts usually have higher levels of education and often make more money than their Muslim neighbors, and this has been typical in Egypt for generations.

Over the years, most of Egypt's Muslims have been friendly with Copts and friendships between Muslims and Christians is normal and common. Many Copts are doctors and lawyers, and many of Egypt's most successful businesses are Copt-owned. Ash has a lumber company that supplies wood for making furniture. Laws forbidding Muslims to work for Christians no longer exist in Egypt, and Ash has many Muslim employees. Some have worked for him for over ten years and feel like family. However, not all Muslims are nice to their Coptic Christian neighbors, and some believe Egypt should only be a place for Muslims to live. These Egyptians who want Christianity removed from Egypt are considered religious extremists, and there is a long history of these types of Muslims hurting Copts through intimidation and violence.



Religious Extremist:

A person who has strong beliefs about religion that are not shared by most people. They often support using violence against those with different religious beliefs.

Entrepreneurship:

The activity of starting and maintaining a business.



In late 2010 when Bishoy was a toddler, a series of anti-government protests and uprisings began spreading through the Islamic countries of north Africa. People wanted changes in society and the protests sparked a movement called the Arab Spring, which quickly made its way to Egypt. Ever since the 1970s, Muslim extremists have committed more and more intimidation and violence against Christians. The outbreak of the protests led many in Copt communities, like Bishoy's neighborhood in Cairo, to hope for more peace between Muslims and non-Muslims in Egypt.

The Arab Spring indeed brought changes to the country, but hopes for a safer Egypt soon disappeared. While the Egyptian military and political groups argued over how to run the country, Muslim extremists intensified their attacks on the Copts. In January of 2011, an extremist group called the Army of Islam bombed the Coptic Orthodox Church of Saint Mark and Pope Peter in Alexandria. The bomb was set off during a Christian religious celebration, killed 23, and left 97 injured.

Extremists who do not think Copts have the right to exist in Egypt began burning churches across the country (63 Egyptian Coptic Orthodox churches were set on fire in 2013 alone), and rarely did six months go by without news coming to Bishoy's neighborhood of something terrible happening to his fellow Copts. Eventually, the anti-Christian violence came to Cairo, and even to Bishoy's church, but miraculously, nothing happened to him or his family.



Arab Spring:

A series of uprisings against government corruption and economic problems that spread across several Arab countries in the early 2010s.

Terror Strikes



The leader of the Roman Catholic Christian church is given the title of Pope. Their current Pope is named Francis, he lives in the Vatican City in Europe, and he is famous around the world. One of the many unique traditions of the Coptic Orthodox Church is that they too have a Pope. He's named Tawadros II (Theodore the 2nd, in English), but outside of Egypt, he isn't widely known. Although Coptic Christianity began in Alexandria, the headquarters of the Church moved to Cairo after the Arab invasion. It is common for Pope Tawadros II to travel to many different Coptic churches, but his home congregation worships at St. Mark's Cathedral in Bishoy's neighborhood—Old Cairo. In fact, Bishoy's family regularly attends Pope Tawadros's home church, and he knows the name of each family member.



Another Coptic tradition is for men to gather on one side of the church during services and for women and children to be on the other side.

On December 11, 2016, at about 10:00 AM, a bomb exploded during Sunday morning worship service inside of a chapel at St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo. Ash was in attendance, but was unharmed because the bomb detonated on the side of the building near the place where his wife and children usually sit. The massive explosion killed 29 people, and injured another 47, but fortunately Bishoy and his mother and sister were unharmed. His sister had been feeling sick, and Bishoy and his mom stayed home with her that day.

Pope Tawadros II was also away that morning. He was visiting another church, but after hearing the news of the blast, he rushed back to Cairo and began publicly pleading with the Egyptian government to protect Copts from Muslim extremists. Government leaders made statements criticizing the extremists, called for a united Egypt, and promised higher security, but a wave of anti-Copt violence swept over the country. 2017 saw 81 Copts murdered by Muslim extremists and forced the Egyptian military to tighten security around Christians.

Coptic Pope Selection

When it comes time to select a new Coptic Pope, a ceremony is held and names of three respected religious leaders are each written on separate pieces of paper and placed in a container. A 12-year-old Copt boy is blind-folded and he selects one piece of paper. The religious leader whose name is on the selected paper becomes the next Pope.





Bishoy's New Job

Thankfully, the killings have drastically reduced over the last few years, but extremists still attempt to make life uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous for Copts. Armed guards protect Coptic churches now, but it is common for groups of Muslim extremists to gather near church entrances to yell insults. Copts like Bishoy and his family are regularly verbally abused on their way in and out of worship services. The extremists curse the Copts, insult their faith, and shout lies about how and when Christianity came to Egypt.

The lies and insults don't feel good, but Bishoy and his family live with them, and Ash has taught his children to walk proudly and ignore what extremists say. This is important, because now that Bishoy is bigger than his mom and almost as tall as his dad, he serves as his sister's primary escort. Each year, an unknown number of Copt teenaged girls are kidnapped by extremists and forced to convert to Islam. Copt girls walking alone are easy targets, so anytime his sister goes shopping or visits friends, Bishoy has to tag along. Having another pair of eyes to watch for trouble is necessary.

Most boys are nervous when they begin escorting their sisters around town, but it was easy for Bishoy. After trying out for and making his soccer club, he walks with confidence.

Courage and Bravery

Each season, over 500 Egyptian men play for one of the 18 teams in the Egyptian professional soccer league. However, despite having between 10 and 20 percent of the population, over the past 30 years only 12 players in the league have been Christians (that's less than 0.01%). It isn't because soccer isn't popular among Copts—most boys are like Bishoy and love the game. Even Pope Tawadros II has commented about the lack of Copts who play at high levels. There are no rules against Copts playing professionally, but there have long been fears that Copts will not be safe in soccer stadiums, and that clubs will not treat Copt players fairly. It is nearly impossible to advance to high levels of soccer without playing for prestigious youth teams, and since all of those teams are led by Muslim coaches and are full of Muslim players, very rarely do Copt boys even tryout.

When Bishoy asked his dad if he could try out for the team he's on now, Ash beamed with pride and excitedly gave his permission. Ash has long regretted that he never attempted to play with and against Muslims, and he was excited for his son to try.

Word of Bishoy's tryout spread through the neighborhood, and responses were mixed. Some people were worried that Bishoy would not be given a fair chance by the Muslim coaches, and there were fears that Muslim players may try to harm him. Interestingly, Bishoy received the most passionate encouragement from his father's Muslim employees, who, like most Egyptian Muslims, love and respect their Copt countrymen. Before the tryout, these men filled Bishoy with confidence by telling him that what matters on the soccer pitch is a player's skills, effort, and attitude—not whether he or she is Christian or Muslim.

Tattoos on Copt Kids


In a tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages, many Copts get a small tattoo of a Christian cross during their childhood.





Before the first day of tryouts, Bishoy asked Ash if he should cover his tattoo with a wristband. Like many Copt boys and girls, Bishoy was given a tattoo of a Christian cross when he was young. For centuries, so that they could easily be identified as non-Muslims, Copts were forced to look different from Muslims. As a result, for centuries now, Copts have tattooed Christian symbols on themselves. Bishoy has a cross on his wrist. Ash told him it was his choice, but that whether or not he covered up his cross, the only pathway to success was to play with courage and bravery.

Bishoy decided not to cover his tattoo, and even though he was nervous and scared on the inside, he refused to show it outwardly during the tryout. The first time a defender gave him a hard foul and knocked him to the ground, every coach and player watched to see how the Copt boy would respond. Would Bishoy stay down on the ground? Would he get up and foul the defender in response? Instead, Bishoy did neither; he quickly jumped to his feet, made a run for goal, called for the ball, received a good pass, and buried the ball in the back of the net! The coaches running the tryout couldn't hide their excitement and cheered. Bishoy celebrated his goal by kissing his cross tattoo, and his nervousness and fear vanished.



When it was announced that Bishoy had made the team, not everyone was happy. Two players quit the team because their families did not want their sons to play with a Christian, and some Copts in the neighborhood believed the new attention Bishoy would receive could bring harm. However, Ash and his new coaches told him not to worry about negativity from others. Bishoy is very popular with all of the boys who remained on the team, and his father could not be prouder. There are even a few Copt boys who are thinking about trying out at the next opportunity.

Life in Egypt is not easy for Copts. For over a thousand years, they have lived in fear that violence could be right around the corner, and it often has been. Bishoy has decided he is not going to live life guided by what could or might happen. Whether going to church with his family, walking around the city with his sister, or playing soccer on the pitch, Bishoy is choosing to be brave.



Fun Facts

The Nile River is 4,132 miles.

95% of the population in Egypt lives along the Nile river

Egypt lies in the north of the African continent.

Ancient Egyptians invented the first known 365-day calendar.

The official language spoken in Egypt is Arabic

The capital of Egypt is Cairo.

102 million people currently live in Egypt.

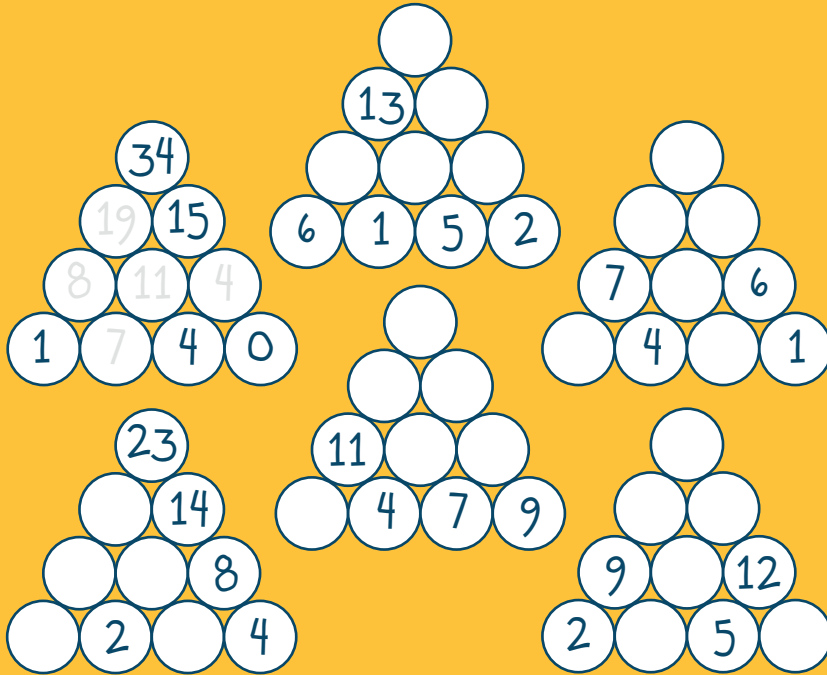
Egypt is believed to be about 90% Muslim.

Egypt is home to about 118 pyramids.

Egypt gets between .5 and 8 inches of rain during the entire year.

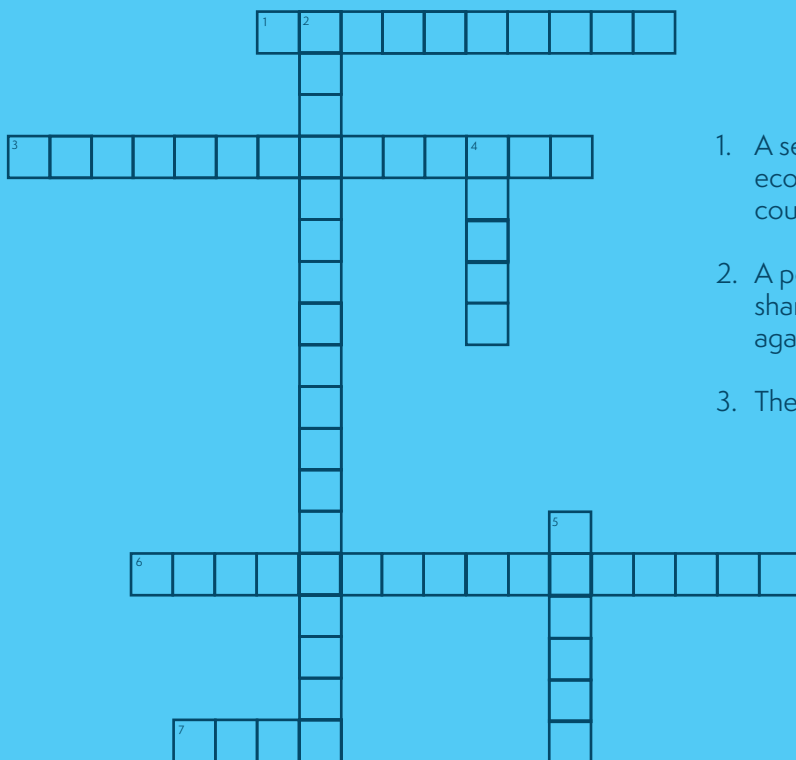
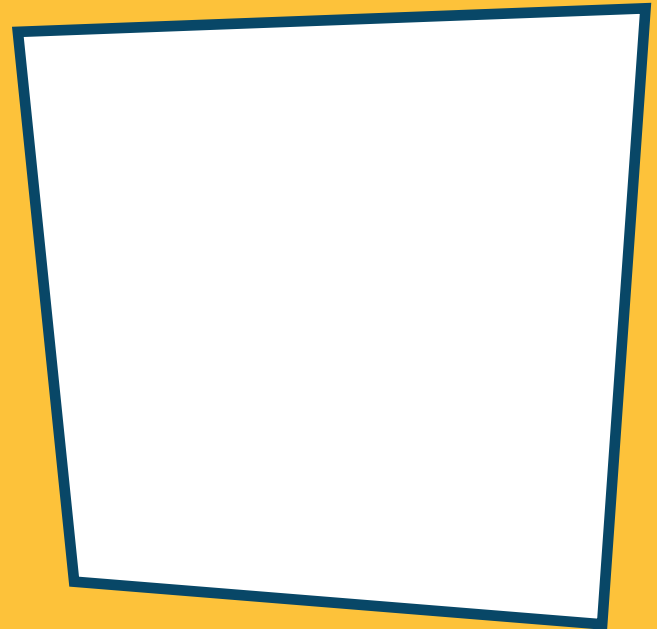
Math Pyramids

Add the numbers next to each other in each row.
Write the answer in the circle above the two numbers.
Add up and subtract down.



Hieroglyphs

Ancient Egyptians didn't have the alphabet that we use today. Instead, they wrote using hieroglyphics, which often used symbols. Hieroglyphs were like ancient emojis. Create a message using just emojis. Then ask a friend to decipher your message.



Crossword

1. A series of uprisings against government corruption and economic problems that spread across several Arab countries in the early 2010s.
2. A person who has strong beliefs about religion that are not shared by most people. They often support using violence against those with different religious beliefs.
3. The unjust treatment of a category of people.
4. A religion founded by a man named Muhammad in the 7th century in what is now Saudi Arabia.
5. A person who believes in and practices Islam.
6. The activity of starting and maintaining a business.
7. A native Egyptian in ancient times, but in more recent times, a member of the Christian Coptic Orthodox Church.

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Images: Getty Images

Answer key:

