In the summer of 2013 I made a decision to travel to Egypt and volunteer at the American university in Cairo. The plan was to campaign and raise awareness on environmental issues that were prevalent in the country, specifically pollution and potential fuel alternatives. It was all planned and I was ready to fly out and begin the internship. However, a few days before my trip to Egypt, a country which had only recently undergone a revolution in 2011 was set for another fresh wave of “revolutionary protests”. Thousands were protesting in the iconic Tahrir Square, situated at the heart of Cairo. I distinctly remember watching the scenes at home and wondering; was it safe to go?

The country was completely polarised, the complete opposite to the revolution in 2011 where the overwhelming majority had the same objective; which was to remove the dictator who had ruled over the country for decades. This time round it was completely different as some wanted the first democratically elected president to remain in power while a substantial percentage did not.

Despite the unstable situation of the country I made the decision to continue with my plans and fly out.

The political situation in the country meant that I was unable to maintain my initial plans of completing the internship, however all was not lost. I soon learnt that the apartment I would soon call home for the next two months was located conveniently close to an orphanage called Darul-Khayr. It almost became second nature to visit the children there daily. I taught them about modern technology and the western world, but they had educated me on much more valuable matters, they gave me the best possible insight on the Egyptian culture and what life there was really like for them. The children were from the most diverse of backgrounds, brought together by pain and loss but united by compassion and love. In some ways I believe it proved to be an even better learning experience than the internship would have been, most significantly to my newly founded mentality. One thing I will never forget was the amount of love and respect the children had, in particular for visitors like myself. I remember being greeted by the entire family each time I would visit; the children would leave their games only to rush to the door to greet me. Some values we can certainly learn from.

During my days at the orphanage I also enrolled at the Tibyaan Centre, where I studied the Arabic language intensively. Having already spent two years learning the language I was eager to practice my skills, I tried at every given opportunity to speak in the mother tongue of the land, and everyone understood me! However they all replied in their dialect which was interesting as
many words sounded different. By the time I had completed the course my Arabic skills had improved drastically, however as the Egyptian people spoke in a rather unique dialect, it was difficult at times to decipher and understand some of the words being spoken. My advice to those interested in learning the Arabic language is to learn Fusha which is basically classical Arabic with the addition of many modern words. A dialect may be worth learning if you plan to live in the country.

Whilst in Cairo, in one particular area called Nasr city I was saddened to see many homeless individuals, with the vast majority being women. I could not comprehend the severity of the level of poverty in some cases until I’d witnessed it myself. I remember two particular individuals; one was a young girl who couldn’t have been older than nine, I had been walking past a group of women and I had stopped to hand them some money, as I walked away I noticed the girl following me. Initially I was afraid she was lost but soon recognised her from amongst the women whom I’d just given money; I turned to her and told her to go back to her mother. She looked up at me and gave me a response I had not anticipated, she said: “I swear in God’s name that my mother is ill in the hospital and my father has passed away.” I knew words and money would not do justice to her, I gave her whatever I could and spoke to her for a short while. The second individual was an elderly woman, who I’d see sitting in the same spot every day. One afternoon I decided to approach her and ask what she was doing sitting there each day. She said: “Brother, I have many children to support” when I asked her about her husband her response was “my husband is with God.” These are only two examples of the hundreds of examples of men, woman specifically, and children living in poverty, it’s an issue I feel should be addressed immediately and effectively.

As I was volunteering and studying the country was turning for the worst. My perspective on democracy in Egypt had changed drastically, a method of leadership created to implement rules of equality was being misused and as a result one of the most historically rich countries known to man was being torn apart. On the 3rd of July 2013 the first democratically elected president was removed from power by the Egyptian army. I could not believe that it was happening; the whole process was just shocking. Of course I cannot speak on behalf of the Egyptian people but what hope is there if an elected president can be removed within just one year, was this really a democracy or some sort of power hungry game?
Towards the end of my stay a curfew was imposed on certain parts of the country, which meant I had to leave 14 hours early to get to the airport! I remember leaving feeling genuinely saddened that my time in Egypt had come to an end. I managed to visit many historical attractions such as the pyramids, Al Azhar University which is the one of the oldest university’s in the world, the largest market in Africa and so much more. What a great experience it was, and what great people the Egyptians are. I hope and pray that the Egyptians will have the aspirations fulfilled in the near future.