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GENERATION FAITHFUL

**Dreams Stifled, Egypt's Young Turn to Islamic Fervor**By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**

CAIRO — The concrete steps leading from Ahmed Muhammad Sayyid's first-floor apartment sag in the middle, worn down over time, like Mr. Sayyid himself. Once, Mr. Sayyid had a decent job and a chance to marry. But his fiancée's family canceled the engagement because after two years, he could not raise enough money to buy an apartment and furniture.

Mr. Sayyid spun into depression and lost nearly 40 pounds. For months, he sat at home and focused on one thing: reading the Koran. Now, at 28, with a diploma in tourism, he is living with his mother and working as a driver for less than \$100 a month. With each of life's disappointments and indignities, Mr. Sayyid has drawn religion closer.

Here in Egypt and across the Middle East, many young people are being forced to put off marriage, the gateway to independence, sexual activity and societal respect. Stymied by the government's failure to provide adequate schooling and thwarted by an economy without jobs to match their abilities or aspirations, they are stuck in limbo between youth and adulthood.

"I can't get a job, I have no money, I can't get married, what can I say?" Mr. Sayyid said one day after becoming so overwhelmed that he refused to go to work, or to go home, and spent the day hiding at a friend's apartment.

In their frustration, the young are turning to religion for solace and purpose, pulling their parents and their governments along with them.

With 60 percent of the region's population under the age of 25, this youthful religious fervor has enormous implications for the Middle East. More than ever, Islam has become the cornerstone of identity, replacing other, failed ideologies: Arabism, socialism, nationalism.

The wave of religious identification has forced governments that are increasingly seen as corrupt or inept to seek their own public redemption through religion. In Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Morocco and Algeria, leaders who once headed secular states or played down religion have struggled to reposition themselves as the guardians of Islamic values. More and more parents are sending their children to religious schools, and some countries have infused more religious content into their state educational systems.

More young people are observing stricter separation between boys and girls, sociologists say, fueling sexual frustrations. The focus on Islam is also further alienating young people from the West and aggravating political grievances already stoked by Western foreign policies. The religious fervor among the young is swelling support for Islam to play a greater role in political life. That in turn has increased political repression, because many governments in the region see Islamic political movements as a threat to their own rule.

While there are few statistics tracking religious observance among the young, there is near-universal agreement that young people are propelling an Islamic revival, one that has been years in the making but is intensifying as the youth bulge in the population is peaking.

In Egypt, where the people have always been religious and conservative, young people are now far more observant and strict in their interpretation of their faith. A generation ago, for example, few young women covered their heads, and few Egyptian men made it a practice to go to the mosque for the five daily prayers. Now the hijab, a scarf that covers the hair and neck, is nearly universal, and mosques are filled throughout the day with young men, and often their fathers.

In 1986, there was one mosque for every 6,031 Egyptians, according to government statistics. By 2005, there was one mosque for every 745 people — and the population has nearly doubled.

Egypt has historically fought a harsh battle against religious extremism. But at the same time, its leaders have tried to use religion for their own political gains. The government of President [Hosni Mubarak](#) — whose wife, Suzanne, remains unveiled — has put more preachers on state television. Its courts have issued what amount to religious decrees, and Mr. Mubarak has infused his own speeches with more religious references.

“The whole country is taken by an extreme conservative attitude,” said Mohamed Sayed Said, deputy director of the government-financed Ahrām Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo. “The government cannot escape it and cannot loosen it.”

### Anger and Shame

Depression and despair tormented dozens of men and women in their 20s interviewed across Egypt, from urban men like Mr. Sayyid to frustrated village residents like Walid Faragallah, who once hoped education would guarantee him social mobility. Their stifled dreams stoke anger toward the government.

“Nobody cares about the people,” Mr. Sayyid said, slapping his hands against the air, echoing sentiment repeated in many interviews with young people across Egypt. “Nobody cares. What is holding me back is the system. Find a general with children and he will have an apartment for each of them. My government is only close to those close to the government.”

Mr. Sayyid, like an increasing number of Egyptians, would like Islam to play a greater role in political life. He and many others said that the very government that claimed to elevate and emphasize their faith was insincere and hypocritical.

“Yes, I do think that Islam is the solution,” Mr. Sayyid said, quoting from the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood, a banned but tolerated organization in Egypt that calls for imposing Shariah, or Islamic law, and wants a religious committee to oversee all matters of state. “These people, the Islamists, they would be better than the fake curtain, the illusion, in front of us now.”

Mr. Sayyid's resigned demeanor masks an angry streak. He said he and his friends would sometimes enter a restaurant, order food, then refuse to pay. They threaten to break up the place if the police are called, intimidating the owners. He explains this as if to prove he is a victim. He tells these stories with anger, and shame, then explains that his prayers are intended as a way to offset his sins.

“Yeah, like thugs,” he said of himself and his friends. “When we were younger, we watched the older guys do this, and then we took over. We inherited it.”

Mr. Sayyid, however, is no Islamic radical, combing militant Web sites and preaching jihad.

He could walk unnoticed in the West. He has a gap-toothed smile, rounded shoulders and a head of black hair that often shines from gel. He likes to wear jeans, and sandals with white socks. He often has a touch of a goatee, and a light shadow of calloused skin — barely noticeable — runs from his hairline to the middle of his forehead. The shadow is his prayer mark, or *zebibah*, which he has earned from pressing his head into the ground each time he bows in prayer.

Like most religious young people, Mr. Sayyid is not an extremist. But with religious conservatism becoming the norm — the starting point — it is easier for extremists to entice young people over the line. There is simply a larger pool to recruit from and a shorter distance to go, especially when coupled with widespread hopelessness.

“There are lots of psychological repercussions and rejection from society,” said Hamdi Taha, a professor of communications at Al Azhar University who runs a government-aligned charity that stages mass weddings for older low-income couples. “This is actually one of the things that could lead one to terrorism. They despair. They think maybe they get nothing in this world, but they will get something in the other life.”

## Obstacles to Marriage

In Egypt and in other countries, like Saudi Arabia, governments help finance mass weddings, because they are concerned about the destabilizing effect of so many men and women who can not afford to marry.

The mass weddings are hugely festive, with couples, many in their late 30s and 40s, allowed to invite dozens of family members and friends. Last year, Mr. Taha said, he had about 6,000 applications for help — and managed to aid 2,300 men and women. In Idku, a small city not far from Alexandria on Egypt's north coast, Mr. Taha's charity staged a wedding for more than 65 couples; 200 others received help but decided not to take part in the collective wedding late last year.

The couples were ferried to an open-air stadium in 75 cars donated by local people. They were greeted by a standing-room-only, roaring crowd, flashing neon lights, traditional music, the local governor and a television celebrity who served as the master of ceremonies for the event.

"They are encouraging the youth to settle down and preventing them for doing anything wrong," said Mona Adam, 26, as she watched her younger sister, Omnia, marry. "Any young man or woman aspires to have a home and a family."

Across the Middle East, marriage is not only the key to adulthood but also a religious obligation, which only adds to the pressure — and the guilt.

"Marriage and forming a family in Arab Muslim countries is a must," said Azza Korayem, a sociologist with the National Center for Social and Criminal Studies. "Those who don't get married, whether they are men or women, become sort of isolated."

Marriage also plays an important financial role for families and the community. Often the only savings families acquire over a lifetime is the money for their children to marry, and handing it over amounts to an intergenerational transfer of wealth.

But marriage is so expensive now, the system is collapsing in many communities. Diane Singerman, a professor at American University, said that a 1999 survey found that marriage in Egypt cost about \$6,000, 11 times annual household expenditures per capita. Five years later, a study found the price had jumped 25 percent more. In other words, a groom and his father in the poorest segment of society had to save their total income for eight years to afford a wedding, she reported.

The result is delayed marriages across the region. A generation ago, 63 percent of Middle Eastern men in their mid- to late 20s were married, according to recent study by the Wolfensohn Center for Development at the [Brookings Institution](#) and the Dubai School of Government. That figure has dropped to nearly 50 percent across the region, among the lowest rates of marriage in the developing world, the report said. In Iran, for example, 38 percent of the 25- to 29-year-old men are not married, one of the largest pools of unattached males in Iranian history. In Egypt, the average age at which men now marry is 31.

And so, instead of marrying, people wait and seek outlets for their frustrations.

Mr. Sayyid lives with his mother, Sabah, who is 45, and who divorced shortly after he was born. He now spends most of his time behind the wheel of a Volkswagen Golf, listening to the Koran. At home, the radio is always on, always broadcasting the Koran. Two books are on a small white night table beside Mr. Sayyid's bed, a large Koran and a small Koran.

As a young woman, Sabah, whose family did not want her last name used, never covered herself when she walked the streets of Sayeda Zeinab, the teeming, densely populated neighborhood known for its kebab and sweets. But now, she makes a pilgrimage each year to Mecca, wears loose fitting Islamic clothing that hides her figure, and she fasts twice a week.

"We pull each other," said Sabah, who cannot read or write and so has learned about Islamic ideas from her son. She said that her son taught her that the Prophet Muhammad said that even if you could not read, looking at the Koran was like reading it.

So she does just that and flips the pages, admiring the artistry of Arabic script.

## Dashed Expectations

Mr. Sayyid's path to stalemate began years ago, in school.

Like most Egyptians educated in public schools, his course of study was determined entirely by grades on standardized tests. He was not a serious student, often skipping school, but scored well enough to go on to an academy, something between high school and a university. He was put in a five-year program to study tourism and hotel operations.

His diploma qualified him for little but unemployment. Education experts say that while Egypt has lifted many citizens out of illiteracy, its education system does not prepare young people for work in the modern world. Nor, according to a recent Population Council report issued in Cairo, does its economy provide enough well-paying jobs to allow many young people to afford marriage.

Egypt's education system was originally devised to produce government workers under a compact with society forged in the heady early days of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's administration in the late 1950s and '60s.

Every graduate was guaranteed a government job, and peasant families for the first time were offered the prospect of social mobility through education. Now children of illiterate peasant farmers have degrees in engineering, law or business. The dream of mobility survives, but there are not enough government jobs for the floods of graduates. And many are not qualified for the private sector jobs that do exist, government and business officials said, because of their poor schooling. Business students often never touch a computer, for example.

On average, it takes several years for graduates to find their first job, in part because they would rather remain unemployed than work in a blue-collar factory position. It is considered a blow to family honor for a college graduate to take a blue-collar job, leaving large numbers of young people with nothing to do.

"O.K., he's a college graduate," said Muhammad el-Seweedy, who runs a government council that has tried with television commercials to persuade college graduates to take factory jobs and has provided training to help improve their skills. "It's done. Now forget it. This is a reality."

But more widespread access to education has raised expectations. "Life was much more bearable for the poor when they did accept their social status," said Galal Amin, an economist and the author of "Whatever Happened to the Egyptians?" "But it is unimaginable when you have an education, to have this thought accepted. Frustration opens the door to religiosity."

In many ways, that is true of Mr. Sayyid.

"What do you think? Of course I am bored," Mr. Sayyid said, trying not to let go of the forced smile he always wears when he talks about his stalled life. "When I get closer to God, I feel things are good in my life."

He insists that it did not bother him that he never found a job in a hotel. "No one who prays wants a corrupt job in a hotel," he said, referring to the pork and alcohol served at such establishments but which are prohibited under Shariah. Later he admitted, "Yes, of course I wanted to work in tourism."

#### Finding Solace in Religion

Zagazig is a medium-size city about an hour north of Cairo, surrounded by the farm land of the Nile Delta region. Laila Ashour works here as a volunteer in a clinic run by the Islamic Preaching Organization. Originally, it aimed to provide medical services to the poor, but it quickly expanded and also helps poor young couples start their lives together by providing furniture, appliances and kitchenware.

Ms. Ashour is 22 years old, a university graduate in communications. There was a time she dressed and acted like her friends, covering her head with a scarf but wearing blue jeans and bright shirts. She flirted with young men on the street, and dreamed of being a television producer.

Today, Ms. Ashour dresses in a loose black gown called an abaya, and covers her head, all but her eyes, with a black piece of clothing over her face called a niqab. When she goes outside she wears black gloves as well. Even in this conservative town,

she looks like a religious fundamentalist.

What she is, is hurt.

“I realized that people don’t help you,” Ms. Ashour said. “It is only God that helps you.”

She was engaged to Mustafa, whose last name she will not disclose, for more than two years. The plan was for Mustafa and his family to take a year or two to construct and furnish an apartment. But Mustafa’s father had no money left after setting up two older sons, and the young man was unable to raise enough money to finish the construction. Ms. Ashour wanted to help, secretly, but she has been unable to find a paying job. When her mother told her to end the engagement, something snapped, and she sought solace in increasingly strict religious practice.

“Everything is God’s will,” she said, explaining why she decided to take on the niqab. “Everything is a test.”

The despair extends to rural Egypt, always a traditional, religious environment, but one that ambitious young people long to escape. In the village of Shamandeel, not far from Zagazig, it took Walid Faragallah six years after graduating with a degree in psychology to find a job in a factory, and his pay was less than \$50 a month. That is an average period of waiting — and average pay — for new entries in the job market. Mr. Faragallah kept that job for a year, and recently found another factory job for \$108 a month, two hours from his home.

“It brings us closer to God, in a sense,” Mr. Faragallah said, speaking of the despair he felt during the years he searched for work. “But sometimes, I can see how it does not make you closer to God, but pushes you toward terrorism. Practically, it killed my ambition. I can’t think of a future.”

His parents built him an apartment so that he would not have to wait to marry. The apartment has been empty for years, though now, at 28 and with his new job, he said he hoped he could support a wife.

“I tell them, my friends still in university, not to dream too much,” Mr. Faragallah said one day while sitting on the balcony of the empty apartment he hopes to one day share with a family.

Back in Cairo, every Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, Mr. Sayyid’s mother cooks him something special, so that when he returns from the mosque he has something to look forward to. “I am worried about him,” she said. “What can he do?”

There is a mosque a few steps from the front door of their house. But an Islamic tradition holds that the farther you walk to the mosque the more credit earned with God. So every Friday, Mr. Sayyid walks past the mosque by his home, and past a few more mosques, before he reaches the Sayeda Zeinab mosque.

“By being religious, God prevents you from doing wrong things,” Mr. Sayyid said, revealing his central fear and motivation, that time and boredom will lead him to sin. “This whole atmosphere we live in is wrong, wrong.”

*Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting.*

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