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GENERATION FAITHFUL

Young and Arab in Land of Mosques and Bars

By [MICHAEL SLACKMAN](#)

DUBAI, [United Arab Emirates](#) — In his old life in Cairo, Rami Galal knew his place and his fate: to become a maintenance man in a hotel, just like his father. But here, in glittering, manic Dubai, he is confronting the unsettling freedom to make his own choices.

Here Mr. Galal, 24, drinks beer almost every night and considers a young Russian prostitute his girlfriend. But he also makes it to work every morning, not something he could say when he lived back in Egypt. Everything is up to him, everything: what meals he eats, whether he goes to the mosque or a bar, who his friends are.

“I was more religious in Egypt,” Mr. Galal said, taking a drag from yet another of his ever-burning Marlboros. “It is moving too fast here. In Egypt there is more time, they have more control over you. It’s hard here. I hope to stop drinking beer; I know it’s wrong. In Egypt, people keep you in check. Here, no one keeps you in check.”

In Egypt, and across much of the Arab world, there is an Islamic revival being driven by young people, where faith and ritual are increasingly the cornerstone of identity. But that is not true amid the ethnic mix that is Dubai, where 80 percent of the people are expatriates, with 200 nationalities.

This economically vital, socially freewheeling yet unmistakably Muslim state has had a transforming effect on young men. Religion has become more of a personal choice and Islam less of a common bond than national identity.

Dubai is, in some ways, a vision of what the rest of the Arab world could become — if it offered comparable economic opportunity, insistence on following the law and tolerance for cultural diversity. In this environment, religion is not something young men turn to because it fills a void or because they are bowing to a collective demand. That, in turn, creates an atmosphere that is open not only to those inclined to a less observant way of life, but also to those who are more religious. In Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Algeria, a man with a long beard is often treated as an Islamist — and sometimes denied work. Not here in Dubai.

“Here, I can practice my religion in a natural and free way because it is a Muslim country and I can also achieve my ambition at work,” said Ahmed Kassab, 30, an electrical engineer from Zagazig Egypt, who wears a long dark beard and has a prayer mark on his forehead. “People here judge the person based on productivity more than what he looks like. It’s different in Egypt, of course.”

A Play ground for All Sides

No one can say for sure why Dubai has been spared the kind of religion-fueled extremism that has plagued other countries in the region. There are not even metal detectors at hotel and mall entrances, standard fare from Morocco to Saudi Arabia. Some speculate that Dubai is like Vienna during the cold war, a play ground for all sides. There is a robust state security system. But there is also a feeling that diversity, tolerance and opportunity help breed moderation.

“There is not going to be somebody who has a grudge against the system,” said Tarik Yousef, dean of the Dubai School of Government. “You might have a problem with something, but there’s enough to make you happy. You have a job — and the mosque is open 24 hours.”

Dubai dazzles, but it also confuses. It appears to offer a straight deal — work hard and make money. It is filled with inequities and exploitation. It is a land of rules: no smoking, no littering, no speeding, no drinking and driving. But it also dares everyone to defy limitations. There is the Burj Dubai, a glass tower that will be the tallest in the world. There is the Dubai Mall, which will be the biggest in the world. There are artificial islands shaped into a palm tree design (they said it couldn’t be done) and an indoor ski slope. There is talk of a new hotel, the biggest yet in Dubai, that will cool the hot sand for its guests. There is credit, and there are credit cards, for anyone with a job. There are no taxes.

“They should give you an introduction when you arrive,” said Hamza Abu Zanad, 28, who moved to Dubai from Jordan about 18 months ago and now works in real estate. “It is very disorienting. I felt lost. There are fancy cars, but don’t speed. You can have prostitutes, but don’t get caught with a woman. I was driving along the beach and there were flashes — I thought someone was taking my picture.”

The flashes turned out to be surveillance cameras. He was speeding. The next day the police called and told him to pay his fines, he said, still laughing at his initial innocence.

He had lived for years in Canada and graduated from college there. He spoke English, drank beer, dated women, lifted weights, lived a Western-style life, but felt culturally out of sync. “At Christmas I was lonely,” Mr. Abu Zanad said one day with a beer in one hand and the tube of a Turkish water pipe in the other. “Everyone is celebrating, but international students don’t know what’s going on.”

In this way, Dubai offers another prescription for promoting moderation. It offers a chance to lead a modern life in an Arab Islamic country. Mr. Abu Zanad raised his beer high, almost in a toast, and said he liked being able to walk through a mall and still hear the call to prayer.

“We like that it’s free and it still has Arab heritage,” he said “It’s not religion, it’s the culture, the Middle Eastern culture.”

“The Arabs have a future here,” said his best friend, Bilal Hamdan. “Where are we going to go back to? Egypt? Jordan? This is the future.”

Mr. Galal sees it as his future too, especially when he thinks of what would await him at home,

where success is guaranteed only to those with connections and wealth.

One evening, as he set out for the night to meet Egyptian friends, he was noticeably agitated. It turned out he watched on television as Egypt's upper house of Parliament, a historic building in the center of Cairo, burned for hours in a humiliating symbol of the state's decay.

"Look how long it's taking them to put out a fire in Parliament and they're using the most primitive methods," he finally said. "I feel like I'm watching a black and white movie. What would I go back and do?"

Mr. Galal grew up in Shubra, a busy, crowded neighborhood in Cairo, where the streets are packed with young men who are unemployed or underemployed. He comes from a traditional, observant household where family honor is linked to obeying social norms and respecting religious values.

Mr. Galal graduated from college with a degree in social work, but the only job available was as a maintenance man for about \$100 a month. He felt as if he was treading water, and so at the urging of his family got engaged to a young woman from his neighborhood. He said that he thought the goal of marriage would give him a purpose, something to work toward.

About a year later, a friend working in Dubai recommended him for a job in construction, and he grabbed the chance. It was a difficult adjustment.

"I didn't feel like any one understood how I felt," he said. He gained weight and got depressed.

He works at a construction company helping to assemble massive air-conditioning units, essential in the withering heat and humidity of Dubai. He reviews blueprints and decides which materials are needed.

His company gave him housing in a dormitory, a three-story, sand-colored building in Jebel Ali, a sprawling desert landscape of big-box warehouses and construction sites.

"When I first arrived it was not what I expected," Mr. Galal said. "You hear about the Emirates, but all the people I worked with were Indian. I wanted to leave."

Now his home, or rather, where he sleeps, is in Labor Camp No. 598,655. He shares a room the size of a walk-in closet with two other men on the first floor of the dormitory. The hundreds of men on his floor share a bathroom and a kitchen, where he will not eat because they serve only Indian food. There are about 20 Arab men out of 3,000 mostly Indian residents. Most of his meals are at mall food courts or in cheap restaurants serving Arabic cuisine.

"It's not nice, it's normal," Mr. Galal said as he closed the flimsy door to his room, stepping over the piles of shoes and sandals in the hall. It was 5:30 p.m. and his roommates were fast asleep after a long hot day at the construction site.

A Change of Identity

In fact, the mix of nationalities has made Mr. Galal redefine himself — not predominantly as Muslim but as Egyptian. Asked if he feels more comfortable with a Pakistani who is Muslim or an

Egyptian who is Christian, he replied automatically: "The Egyptian."

His best friend, Ayman Ibrahim, 28, lives in the room next to Mr. Galal, also with two other men. Mr. Ibrahim is from Alexandria, Egypt, and has been in Dubai for more than two years. He works as a senior safety supervisor in another division of the company.

Mr. Ibrahim was waiting outside in a white Toyota Corolla provided by the company. His Egyptian fiancée's picture dangled from his key chain in the ignition.

Dubai has been built along roadways, 6, 12, 14 lanes wide. There was no central urban planning and the result is a city of oases, each divided from the other by lanes of traffic. The physical distance between people is matched by the distance between nationalities. Dubai has everything money can buy, but it does not have a unifying culture or identity. The only common thread is ambition.

As Mr. Galal and Mr. Ibrahim headed to town, the traffic was ferocious, another downside of Dubai's full-throttle development. It took two hours to get to Diera, the old part of the city. But the friends did not seem to mind inching along. Popular Egyptian love songs played from the stereo as the car crawled past the Marina, another exclamation point in a city full of them, with skyscrapers, a Buddha Bar and a marina, a real marina, for boats.

"This is not for us, the sheiks live here," Mr. Galal said as the car passed the Marina. But there was no anger or envy in his voice, as there would be if he were in Egypt, where when he sees wealth he knows that it is beyond his reach. When Mr. Galal came to Dubai his salary was 2,000 dirhams a month, or about \$550.

"I wish I can make 40,000 a month," he said with a dreamy smile. "When I first came here I was hoping for 5,000, now I make 5 and I want 10, and I will start making 10 in a month. Salaries here increase."

The young men made it to Diera, parked in a hotel lot and walked down the sidewalk, until the smell of scented tobacco was strong and sweet. They turned left at the Domino's Pizza, up a flight of stairs and into Awtar, an Egyptian-style coffeehouse that served Turkish water pipes, called shisha in Egypt, and showed Egyptian soccer on television. The place was filled with Egyptian men who were smoking, and drinking sweet tea and coffee.

Mr. Galal put his cellphone on the table and lit a Marlboro, again. He described how he no longer felt at home anywhere. The diversity and opportunity in Dubai, he says, have made Egypt seem more unlivable than it was before. But he said the openness, the temptations of Dubai, also frightened him.

"The things I saw here, I can't tell you," he said "I can't trust anyone here, I can't."

'A New Way of Life'

The Rattlesnake Bar and Grill, where he and his friend often go after the coffeehouse, is cheap by Dubai standards, about an \$18 cover charge. Inside there is a Wild West theme and a Filipino rock

band blasting pop music and many single women lined up like merchandise by the front door. A sign by the bar promised “a new way of life.”

This is where Mr. Galal met Reem — though he said that was probably not her real name. On a Thursday night — the first night of the weekend — Rattlesnake was packed with single men and prostitutes. Mr. Galal seemed jealous when Reem was working the floor, talking to guys. His head was tipped, his shoulders hiked up, a bit like a nervous schoolboy. Reem wore skin-tight black tights, a black, low-cut top, and held a stern gaze as Mr. Galal leaned in and talked to her. They chatted a few minutes before Reem went off.

“Look, I’m not a muscle man and I’m not loaded, she must like me,” Mr. Galal said, sounding a touch unsure of himself.

“She’s here for business and I know she has to do this. She tries to make me understand. But I get attached.”

A week later, Mr. Galal was overloaded. “I am suffocating here,” he said as he walked into the coffeehouse. He moved up his vacation home to Cairo. He said that he needed to get back on track, to break from the drinking and the women, and reconnect with his values.

A few days later, Mr. Ibrahim drove him to the airport for the nearly four-hour flight home to spend the holy month of [Ramadan](#) with his family. In Dubai, Mr. Ibrahim said, “There’s work and life and money. There were days when I didn’t have a place to stay, no money, nothing. But I made it as opposed to Egypt where you start at zero and stay at zero.”

But if Dubai offers opportunity, it also poses risks.

For days after his return to Egypt, Mr. Galal could not get hold of Mr. Ibrahim on the telephone. He had been arrested, charged by the police with trying to steal tons of scrap metal from his construction site. Five days after he was taken in, Mr. Ibrahim was released, but the police kept his passport.

“I didn’t do it,” he said. “I am here two and a half years trying to make a life for myself and in two minutes my life is ruined.”

In Cairo, Mr. Galal reconnected with his family. He fasted for Ramadan, including giving up cigarettes during daylight hours. And he went out looking for his friends on the bustling streets of his neighborhood, which is the antithesis of Dubai. It is filled with people, men, women, children, all night long, shopping, chatting, smoking, enjoying the cool night air, the warmth of the neighborhood, and a common culture.

Mr. Galal cut and gelled his hair. He got a close shave and bought himself a thick silver link chain to wear around his neck. He looked as if he would fit right in. But he did not feel that way.

“My friends are all stuck at a certain limit, that’s as far as they can go,” Mr. Galal said after three weeks at home. “Nothing is new here. Nothing is happening. My friends feel like I changed. They say money changed me.”

Mr. Galal and a cousin went out for a night of fun the day before he was scheduled to return to Dubai. They sat on the sidewalk by the Nile where men were fishing. A woman rented them plastic lawn chairs and brought over sweet tea and a drink made from chickpeas. "I want to go back," he said. "I was living better there. It's the simple things, sitting at the coffee shop, talking to people, their mentality is different."

He said he broke off his engagement. Marriage in Egypt is usually a practical matter, a necessary step to adulthood, to independence. It is often arranged.

A year in Dubai changed his view of marriage. "You are looking for someone to spend your whole future with," Mr. Galal said.

"I want to go back and have fun. My future is there, in Dubai."

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