

GENERATION FAITHFUL -- A SERIES OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN 2008 IN THE NYTIMES ON YOUNGSTERS IN MUSLIM MIDDLE EAST

Some Arab Women Find Freedom in the Skies

By KATHERINE ZOEPF, NYTimes, December 22, 2008

ABU DHABI, [United Arab Emirates](#) — Marwa Abdel Aziz Fathi giggled self-consciously as she looked down at the new wing-shaped brooch on the left breast pocket of her crisp gray uniform, then around the room at the dozens of other Etihad flight attendants all chatting and eating canapés around her.

It was graduation day at Etihad Training Academy, where the national airline of the United Arab Emirates holds a seven-week training course for new flight attendants. Downstairs are the cavernous classrooms where Ms. Fathi and other trainees rehearsed meal service plans in life-size mockups of planes and trained in the swimming pool, where they learned how to evacuate passengers in the event of an emergency landing over water. Despite her obvious pride, Ms. Fathi, a 22-year-old from Egypt, was amazed to find herself here. “I never in my life thought I’d work abroad,” said Ms. Fathi, who was a university student in Cairo when she began noticing newspaper advertisements recruiting young Egyptians to work at airlines based in the Persian Gulf. “My family thought I was crazy. But then some families don’t let you leave at all.”

A decade ago, unmarried Arab women like Ms. Fathi, working outside their home countries, were rare. But just as young men from poor Arab nations flocked to the oil-rich Persian Gulf states for jobs, more young women are doing so, sociologists say, though no official statistics are kept on how many.

Flight attendants have become the public face of the new mobility for some young Arab women, just as they were the face of new freedoms for women in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. They have become a subject of social anxiety and fascination in much the same way.

The dormitory here where the Etihad flight attendants live after training looks much like the city’s many 1970s-style office blocks, its windows iridescent like gasoline on a puddle. But there are three security guards on the ground floor, a logbook for sign-ins and strict rules. Anyone who tries to sneak a man back to one of the simply furnished two-bedroom suites that the women share may be dismissed, even deported.

In the midst of an Islamic revival across the Arab world that is largely being led by young people, gulf states like Abu Dhabi — which offer freedoms and opportunities nearly unimaginable elsewhere in the Middle East — have become an unlikely place of refuge for some young Arab women. And many say that the experience of living independently and working hard for high salaries has forever changed their ambitions and their beliefs about themselves, though it can also lead to a painful sense of alienation from their home countries and their families.

At almost any hour of the day or night, there are a dozen or more young women with identical rolling suitcases waiting in the lobby of their dormitory to be picked up for work on Etihad flights. Though several are still drowsily applying makeup — and the more steady-handed have perfected a back-of-the-bus toilette that takes exactly the length of their usual ride to Abu Dhabi International Airport — they are uniformly well ironed and blow-dried. Those with longer hair wear black hair-ties wrapped around meticulously hair-netted ponytails. They wear jaunty little caps with attached gauzy scarves that hint at hijab, the head coverings worn by many Muslim women. Like college students during exams, all of them gripe good-naturedly about how little they have slept.

There are exclamations of congratulation and commiseration as the women learn friends' assignments. Most coveted are long-haul routes to places like Toronto and Sydney, Australia, where layovers may last many days, hotels are comfortable and per diem allowances from the airline to cover food and incidentals are generous. Short-haul flights to places like Khartoum, Sudan, are dreaded: more than four hours of work, followed by refueling, a new load of passengers, an exhausting late-night return flight to Abu Dhabi and the shuttle bus back to the dormitory tower with its vigilant guards.

Upstairs, scrubbed of their thick, professional makeup, most of the women look a decade younger. They seem to subsist on snack food: toast made, Arabic-style, by waving flaps of pita over an open flame; slivers of cheap, over-salted Bulgarian cheese; the Lebanese date-filled cookies called ajweh; pillowy rolls from a local Cinnamon outlet that one young Syrian flight attendant proclaimed herself addicted to (an expression she used with self-conscious delight, a badge of newfound worldliness).

They watch bootlegged DVDs — “Desperate Housewives,” “Sex and the City” — bought on layovers in Bangladesh and Indonesia. They drift along the tiled floors between their rooms in velour sweatpants and fuzzy slippers, and they keep their voices low: someone is always trying to catch a wink of sleep before her flight.

A Lonely Existence

It is a hushed, lonely and fluorescent-lighted existence, and it is leavened mostly by nights out dancing. Despite the increasing numbers of women moving to the gulf countries, the labor migration patterns of the last 20 years have left the Emirates with a male-female ratio that is more skewed than anywhere else in the world; in the 15-to-64 age group, there are more than 2.7 men for every woman.

Etihad flight attendants are such popular additions to Abu Dhabi's modest hotel bar scene that their presence is encouraged by frequent “Ladies' Nights” and cabin-crew-only drink discounts. It is almost impossible for an unveiled woman in her 20s to go to a mall or grocery store in Abu Dhabi without being asked regularly, by grinning strangers, if she is a stewardess.

One evening last fall, an Egyptian flight attendant for Etihad with dyed blond hair and five-inch platform heels led a friend — a 23-year-old Tunisian woman wearing a sparkly

white belt who said that she had come to the Emirates hoping to find work as a seamstress — up to the entrance of the Sax nightclub at the Royal Meridien Hotel. Just inside, in the bar area, several young Emirates men in white dishdashas were dancing jerkily to deafening club music. Clutching her friend by the elbow, the Egyptian woman indicated one of the bouncers. “Isn’t he just so yummy?” she shrieked. The bouncer, who had plainly heard, ignored her, and the women filed past. Despite appearances, explained the Egyptian flight attendant — who asked not to be named because she was not authorized by Etihad to speak to the news media — sex and dating are very fraught matters for most of the young Arab women who come to work in the Emirates.

Some young women cope with their new lives away from home by becoming almost nun-like, keeping to themselves and remaining very observant Muslims, she said, while others quickly find themselves in the arms of unsuitable men. “With the Arabic girls who come to work here, you get two types,” the Egyptian woman said. “They’re either very closed up and scared and they don’t do anything, or else they’re not really thinking about flying — they’re just here to get their freedom. They’re really naughty and crazy.”

Treated Like a Heroine

Rania Abou Youssef, 26, a flight attendant for the Dubai-based airline, Emirates, said that when she went home to Alexandria, Egypt, her female cousins treated her like a heroine. “I’ve been doing this for four years,” she said, “and still they’re always asking, ‘Where did you go and what was it like and where are the photographs?’ ”

Many of the young Arab women working in the Persian Gulf take delight in their status as pioneers, role models for their friends and younger female relatives. Young women brought up in a culture that highly values community, they have learned to see themselves as individuals.

For many families, allowing a daughter to work, much less to travel overseas unaccompanied, may call her virtue into question and threaten her marriage prospects. Yet this culture is changing, said Musa Shteiwi, a sociologist at Jordan University in Amman. “We’re noticing more and more single women going to the gulf these days,” he said. “It’s still not exactly common, but over the last four or five years it’s become quite an observable phenomenon.”

Unemployment levels across the Arab world remain high. As the networks of Arab expatriates in the gulf countries become stronger and as cellphones and expanding Internet access make overseas communication more affordable, some families have grown more comfortable with the idea of allowing daughters to work here. Some gulf-based employers now say they tailor recruitment procedures for young women with Arab family values in mind. They may hire groups of women from a particular town or region, for example, so the women can support one another once in the gulf. “A lot of girls do this now because this has a reputation for being very safe,” said Enas Hassan, an Iraqi flight attendant for Emirates. “The families have a sense of security. They know that if their girls start flying they won’t be thrown into the wide world without protection.”

A Feeling of Displacement

Yet not everyone can make peace with life in the United Arab Emirates, the young flight attendants say. Even the landscape — block after sterile block of hotels and office buildings with small shops and takeout restaurants on their lower floors — can contribute to a feeling of displacement. Nearly all year long, for most of the day, the sunlight is bright white, so harsh that it obliterates all contrast. Despite vigilant watering, even the palm trees on roadsides look grayish and embattled. Some of the young women tell stories of fellow flight attendants who have simply slipped onto planes to their home countries and run away, without giving notice to the airline.

The most successful Arab flight attendants, they say, are often those whose circumstances have already placed them somehow at the margins of their home societies: young immigrant women who are supporting their families after the death of a male breadwinner, for example, and a handful of young widows and divorced women who are eventually permitted to work overseas after their prospects of remarriage have dimmed.

Far more than other jobs they might find in the gulf, flying makes it difficult for Muslim women to fulfill religious duties like praying five times a day and fasting during [Ramadan](#), the Egyptian attendant noted. She said she hoped to wear the hijab one day, “just not yet.” A sense of disconnection from their religion can add to feelings of alienation from conservative Muslim communities back home. Young women whose work in the gulf supports an extended family often find, to their surprise and chagrin, that work has made them unsuitable for life within that family.

“A very good Syrian friend of mine decided to resign from the airline and go back home,” the Egyptian flight attendant said. “But she can’t tolerate living in a family house anymore. Her parents love her brother and put him first, and she’s never allowed out alone, even if it’s just to go and have a coffee.”

“It becomes very difficult to go home again,” she said.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/22/world/middleeast/22abudhabi.html?th&emc=th>

November 21, 2008

GENERATION FAITHFUL

Hezbollah Seeks to Marshal the Piety of the Young

By **ROBERT F. WORTH**

RIYQAQ, [Lebanon](#) — On a Bekaa Valley playing field gilded by late-afternoon sun, hundreds of young men wearing [Boy Scout](#)-style uniforms and kerchiefs stand rigidly at attention as a military band plays, its marchers bearing aloft the distinctive yellow banner of [Hezbollah](#), the militant Shiite movement. They are adolescents — 17 or 18 years old — but they have the stern faces of adult men, lightly bearded, some of them with dark

spots in the center of their foreheads from bowing down in prayer. Each of them wears a tiny picture of Ayatollah [Ruhollah Khomeini](#), the Shiite cleric who led the Iranian revolution, on his chest. “You are our leader!” the boys chant in unison, as a Hezbollah official walks to a podium and addresses them with a Koranic invocation. “We are your men!”

This is the vanguard of Hezbollah’s youth movement, the [Mahdi Scouts](#). Some of the graduates gathered at this ceremony will go on to join Hezbollah’s guerrilla army, fighting Israel in the hills of southern Lebanon. Others will work in the party’s bureaucracy. The rest will probably join the fast-growing and passionately loyal base of support that has made Hezbollah the most powerful political, military and social force in Lebanon.

At a time of religious revival across the Islamic world, intense piety among the young is nothing unusual. But in Lebanon, Hezbollah — the name means the party of God — has marshaled these ambient energies for a highly political project: educating a younger generation to continue its military struggle against Israel. Hezbollah’s battlefield resilience has made it a model for other militant groups across the Middle East, including [Hamas](#). And that success is due, in no small measure, to the party’s extraordinarily comprehensive array of religion-themed youth and recruitment programs.

There is [a network of schools](#)— some of them run by Hezbollah, others affiliated with or controlled by it — largely shielded from outsiders. There is a nationwide network of clerics who provide weekly religious lessons to young people on a neighborhood basis. There is a group for students at unaffiliated schools and colleges that presents Hezbollah to a wider audience. The party organizes non-Scout-related summer camps and field trips, and during Muslim religious holidays it arranges events to encourage young people to express their devotion in public and to perform charity work. “It’s like a complete system, from primary school to university,” said Talal Atrissi, a political analyst at Lebanese University who has been studying Hezbollah for decades. “The goal is to prepare a generation that has deep religious faith and is also close to Hezbollah.”

Much of this activity is fueled by a broader Shiite religious resurgence in Lebanon that began after the Iranian revolution in 1979. But Hezbollah has gone further than any other organization in mobilizing this force, both to build its own support base and to immunize Shiite youths from the temptations of Lebanon’s diverse and mostly secular society.

Hezbollah’s influence on Lebanese youth is very difficult to quantify because of the party’s extreme secrecy and the general absence of reliable statistics in the country. It is clear that the [Shiite religious schools](#), in which Hezbollah exercises a dominant influence, have grown over the past two decades from a mere handful into a major national network. Other, less visible avenues may be equally important, like the growing number of clerics associated with the movement.

Hezbollah and its allies have also adapted and expanded religious rituals involving children, starting at ever-earlier ages. Women, who play a more prominent role in

Hezbollah than they do in most other radical Islamic groups, are especially important in creating what is often called “the jihad atmosphere” among children.

‘This Is Women’s Jihad’

As night fell in the southern Lebanese town of Jibshit, a lone woman in a black gown strode purposefully into the spotlight on a makeshift stage. Before her sat hundreds of Mahdi Scout parents, who had come to watch one of the central events of their young daughters’ lives. “Welcome, welcome,” their host said. “We appreciate your presence here tonight. Your daughters are now putting on this angelic costume for the first time.”

Munira Halawi, a slim, 23-year-old Hezbollah member with the direct gaze and passionate manner of an evangelist, was the master of ceremonies at a ritual known as a Takleef Shara’ee, or the holy responsibility, in which some 300 female scouts ages 8 or 9 formally donned the hijab, or Islamic head scarf.

For the girls, the ritual was a moment of tremendous symbolic significance, marking the start of a deeper religious commitment and the approach of adulthood. These ceremonies, once rare, have become common in recent years. It was a milestone as well for Ms. Halawi, who had been practicing with the girls for weeks: she was now a Qa’ida, a young female leader who helps supervise the education of younger girls.

Born in 1985, Ms. Halawi is in some ways typical of the younger generation of female Hezbollah members. She grew up after Hezbollah and its allies had begun establishing what they called the hala Islamiyyah, or Islamic atmosphere, in Shiite Lebanon. She quickly became far more devout than her parents, who had grown up during an era when secular ideologies like pan-Arabism and Communism were popular in Lebanon. She married early and had the first of her two children before turning 17.

As Ms. Halawi finished her introduction, the girls began walking up the aisle toward the stage, dressed in silky white gowns with furry hoods. Bubbles descended from the wings. White smoke drifted up from a fog machine. A sound system played Hezbollah anthems — deep male voices booming to a marching band’s rhythm. The parents applauded wildly, the mothers ululating.

The two-and-a-half hour ceremony that followed — in which the girls performed a play about the meaning of the hijab and a bearded Hezbollah cleric delivered a long political speech — was a concentrated dose of Hezbollah ideology, seamlessly blending millenarian Shiite doctrine with furious diatribes against Israel. Again and again, the girls were told that the hijab was an all-important emblem of Islamic virtue and that it was the secret power that allowed Hezbollah to liberate southern Lebanon. The struggle with Israel, they were told, is the same as the struggle of Shiite Islam’s founding figures, Ali and Hussein, against unjust rulers in their time.

Through it all, Ms. Halawi was the presiding figure on the stage, introducing each section of the evening and reciting Koranic verses and her own poetic homage to the veil. “Our

veil is a jewel-encrusted crown, dignified and lofty, that God made to make us blossom,” she said at one point, gazing out into the darkness with a look of passionate intensity. “He opened the door of obedience and contentment for us.”

A few days later, relaxing over tea at her sister’s house, Ms. Halawi, still dressed in a black Abaya, an Islamic gown, expanded on the theme of the ceremony. Religious education now begins much earlier than it did in her parents’ time, she explained. Islamic schools, some run by Hezbollah, begin Koranic lessons at the age of 4, and it is common for girls to start fasting and wearing a hijab at 8. In all this, the mother’s guidance is the key.

“This is women’s jihad,” Ms. Halawi said.

Camp, With a Moral Portion

From a distance, it resembles any other Boy Scout camp in the world. Two rows of canvas tents face each other on the banks of the Litani River, the powder-blue stream that runs across southern Lebanon not far from the Israeli border. A hand-built wooden jungle gym stands near the camp entrance, where pine trees sway in the breeze and dry, brown hills are visible in the distance. Then, planted on sticks in the river, two huge posters bearing the faces of Ayatollah Khomeini and Sheik [Hassan Nasrallah](#), the leader of Hezbollah, come into view. “Since 1985 we have managed to raise a good generation,” said Muhammad al-Akhdar, 25, a scout leader, as he showed a visitor around the grounds. “We had 850 kids here this summer, ages 9 to 15.”

This camp is called Tyr fil Say, one of the sites in south Lebanon where the Mahdi Scouts train. Much of what they do is similar to the activities of scouts the world over: learning to swim, to build campfires, to tie knots and to play sports. Mr. Akhdar described some of the games the young scouts play, including one where they divide into two teams — Americans and the Resistance — and try to throw one another into the river.

The Mahdi Scouts also get visits from Hezbollah fighters, wearing camouflage and toting AK-47s, who talk about fighting Israel. Mr. Akhdar led a visitor around the tents, where boys had been spelling out Koranic phrases like “the promise” and “the owner of time” using stones. There was also a meticulously arranged grave, complete with lettering and decoration. In place of the headstone was a small photograph of [Imad Mughniyah](#), the Hezbollah commander who was killed in February and who was widely viewed in the West as the mastermind of decades of bombings, kidnappings and hijackings.

The Mahdi Scouts were founded in 1985, shortly after Hezbollah itself. Officially, the group is like any of the other 29 different scout groups in Lebanon, many of which belong to political parties and serve as feeders for them. But the Mahdi Scouts are different. They are much larger; with an estimated 60,000 children and Scout leaders, they are six times the size of any other Lebanese scout group. Even their marching movements are more militaristic than the others, according to Mustafa Muhammad Abdel Rasoul, the head of the Lebanese Scouts’ Union. While the Mahdi Scouts fall under the

umbrella of the Lebanese union, they have no direct affiliation with the international scouting body based in Switzerland. Because of the Scouts' reputation as a feeder for Hezbollah's armed force, the party has become extremely protective and rarely grants outsiders access to them. Still, Hezbollah officials often casually mention the link between the Scouts and the guerrilla force. "After age 16 the boys mostly go to resistance or military activities," said Bilal Na'im, who served as Hezbollah's director for the Mahdi Scouts until last year.

Another difference from most scout groups lies in the program. Religious and moral instruction — rather than physical activity — occupy the vast bulk of the Mahdi Scouts' curriculum, and the scout leaders adhere strictly to lessons outlined in books for each age group. Those books, copies of which were provided to this reporter by a Hezbollah official, show an extraordinary focus on religious themes and a full-time preoccupation with Hezbollah's military struggle against Israel. The chapter titles, for the 12- to 14-year-old age group, include "Love and Hate in God," "Know Your Enemy," "Loyalty to the Leader" and "Facts About Jews." Jews are described as cruel, corrupt, cowardly and deceitful, and they are called the killers of prophets. The chapter on Jews states that "their Talmud says those outside the Jewish religion are animals."

In every chapter, the children are required to write down or recite Koranic verses that illustrate the theme in question. They are taught to venerate Ayatollah Khomeini — Iran has been a longtime supporter of Hezbollah, providing it with money, weapons and training — and the leaders of Hezbollah. They are told to hate Israel and to avoid people who are not devout. Questions at the ends of chapters encourage the children to "watch your heart" and "assess your heart" to check wrong impulses and encourage virtuous ones. One note to the instructors reminds them that young scouts are in a sensitive phase of development that should be considered "a launching toward commitment."

Secular Influences

In the West, the image of Hezbollah is often that of its bearded, young guerrilla fighters, dressed in military camouflage and clutching AK-47s. But Hezbollah's inner core of fighters and employees — its full-time members — is a far smaller group than its supporters. This broader category, covering the better part of Lebanon's roughly one million Shiites, includes reservists, who will fight if needed; doctors and engineers, who contribute their skills; and mere sympathizers.

In that sense, a more representative figure of the party's young following might be someone like Ali al-Sayyed. A quiet, clean-cut 24-year-old, Mr. Sayyed grew up in south Lebanon and now works as an accountant in Beirut. Hezbollah has offered him jobs, but he prefers to maintain his independence. But his entire life has been lived in the shadow of Hezbollah. He attended a Mustafa high school, one of a national network of schools affiliated with the party, where he spent at least five class hours every week studying religion and listening to his teachers pray for Hezbollah's fighters and Ayatollah Khomeini. After school and during the summers, he was with the Mahdi Scouts. Later he became a Scout leader. He is extremely devout — he will not shake hands with women

— and mentions his willingness to fight and die for Hezbollah as though it were a matter of course. “They made us, so of course I would sacrifice my life for them,” he said as he sat gazing through the glass wall of a Beirut cafe on an autumn evening. “Before, the Shiites were in a wretched condition.”

Yet Mr. Sayyid’s generation is also in many ways more exposed to the temptations of Lebanon’s secular and often decadent society than its predecessors. That shift is apparent even in the Dahiya, or Suburb, the vast enclave on the southern edge of Beirut where most of Lebanon’s Shiites live and where Hezbollah has its headquarters.

Once an austere ghetto where bearded men would chastise women who dared to appear in public without an Islamic head scarf, the Dahiya is now a far more open place. There are Internet cafes, music and DVD shops, Chinese restaurants and an amusement park called Fantasy World. There is no public consumption of alcohol, but the streets are thick with satellite dishes and open-air television sets. Lingerie shops display posters of scantily-clad models in their windows, and young women walk past in tight jeans, their hair uncovered.

The cafe where Mr. Sayyed was sitting, on the outskirts of Dahiya, was typical. Hezbollah banners were visible on the street outside, but on the inside young people sat at aluminum tables sipping cappuccinos, eating doughnuts and listening to their iPods. “Hezbollah tries to keep the youth living in a religious atmosphere, but they can’t force them,” he said, gazing uneasily at the street outside.

Mr. Sayyed mentioned Rami Olaik, a former Hezbollah firebrand who left the party and this year published a book about his indoctrination and gradual disenchantment. The book recounts Mr. Olaik’s struggle to reconcile his sexual yearnings with the party’s discipline, and his disgust at the way party members manipulated religious doctrine to justify their encounters with prostitutes. Some unmarried Hezbollah members engage in “temporary marriage” to have sexual relationships, an arrangement allowed by some Shiite religious authorities.

Hezbollah officials say they cannot coerce young people, because it would only create rebels like Mr. Olaik. Instead, they leave them largely free in Lebanon’s pluralistic maze, trusting in the power of their religious training. But there is a limit to Hezbollah’s flexibility. All young members and supporters are encouraged to develop a “hiss amni,” or security sense, and are warned to beware of curious outsiders, who may be spies.

After Mr. Sayyed had been talking to a foreign journalist in the coffee shop for more than an hour, a hard-looking young man at a neighboring table began staring at him. Suddenly looking nervous, Mr. Sayyed agreed to continue the conversation on the cafe’s second floor. But he seemed agitated, and later he repeatedly postponed another meeting planned for the next week. Finally, he sent an apologetic e-mail message explaining that he would not be able to meet again.

“As you know, we live in a war with Israel and America,” he wrote in stumbling English, “and they want to war us (destroy) in all the way.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/world/middleeast/21lebanon.html>

October 14, 2008

GENERATION FAITHFUL

Youthful Voice Stirs Challenge to Secular Turks

By **SABRINA TAVERNISE**

ISTANBUL — High school hurt for Havva Yilmaz. She tried out several selves. She ran away. Nothing felt right. “There was no sincerity,” she said. “It was shallow.” So at 16, she did something none of her friends had done: She put on an Islamic head scarf.

In most Muslim countries, that would be a nonevent. In Turkey, it was a rebellion. Turkey has built its modern identity on secularism. Women on billboards do not wear scarves. The scarves are banned in schools and universities. So Ms. Yilmaz dropped out of school. Her parents were angry. Her classmates stopped calling her.

Like many young people at a time of religious revival across the Muslim world, Ms. Yilmaz, now 21, is more observant than her parents. Her mother wears a scarf, but cannot read the Koran in Arabic. They do not pray five times a day. The habits were typical for their generation — Turks who moved from the countryside during industrialization. “Before I decided to cover, I knew who I was not,” Ms. Yilmaz said, sitting in a leafy Ottoman-era courtyard. “After I covered, I finally knew who I was.” While her decision was in some ways a recognizable act of youthful rebellion, in Turkey her personal choices are part of a paradox at the heart of the country’s modern identity.

Turkey is now run by a party of observant Muslims, but its reigning ideology and law are strictly secular, dating from the authoritarian rule in the 1920s of [Mustafa Kemal Ataturk](#), a former army general who pushed Turkey toward the West and cut its roots with the Ottoman East. For some young people today, freedom means the right to practice Islam, and self-expression means covering their hair. They are redrawing lines between freedom and devotion, modernization and tradition, and blurring some prevailing distinctions between East and West.

Ms. Yilmaz’s embrace of her religious identity has thrust her into politics. She campaigned to allow women to wear scarves on college campuses, a movement that prompted emotional, often agonized, debates across Turkey about where Islam fit into an open society. That question has paralyzed politics twice in the past year and a half, and has drawn hundreds of thousands into the streets to protest what they call a growing religiosity in society and in government. By dropping out of the education system, she found her way into Turkey’s growing, lively culture of young activists.

She attended a political philosophy reading group, studying Hegel, St. Augustine and Machiavelli. She took sociology classes from a free learning center. She met other activists, many of them students trying to redefine words like “modern,” which has meant secular and Western-looking for decades. She made new friends, like Hilal Kaplan, whose scarf sometimes had a map of the world on it.

Their fight is not solely about Islam. Turkey is in ferment, and Ms. Yilmaz and her young peers are demanding equal rights for all groups in Turkey. They are far less bothered by the religious and ethnic differences that divide older generations. “Turkey is not just secular people versus religious people,” Ms. Kaplan said. “We were a very segregated society, but that segregation is breaking up.”

In a slushy week in the middle of January, the head scarf became the focus of a heated national outpouring, and Ms. Yilmaz one of its most eloquent defenders.

The government of Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) pledged to pass a law letting women who wear them into college. Staunchly secular Turks opposed broader freedoms for Islam, in part because they did not trust Mr. Erdogan, a popular politician who began his career championing a greater role for Islam in politics and who has since moderated his stance.

Turkey remains a democratic experiment unique in the Muslim world. The Ottomans dabbled in democracy as early as 1876, creating a Constitution and a Parliament. The country was never colonized by Western powers, as Arabs were. It gradually developed into a vibrant democracy. The fact that young people like Ms. Yilmaz are protesting at all is one of its distinguishing features.

In many ways, Ms. Yilmaz’s scarf freed her, but for many other women, it is the opposite. In poor, religiously conservative areas in rural Turkey, girls wear scarves from young ages, and many Turks feel strongly that without state regulation, young women would come under more pressure to cover up. The head scarf bill, in that respect, could lead to less freedom for women, they argued. But for Ms. Yilmaz, the anger against the bill was hard to understand. So one day, armed with a microphone and a strong sense of justice, Ms. Yilmaz marched into a hotel in central Istanbul and, with two friends, both in scarves, made her best case. “The pain that we’ve been through as university doors were harshly shut in our faces taught us one thing,” she said, speaking to reporters. “Our real problem is with the mentality of prohibition that thinks it has the right to interfere with people’s lives.”

Ms. Yilmaz’s heartfelt speech, written with her friends, drew national attention. They were invited on television talk shows. They gave radio and newspaper interviews. Part of their appeal came from their attempt to go beyond religion to include all groups in Turkish society, like ethnic and sectarian minorities.

After Ms. Yilmaz left high school, she joined a group called the Young Civilians, a diverse band of young people who used dark humor and occasional references to the

philosopher Michel Foucault to criticize everything from the state's repression of Kurds, the biggest ethnic minority, to its day of "Youth and Sport," a series of Soviet-style rallies of students in stadiums every spring. Their symbol was a Converse sneaker. Their members were funny and irreverent. One once joked that if you mentioned the name Marx, young women without head scarves assumed you were talking about the British department store Marks & Spencer, while ones in scarves understood the reference to the philosopher.

In a tongue-in-cheek effort to change perceptions of Kurds, the group ran a discussion program called "Let's Get a Little Kurdish," which featured sessions on Kurdish music, history and — in a particularly rebellious twist — even language. By March, the month after Parliament passed the final version of the head scarf proposal, the debate had reached a frenzied pitch. Ms. Yilmaz and some friends — some in scarves, some not — agreed to go on a popular television talk show. The audience's questions were angry.

One young woman stood up and, looking directly at another in a scarf, said that she did not want her on campus, said Neslihan Akbulut, a friend of Ms. Yilmaz, who had helped to compose the head scarf statement. Another said she felt sorry for them because they were oppressed by men. A third fretted that allowing them into universities would lead to further demands about jobs, resulting in an "invasion." Ms. Yilmaz said later: "I thought, are we living in the same country? No, it's impossible."

They did not give up. They spent the day in a drafty cafe in central Istanbul, wearing boots and coats and going over their position with journalists, one by one. "If women are ever forced to wear head scarves, we should be equally sensitive and stand against it," Ms. Akbulut said. One of the journalists said, "You don't support gays."

Ms. Kaplan countered: "Islam tells us to fight this urge," but she said that did not affect a homosexual's rights as a citizen. "I am against police oppression of homosexuals. I am against a worldview that diminishes us to our scarves and homosexuals to the bedroom."

Ms. Yilmaz agreed. "When you wear a scarf," she said, "you are expected to act and think in a certain way, and support a certain political party. You're stripped of your personality."

The young women say that the scarf, contrary to popular belief, was not forced on them by their families. Some women wear it because their mothers did. For others, like Ms. Yilmaz, it was a carefully considered choice. Though it is not among the five pillars of Islam — the duties required for every Muslim, including daily prayer — Ms. Yilmaz sees it as a command in the Koran. "Physical contact is something special, something private," she said, describing the thinking behind her covering. "Constant contact takes away from the specialness, the privacy of the thing you share."

Still, in Turkey, traditional rules are often bent to accommodate modern life. Handshaking, for example, is a widespread Turkish custom, and most women follow it. Turkey is culturally very different from Arab societies, and for that reason interprets

Islam differently. Islam here is heavily influenced by Sufism, an introspective strain that tends to be more flexible. “You can’t reject an extended hand,” Ms. Kaplan said. “You don’t want to break a person’s heart.”

Young activists like Ms. Yilmaz are driving change in Turkish society against a backdrop of growing materialism and consumerism. Most young Turks care little for politics and are instead occupied with the daily task of paying the bills.

That is an easier task in Turkey than in a number of Middle Eastern countries, because Turkey is relatively affluent. After three decades of intense development, its economy is five times bigger than Egypt’s — a country with roughly the same population.

The wealth has profoundly shaped young lives. In cities, young people no longer have to live with their parents after marriage. They take mortgages. They buy furniture on credit. They compete for jobs in new fields like marketing, finance and public relations.

In past generations, women lived with their husband’s families, doubling their work. “When you don’t have time to do anything for yourself, you don’t have time to question anything, even religion,” Ms. Kaplan said.

The economic changes that have swept Turkish society, bringing cellphones, iPods and the Internet, are transforming the younger generation. Young people are more connected to the Western world than ever before. A quick visit to a bookstore or a movie theater offers proof.

Observant Turks are grappling with questions like: Where does praying fit in a busy life of e-mail messages and 60-hour weeks? How do you hold on to Eastern tradition in a rising tide of Western culture?

The head scarf debate ended abruptly in June, when Turkey’s Constitutional Court ruled that the new law allowing women attending universities to wear scarves was unconstitutional, because it violated the nation’s principles of secularism.

Ms. Yilmaz got the news in a text message from her friend. In her bitter disappointment, she realized how much hope she had held out. “How can I be a part of a country that does not accept me?” she said.

Still, she has no regrets and is not giving up. “What we did was worth something,” she said. “People heard our voices. One day the prohibition is imposed on us. The next day, it could be someone else. If we work together, we can fight it.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/14/world/europe/14turkey.html>

September 22, 2008

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 Playground 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 playground 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 Tariq 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 anyone 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 Rim — 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 Rim was working the floor, talking to guys. His head was tipped, his shoulders hiked up, a bit like a nervous schoolboy. Rim 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 Rim 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.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/22/world/middleeast/22dubai.html>

June 23, 2008

GENERATION FAITHFUL

In Algeria, a Tug of War for Young Minds

By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**

ALGIERS — First, Abdel Malek Outas’s teachers taught him to write math equations in Arabic, and embrace Islam and the Arab world. Then they told him to write in Latin letters that are no longer branded unpatriotic, and open his mind to the West. Malek is 19, and he is confused. “When we were in middle school we studied only in Arabic,” he said.

“When we went to high school, they changed the program, and a lot is in French. Sometimes, we don’t even understand what we are writing.”

The confusion has bled off the pages of his math book and deep into his life. One moment, he is rapping; another, he recounts how he flirted with terrorism, agreeing two years ago to go with a recruiter to kill apostates in the name of jihad.

At a time of religious revival across the Muslim world, [Algeria](#)’s youth are in play. The focus of this contest is the schools, where for decades Islamists controlled what children learned, and how they learned, officials and education experts here said.

Now the government is urgently trying to re-engineer Algerian identity, changing the curriculum to wrest momentum from the Islamists, provide its youth with more employable skills, and combat the terrorism it fears schools have inadvertently encouraged. It appears to be the most ambitious attempt in the region to change a school system to make its students less vulnerable to religious extremism.

But many educators are resisting the changes, and many disenchanted young men are dropping out of schools. It is a tense time in Algiers, where city streets are crowded with police officers and security checkpoints and alive with fears that Algeria is facing a resurgence of Islamic terrorism. From 1991 to 2002, as many as 200,000 Algerians died in fighting between government forces and Islamic terrorists. Now one of the main terrorist groups, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or G.S.P.C., has affiliated with [Al Qaeda](#), re-branding itself as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

There is a sense that this country could still go either way. Young people here in the capital appear extremely observant, filling mosques for the daily prayers, insisting that they have a place to pray in school. The strictest form of Islam, Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia, has become the gold standard for the young. And yet, the young in Algiers also appear far more socially liberal than their peers in places like Egypt and Jordan. Young veiled women walk hand in hand, or sit leg to leg, with young men, public flirtations unthinkable in most other Muslim countries.

The two natures of the country reflect the way in which Algerian identity was cleaved in half by 132 years of French colonial rule, and then again by independence and forced Arabization. Once the French were driven out in 1962, the Algerians were determined to forge a national identity free from Western influence.

The schools were one center of that drive. French was banned as the language of education, replaced by Arabic. Islamic law and the study of the Koran were required, and math and science were shortchanged. Students were warned that sinners go to hell, and 6-year-olds were instructed in the proper way to wash a corpse for burial, education officials said.

There is a feeling among many Algerians that they went too far. “We say that Algeria’s schools have trained monsters,” said Khaoula Taleb Ibrahim, a professor of education at

the University of Algiers. “It is not to that extent, but the schools have contributed to that problem.”

Over the years, the government has pushed back, reintroducing French, removing the most zealous religious teachers and trying to revise the religious curriculum. Seven years ago, a committee appointed by the president issued a report calling for an overhaul of the school system — and it died under intense political pressure, mostly from the Islamists and conservatives, officials said. But this year, the government is beginning to make substantive changes. The schools are moving from rote learning — which was always linked to memorizing the Koran — to critical thinking, where teachers ask students to research subjects and think about concepts.

Yet the students and teachers are still unprepared, untrained and, in many cases, unreceptive. “Before, teachers used to explain the lesson,” Malek said. “Now they want us to think more, to research, but it’s very difficult for us.”

Malek says he hopes to graduate from high school next year and now wants to join the military, just like his father. He is a long way from being the person who had accepted what he says the terrorist recruiter told him — that soldiers, like his own father, are apostates and should be killed. His resolution lasted for three days, until his imam found out and persuaded him not to go.

But the call to jihad still tugs at him. In his world, jihad, or struggle, is a duty for Muslims, but as Malek explains, the challenge is who will convince young people of the proper form that struggle should take. “They really convince you,” he said of the extremists. Then later, with great sincerity, he asked: “Can you help me? I want to go to New York and rap.”

The Family

In Algeria, your sense of identity often depends on when you went to school. Hassinah Bou Bekeur, 26, enjoys watching the Saudi satellite channels and the news in Arabic. She watches with her mother and four younger sisters in one room. But her father, Nasreddin, 60, stays in another room so he can watch in French, the language of his education. “He is not very strict,” she said of her father, with a touch of affection and disappointment in her voice. “We have more awareness of religion now.”

She took the veil when she was 20; one sister did so at 17, and another sister at 15. The youngest, Zaynab, is only 12 and does not yet wear the veil. The veil is a symbol of the distance between father and children. While Mr. Bou Bekeur studied the Koran, Islam was not the cornerstone of his identity. He says he even drank alcohol — which is prohibited by Islam — until 1986. “I never knew that,” said Amal, his 17-year-old daughter, and then with a smile, she waved her fist at her father and said, “I will kill you.”

The Bou Bekeur family illustrates the outcome of Algeria's school-based Arabization project. The family is close but the generation gap is extraordinary. It is not solely the result of schooling — but the history of the education system here helps explain the distance between the generations.

It begins with occupation and schools designed to train people for a French-run system. Even after independence, the schools needed to continue to train in French because the government needed managers and experts to replace those French citizens who had left the country, officials here said. In 1971, officials said, the Arabization project began in earnest, when French was prohibited as a language of education.

But there were not enough educators qualified to teach in Arabic, so Algeria turned to Egyptians, Iraqis and Syrians — not realizing, officials say now, that many of those teachers had extreme religious views and that they helped plant the seeds of radicalism that would later flourish in a school system where Arabization became interchangeable with Islamization. In the Bou Bekeur house that meant children far more religious than their father — and their mother. “The foundation of religion, I learned in school,” said Mr. Bou Bekeur's son, Abdel Rahman, 25. “We pray more than them and we know religion better than them,” he said of his father's generation. “We are more religious. My father used to drink. I never drank. My father asked me if it was O.K. to take a car loan. I told him, no, it is Haram,” forbidden in Islam.

So his father did not take the loan. His father is a quiet man in a house of strong-willed people. He can barely help his children with their homework, because his Arabic is poor. And he worries about their future, and the future of his country. “Now they are at a crossroads,” Mr. Bou Bekeur said of his children and their generation. “Either they go to the West, or stay with this and become extremists.”

The children do not respond to such remarks. They often give their father a kind of sad, knowing smile, as though they have done the best that they can with him, and are pleased with the progress he has made.

The family lives in a small pink villa, inherited from Mr. Bou Bekeur's father, who was killed fighting the French. Mr. Bou Bekeur's wife, Naima, is 48, and of a different generation altogether. She was among the first to go through the state-sponsored Arabization process. She said she remembered having a teacher from Egypt who was supposed to teach academic subjects in Arabic — but provided her first real lessons in religion.

Mrs. Bou Bekeur started serving lunch, homemade couscous. The family was sitting in the main living room on big brown couches, as Mr. Bou Bekeur scratched away at one of his French crossword puzzles. Hassinah wore orange velour pants, an orange velour top and a large pink scarf that covered her head and was pinned beneath her chin.

The conversation shifted, with Hassinah complaining that men were treated better at home than women. “The boys don't have to wash the dishes. Why?” she said. “Why the

difference? If I had a boy or girl, I would treat them equal. “Women are supposed to work all day and come home and clean and cook — no way,” she fumed, her hands firmly on her knees. Mr. Bou Bekeur seemed pleased. “Women have more opportunities today than they used to. Women can participate in sports and still be respected,” he said in his naturally soft voice. “No,” Hassinah said, gently, shaking her head at her father. “My way of thinking is more influenced by religion. My religion tells me ‘no, that’s not right.’ ” Zaynab, the 12-year-old, was seated in the corner, headphones on, humming a song by [Beyoncé](#), and smiling as she did homework.

Malek and Friends

Four years ago, Amine Aba, 19, one of Malek’s best friends, decided it was time to take his religion more seriously, to stop listening to music, to stop dancing, to stop hanging around with Malek — most of which he accomplished most of the time. “Muslim countries have been influenced by the Europeans,” Amine said, explaining why he thought he had not been religious enough for most of his life. “We have neglected our religion,” he said. “Like us,” said Malek, who was nearby with a new buddy, Muhammad Lamine Messaoudi, a baby-faced 18-year-old with a bit of a paunch and a constant smile. The two burst into nervous laughter.

Malek, Amine and Lamine are each dealing with the forces shaping their world in slightly different ways. Amine has chosen religion; Malek, who has gelled hair and a slight stutter, has taken a middle road of religion, girls and rap; and Lamine appears a sentry of the left, interested in beer, girls and, he hopes, a life in [France](#).

Each has felt the push and pull of the political-ideological fight going on in Algerian schools, between those who want to maintain the status quo and those who hope to reopen a window to the West. The messages the young men receive through teachers and the curriculum are still, almost uniformly, aimed at reinforcing their Arab-Islamic identity. But that is changing, slowly, and not without a fight. “We would never have imagined Algeria could one day be faced with violence that would come from Islam,” said Fatiha Yomsi, an adviser to the minister of education.

Students go to school amid subdued tension because many educators do not like the changes that are coming. “He is an Islamist. He would not shake my hand before,” Ms. Yomsi said as she introduced an Arabic teacher during a morning tour of Al Said Hamdeen high school here. Then as she walked around, she pointed out the front line in the struggle, keeping boys and girls together in class. “You see, all these classes are mixed,” she said. “It is very important. We fought for this. That is why I am targeted for death.”

At stake are the identities of young people like Malek, Amine and Lamine — and their futures.

The young men focused on trying to pass their exams, because Algiers is full of examples of those who have not. More than 500,000 students drop out each year, officials said —

and only about 20 percent of students make it into high school. Only about half make it from high school into a university. A vast majority of dropouts are young men, who see no link between work and school. Young women tend to stick with school because, officials said, it offers independence from their parents.

Algeria's young men leave school because there is no longer any connection between education and employment, school officials said. The schools raise them to be religious, but do not teach them skills needed to get a job.

This is another cause for extremism, and it is one reason the police do nothing to stop so many young men from illegally selling everything from deodorant to bread at makeshift stands. "These stands are illegal, but they let them do it as a matter of security and because of unemployment — instead of them going out and carrying weapons," said Muhammad Darwish, a social studies teacher in the Muhammad Bou Ras middle school, as he passed masses of young men selling on the street.

Malek, Amine and Lamine are all trying to avoid ending up like a vast majority of their friends — selling on the street. Lamine and Malek try to study. But they say that is only because if they fail the exams, they cannot get into the military — and if they cannot get into the military, they will have no status in Algeria. They have focused on the science curriculum. But their hearts do not seem to be in it. "They don't let you like education here," Lamine said.

Malek met Amine when Amine's family moved into the walled and guarded compound for military families where Malek already lived. It is beside the Kasbah, the old Arab quarter, where streets wind up and down hills that fall from the mountains to the sea. That was four years ago, and the young men became friends, going together to the mosque where they practiced the traditional way of reciting the Koran aloud.

But as Amine grew more religious, Malek began to drift away from him, in part out of concern for his father. "The military and a beard don't go together," he said. Malek shaved his beard and started to spend all his free time with Lamine, a very quiet young man with a shaved head. One of their favorite spots to relax is the monument to those killed in the war against the French. The concrete monument soars more than 300 feet into the sky, with three ramps sweeping up to an apex.

The sky was blue, the wind heavy and the clouds white on a May day when Malek dropped to the pavement and began to break dance, his feet in the air, his shoulders pressed to the ground. Suddenly Algerian rap played from Lamine's cellphone as they danced and laughed — until they stopped. Amine wrapped his arm around Malek's shoulder and they recited the Koran, their voices carrying through the wind. Lamine stood by, silently. "I only have 25 days until the test; I have to go home," Amine said. "My mother will be mad at me if I don't study."

After he left, Lamine was asked how he felt about Amine. He has frequently teased him, suggesting that they go together to the bar for a beer. Lamine does not go with Malek to

pray, talks often about drinking alcohol and said that two years ago he was arrested trying to sneak onto a ship to get to France. “He’s O.K.,” Lamine said. “I’d like to be like him. I’d like to be religious someday, too.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/23/world/africa/23algeria.html>

May 13, 2008

GENERATION FAITHFUL

Love on Girls’ Side of the Saudi Divide

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#) — The dance party in Atheer Jassem al-Othman’s living room was in full swing. The guests — about two dozen girls in their late teens — had arrived, and Ms. Othman and her mother were passing around cups of sweet tea and dishes of dates. About half the girls were swaying and gyrating, without the slightest self-consciousness, among overstuffed sofas, heavy draperies, tables larded with figurines and ornately-covered tissue boxes. Their head-to-toe abayas, balled up and tossed onto chairs, looked like black cloth puddles. Suddenly, the music stopped, and an 18-year-old named Alia tottered forward. “Girls? I have something to tell you,” Alia faltered, appearing to sway slightly on her high heels. She paused anxiously, and the next words came out in a rush. “I’ve gotten engaged!” There was a chorus of shrieks at the surprise announcement and Alia burst into tears, as did several of the other girls.

Ms. Othman’s mother smiled knowingly and left the room, leaving the girls to their moment of emotion. The group has been friends since they were of middle-school age, and Alia would be the first of them to marry.

A cellphone picture of Alia’s fiancé — a 25-year-old military man named Badr — was passed around, and the girls began pestering Alia for the details of her showfa. A showfa — literally, a “viewing” — usually occurs on the day that a Saudi girl is engaged. A girl’s suitor, when he comes to ask her father for her hand in marriage, has the right to see her dressed without her Abaya. In some families, he may have a supervised conversation with her. Ideally, many Saudis say, her showfa will be the only time in a girl’s life that she is seen this way by a man outside her family.

The separation between the sexes in Saudi Arabia is so extreme that it is difficult to overstate. Saudi women may not drive, and they must wear black abayas and head coverings in public at all times. They are spirited around the city in cars with tinted windows, attend girls-only schools and university departments, and eat in special “family” sections of cafes and restaurants, which are carefully partitioned from the sections used by single male diners.

Special women-only gyms, women-only boutiques and travel agencies, even a women-only shopping mall, have been established in Riyadh in recent years to serve women who

did not previously have access to such places unless they were chaperoned by a male relative.

Playful as they are, girls like Ms. Othman and her friends are well aware of the limits that their conservative society places on their behavior. And, for the most part, they say that they do not seriously question those limits.

Most of the girls say their faith, in the strict interpretation of Islam espoused by the Wahhabi religious establishment here, runs very deep. They argue a bit among themselves about the details — whether it is acceptable to have men on your [Facebook](#) friend list, or whether a male first cousin should ever be able to see you without your face covered — and they peppered this reporter with questions about what the young Saudi men she had met were thinking about and talking about.

But they seem to regard the idea of having a conversation with a man before their showfas and subsequent engagements with very real horror. When they do talk about girls who chat with men online or who somehow find their own fiancés, these stories have something of the quality of urban legends about them: fuzzy in their particulars, told about friends of friends, or “someone in my sister’s class.”

Well-brought-up unmarried young women here are so isolated from boys and men that when they talk about them, it sometimes sounds as if they are discussing a different species.

Questions for the Fiancé

Later that evening, over fava bean stew, salad, and meat-filled pastries, Alia revealed that she was to be allowed to speak to her fiancé on the phone. Their first phone conversation was scheduled for the following day, she said, and she was so worried about what to say to Badr that she was compiling a list of questions. “Ask him whether he likes his work,” one of her friends suggested. “Men are supposed to love talking about their work.” “Ask him what kind of cellphone he has, and what kind of car,” suggested another. “That way you’ll be able to find out how he spends his money, whether he’s free with it or whether he’s stingy.”

Alia nodded earnestly, dark ringlets bouncing, and took notes. She had been so racked with nerves during her showfa that she had almost dropped the tray of juice her father had asked her to bring in to her fiancé, and she could hardly remember a thing he had said. She was to learn a bit more about him during this next conversation.

According to about 30 Saudi girls and women between ages 15 and 25, all interviewed during December, January and February, it is becoming more and more socially acceptable for young engaged women to speak to their fiancés on the phone, though more conservative families still forbid all contact between engaged couples. It is considered embarrassing to admit to much strong feeling for a fiancé before the wedding and, before their engagements, any kind of contact with a man is out of the question. Even so, young

women here sometimes resort to clandestine activities to chat with or to meet men, or simply to catch a rare glimpse into the men's world.

Though it is as near to hand as the offices they pass each morning on the way to college, or the Majlis, a traditional home reception room, where their fathers and brothers entertain friends, the men's world is so remote from them that some Saudi girls resort to disguise in order to venture into it.

At Prince Sultan University, where Atheer Jassem al-Othman, 18, is a first-year law student, a pair of second-year students recently spent a mid-morning break between classes showing off photographs of themselves dressed as boys.

In the pictures, the girls wore thobes, the ankle-length white garments traditionally worn by Saudi men, and had covered their hair with the male headdresses called shmags. One of the girls had used an eyeliner pencil to give herself a grayish, stubble-like mist along her jaw line. Displayed on the screens of the two girls' cellphones, the photographs evoked little exclamations of congratulation as they were passed around. "A lot of girls do it," said an 18-year-old named Sara al-Tukhaifi who explained that a girl and her friends might cross-dress, sneaking thobes out of a brother's closet, then challenge each other to enter the Saudi male sphere in various ways, by walking nonchalantly up to the men-only counter in a McDonalds, say, or even by driving. "It's just a game," Ms. Tukhaifi said, although detention by the religious police is always a possibility. "I haven't done it myself, but those two are really good at it. They went into a store and pretended to be looking at another girl — they even got her to turn her face away."

Grinning, Ms. Tukhaifi mimicked the gesture, pressing her face into the corner of her hijab with exaggerated pretend modesty while her classmate Shaden giggled. Saudi newspapers often lament the rise of rebellious behavior among young Saudis. There are reports of a recent spate of ugly confrontations between youths and the religious police, and of a supposed increase in same-sex love affairs among young people frustrated at the strict division between the genders.

And certainly, practices like "numbering" — where a group of young men in a car chase another car they believe to contain young women, and try to give the women their phone number via Bluetooth, or by holding a written number up to the window — have become a very visible part of Saudi urban life.

Flirting by Phone

A woman can't switch her phone's Bluetooth feature on in a public place without receiving a barrage of the love poems and photos of flowers and small children which many Saudi men keep stored on their phones for purposes of flirtation. And last year, Al Arabiyyah television reported that some young Saudis have started buying special "electronic belts," which use Bluetooth technology to discreetly beam the wearer's cellphone number and e-mail address at passing members of the opposite sex.

Ms. Tukhaifi and Shaden know of girls in their college who have passionate friendships, possibly even love affairs, with other girls but they say that this, like the cross-dressing, is just a “game” born of frustration, something that will inevitably end when the girls in question become engaged. And they and their friends say that they find the experience of being chased by boys in cars to be frightening, and insist that they do not know any girl who has actually spoken to a boy who contacted her via Bluetooth. “If your family found out you were talking to a man online, that’s not quite as bad as talking to him on the phone,” Ms. Tukhaifi explained. “With the phone, everyone can agree that is forbidden, because Islam forbids a stranger to hear your voice. Online he only sees your writing, so that’s slightly more open to interpretation. “One test is that if you’re ashamed to tell your family something, then you know for sure it’s wrong,” Ms. Tukhaifi continued. “For a while I had Facebook friends who were boys — I didn’t e-mail with them or anything, but they asked me to ‘friend’ them and so I did. But then I thought about my family and I took them off the list.”

Ms. Tukhaifi and Shaden both spoke admiringly of the religious police, whom they see as the guardians of perfectly normal Saudi social values, and Shaden boasted lightly about an older brother who has become multazim, very strict in his faith, and who has been seeing to it that all her family members become more punctilious in their religious observance. “Praise be to God, he became multazim when he was in ninth grade,” Shaden recalled, fondly. “I remember how he started to grow his beard — it was so wispy when it started — and to wear a shorter thobe.” Saudi men often grow their beards long and wear their thobes cut above the ankles as signals of their religious devotion.

“I always go to him when I have problems,” said Shaden who, like many of the young Saudi women interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition that her last name be omitted. “And he’s not too strict — he still listens to music sometimes. I asked him once, ‘You do everything right and yet you’re listening to music?’ He said, ‘I know music is Haram, and Inshallah, with time I will be able to stop listening to music too.’ ” Haram means forbidden, and Inshallah means “God willing.” She added, “I told him, ‘I want a husband like you.’ ”

Separated From Cousins

Shaden lives in a large walled compound in a prosperous Riyadh suburb; her father’s brothers live with their families in separate houses within the compound, and the families share a common garden and pool. Shaden and several of her male cousins grew up playing together constantly, tearing around the pool together during the summer, and enjoying shared vacations. Now that, at 17, she is considered an adult Saudi woman and must confine herself to the female sphere, she sometimes misses their company.

“Until I was in 9th or 10th grade, we used to put a carpet on the lawn and we would take hot milk and sit there with my boy cousins,” Shaden recalled, at home one February evening, in front of the television. She was serving a few female guests a party dip of her own invention, a concoction of yogurt, mayonnaise and thyme. “But my mom and their mom got uncomfortable with it, and so we stopped,” she said. “Now we sometimes talk

on MSN, or on the phone, but they shouldn't ever see my face." "My sister and I sometimes ask my mom, 'Why didn't you breast-feed our boy cousins, too?' " Shaden continued.

She was referring to a practice called milk kinship that predates Islam and is still common in the Persian Gulf countries. A woman does not have to veil herself in front of a man she nursed as an infant, and neither do her biological children. The woman's biological children and the children she has nursed are considered "milk siblings" and are prohibited from marrying. "If my mom had breast-fed my cousins, we could sit with them, and it would all be much easier," Shaden said. She turned back to the stack of DVDs she had been rifling through, and held up a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, the version with Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet, a film she says she has seen dozens of times. "It's a bit like our society, I think," Shaden said of late Georgian England. "It's dignified, and a bit strict. Doesn't it remind you a little bit of Saudi Arabia? It's my favorite DVD." Shaden sighed, deeply. "When Darcy comes to Elizabeth and says 'I love you' — that's exactly the kind of love I want."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/world/middleeast/13girls.html>

May 12, 2008

GENERATION FAITHFUL

Young Saudis, Vexed and Entranced by Love's Rules

By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**

RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#) — Nader al-Mutairi stiffened his shoulders, clenched his fists and said, "Let's do our mission." Then the young man stepped into the cool, empty lobby of a dental clinic, intent on getting the phone number of one of the young women working as a receptionist.

Asking a woman for her number can cause a young man anxiety anywhere. But in Saudi Arabia, getting caught with an unrelated woman can mean arrest, a possible flogging and dishonor, the worst penalty of all in a society where preserving a family's reputation depends on faithful adherence to a strict code of separation between the sexes. Above all, Nader feared that his cousin Enad al-Mutairi would find out that he was breaking the rules. Nader is engaged to Enad's 17-year-old sister, Sarah. "Please don't talk to Enad about this," he said. "He will kill me."

The sun was already low in the sky as Nader entered the clinic. Almost instantly, his resolve faded. His shoulders drooped, his hands unclenched and his voice began to quiver. "I am not lucky today; let's leave," he said. It was a flash of rebellion, almost instantly quelled. In the West, youth is typically a time to challenge authority. But what stood out in dozens of interviews with young men and women here was how completely they have accepted the religious and cultural demands of the Muslim world's most conservative society.

They may chafe against the rules, even at times try to evade them, but they can be merciless in their condemnation of those who flout them too brazenly. And they are committed to perpetuating the rules with their own children. That suggests that Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islam, largely uncontested at home by the next generation and spread abroad by Saudi money in a time of religious revival, will increasingly shape how Muslims around the world will live their faith. Young men like Nader and Enad are taught that they are the guardians of the family's reputation, expected to shield their female relatives from shame and avoid dishonoring their families by their own behavior. It is a classic example of how the Saudis have melded their faith with their desert tribal traditions. "One of the most important Arab traditions is honor," Enad said. "If my sister goes in the street and someone assaults her, she won't be able to protect herself. The nature of men is that men are more rational. Women are not rational. With one or two or three words, a man can get what he wants from a woman. If I call someone and a girl answers, I have to apologize. It's a huge deal. It is a violation of the house."

Enad is the alpha male, a 20-year-old police officer with an explosive temper and a fondness for teasing. Nader, 22, is soft-spoken, with a gentle smile and an inclination to follow rather than lead. They are more than cousins; they are lifelong friends and confidants. That is often the case in Saudi Arabia, where families are frequently large and insular.

Enad and Nader are among several dozen Mutairi cousins who since childhood have spent virtually all their free time together: Boys learning to be boys, and now men, together. They are average young Saudi men, not wealthy, not poor, not from the more liberal south or east, but residents of the nation's conservative heartland, Riyadh. It is a flat, clean city of five million people that gleams with oil wealth, two glass skyscrapers and roads clogged with oversize S.U.V.'s. It offers young men very little in the way of entertainment, with no movie theaters and few sports facilities. If they are unmarried, they cannot even enter the malls where women shop.

Guardians of Propriety

Nader sank deep into a cushioned chair in a hotel cafe, sipping fresh orange juice, fiddling with his cellphone. If there is one accessory that allows a bit of self-expression for Saudi men, it is their cellphones. Nader's is filled with pictures of pretty women taken from the Internet, tight face shots of singers and actresses. His ring tone is a love song in Arabic (one of the most popular ring tones among his cousins is the theme song to "Titanic"). "I'm very romantic," Nader said. "I don't like action movies. I like romance. 'Titanic' is No. 1. I like 'Head Over Heels.' Romance is love."

Three days later, in a nearby restaurant, Nader and Enad were concentrating on eating with utensils, feeling a bit awkward since they normally eat with their right hands. Suddenly, the young men stopped focusing on their food. A woman had entered the restaurant, alone. She was completely draped in a black Abaya, her face covered by a black veil, her hair and ears covered by a black cloth pulled tight. "Look at the batman," Nader said derisively, snickering.

Enad pretended to toss his burning cigarette at the woman, who by now had been seated at a table. The glaring young men unnerved her, as though her parents had caught her doing something wrong. “She is alone, without a man,” Enad said, explaining why they were disgusted, not just with her, but with her male relatives, too, wherever they were.

When a man joined her at the table — someone they assumed was her husband — she removed her face veil, which fueled Enad and Nader’s hostility. They continued to make mocking hand gestures and comments until the couple changed tables. Even then, the woman was so flustered she held the cloth self-consciously over her face throughout her meal. “Thank God our women are at home,” Enad said.

Nader and Enad pray five times a day, often stopping whatever they are doing to traipse off with their cousins to the nearest mosque. Prayer is mandatory in the kingdom, and the religious police force all shops to shut during prayer times. But it is also casual, as routine for Nader and Enad as taking a coffee break. To Nader and Enad, prayer is essential. In Enad’s view, jihad is, too, not the more moderate approach that emphasizes doing good deeds, but the idea of picking up a weapon and fighting in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Jihad is not a crime; it is a duty,” Enad said in casual conversation. “If someone comes into your house, will you stand there or will you fight them?” Enad said, leaning forward, his short, thick hands resting on his knees. “Arab or Muslim lands are like one house.” Would he go fight? “I would need permission from my parents,” he said. Nader, though, said, “Don’t ask me. I am afraid of the government.”

The concept is such a fundamental principle, so embedded in their psyches, that they do not see any conflict between their belief in armed jihad and their work as security agents of the state. As a police officer, Enad helps conduct raids on suspected terrorist hideouts. Nader works in the military as a communications officer.

Each earns about 4,000 riyals a month, about \$1,200, not nearly enough to become independent from their parents. But that is not a huge concern, because fathers are expected to provide for even their grown children, to ensure that they have a place to live and the means to get married.

To many parents, providing money is seen as more central to their duty — their honor — than ensuring that their children get an education. Each young man has the requisite mustache and goatee, and most of the time dresses in a traditional robe. Nader prefers the white thobe, an ankle-length gown; Enad prefers beige. But on weekends, they opt for the wild and crazy guy look, often wearing running pants, tight short-sleeved shirts, bright colors, stripes and plaids together, lots of Velcro and elastic on their shoes. In Western-style clothes, they both seem smaller, and a touch on the pudgy side. Nader says softly, “I don’t exercise.”

Family Life

There are eight other children in the house where Enad lives with his father, his mother and his father's second wife. The apartment has little furniture, with nothing on the walls. The men and boys gather in a living room off the main hall, sitting on soiled beige wall-to-wall carpeting, watching a television propped up on a crooked cabinet. The women have a similar living room, nearly identical, behind closed doors. The house remains a haven for Enad and his cousins, who often spend their free time sleeping, watching Dr. Phil and [Oprah](#) with subtitles on television, drinking cardamom coffee and sweet tea — and smoking.

Enad and Nader were always close, but their relationship changed when Nader and Sarah became engaged. Enad's father agreed to let Nader marry one of his four daughters. Nader picked Sarah, though she is not the oldest, in part, he said, because he actually saw her face when she was a child and recalled that she was pretty. They quickly signed a wedding contract, making them legally married, but by tradition they do not consider themselves so until the wedding party, set for this spring. During the intervening months, they are not allowed to see each other or spend any time together.

Nader said he expected to see his new wife for the first time after their wedding ceremony — which would also be segregated by sex — when they are photographed as husband and wife. “If you want to know what your wife looks like, look at her brother,” Nader said in defending the practice of marrying someone he had seen only once, briefly, as a child. That is the traditional Nader, who at times conflicts with the romantic Nader.

Soon his cellphone beeped, signaling a text message. Nader blushed, stuck his tongue out and turned slightly away to read the message, which came from “My Love.” He sneaks secret phone calls and messages with Sarah. When she calls, or writes a message, his phone flashes “My Love” over two interlocked red hearts. “I have a connection,” he said, quietly, as he read, explaining how Sarah manages to communicate with him.

His connection is Enad, who secretly slipped Sarah a cellphone that Nader had bought for her. These conversations are taboo and could cause a dispute between two families. So their talks were clandestine, like sneaking out for a date after the parents go to bed. Enad keeps the secret, but it adds to an underlying tension between the two, as Nader tries to develop his own identity as a future head of household, as a man.

Enad teases Nader, saying, “In a year you will find my sister with a mustache and him in the kitchen.” “Not true,” Nader said, mustering as much defiance as he could. “I am a man.”

Another flashpoint: The honeymoon. Nader is planning to take Sarah to Malaysia, and Enad wants to go. He suggests that Nader owes him. “Yes, take me,” Enad says, with a touch of mischief in his voice. Nader cannot seem to tell whether he is kidding. “You know, he can be crazy,” Nader said. “He's always angry. No, he is not coming. It is not a good idea.”

Back in the Village

Nader grew up in Riyadh, and his parents, like Enad's, are first cousins. Enad says his way of thinking was forged in the village of Najkh, 350 miles west of Riyadh, where he lived until he was 14 with his grandfather. It is where he still feels most comfortable.

When he can, he has a cousin drive him to his grandfather's home, a one-story cement box in the desert, four miles from the nearest house. There is a walled-in yard of sand with piles of wood used to heat the house in the cold desert winters. Inside there is no furniture, just a few cushions on the floor and a prayer rug pointing in the direction of Mecca. Enad and his cousins absentmindedly toss trash out the kitchen window, and around the yard, expecting that the "houseboy," a man named Nasreddin from India, will clean up after them — and he does.

Enad is quiet and hides his cigarettes when his grandfather comes through. He would never tell his father or grandfather that he smokes. Enad remains stone-faced when a cousin mentions that another of his cousins, a woman named Al Atti, 22, is interested in him. The topic came up because another cousin, Raed, had asked Al Atti to marry him, and she refused.

The conflict and flirtation touched on so many issues — manhood, love, family relations — that it sparked a flurry of whispering, and even Enad was drawn in. Al Atti had let her sisters know that she liked Enad, but made it clear that she could never admit that publicly. So she asked a sister to spread the word from cousin to cousin, and ultimately to Enad. "It's forbidden to announce your love. It is impossible," she said. Word finally reached Enad, who tried to stay cool but was clearly interested, and flattered. At that point Enad was himself whispering about Al Atti, trying to figure out a way to communicate with her without actually talking to her himself. He asked a female visitor to arrange a call, and then pass along a message of interest.

Enad said it was never his idea to pursue her, but that a man — a real man — could not reject a woman who wanted him. To get his cousin Raed out of the picture, he suggested that Al Atti's brother take Raed to hear Al Atti's refusal in person, at her house. "From behind a wall," Enad said. "Love is dangerous," Al Atti said as she sat with her sisters in the house. "It can ruin your reputation."

A Question of Romance

It was a short visit, two days in the village, and then Enad was back to Riyadh for work. In Riyadh he seemed to be both excited and tormented by Al Atti's interest. That weekend, he and Nader went out to the desert, just outside of Riyadh, where young men go to drive Jeeps in the sand and to relax, free from the oversight of the religious police and neighbors. They sat beside each other on a blanket. Nader began. "I am a romantic person," he said. "There is no romance."

What Nader meant was that Saudi traditions do not allow for romance between young, unmarried couples. There are many stories of young men and women secretly dating, falling in love, but being unable to tell their parents because they could never explain how they knew each other in the first place. One young couple said that after two years of secret dating they hired a matchmaker to arrange a phony introduction so their parents would think that was how they had met. Now, in the desert, Nader's candor set Enad off. "He thinks that there is no romance. How is there no romance?" Enad said, his eyes bulging as he grew angry. "When you get married, be romantic with your wife. You want to meet a woman on the street so you can be romantic?"

Nader was intimidated, and frightened. "No, no," he said. "Convince me then that you're right," Enad shot back. "I am saying there is no romance," Nader said, trying to push back. Enad did not relent, berating his cousin. Under his breath, Nader said, "Enad knows everything." Then he folded. "Fine, there is romance," he said, and got up and walked away, flushed and embarrassed.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/12/world/middleeast/12saudi.html>

March 4, 2008

GENERATION FAITHFUL

Violence Leaves Young Iraqis Doubting Clerics

By **SABRINA TAVERNISE**

Correction Appended

BAGHDAD — After almost five years of war, many young people in [Iraq](#), exhausted by constant firsthand exposure to the violence of religious extremism, say they have grown disillusioned with religious leaders and skeptical of the faith that they preach. In two months of interviews with 40 young people in five Iraqi cities, a pattern of disenchantment emerged, in which young Iraqis, both poor and middle class, blamed clerics for the violence and the restrictions that have narrowed their lives. "I hate Islam and all the clerics because they limit our freedom every day and their instruction became heavy over us," said Sara, a high school student in Basra. "Most of the girls in my high school hate that Islamic people control the authority because they don't deserve to be rulers."

Atheer, a 19-year-old from a poor, heavily Shiite neighborhood in southern Baghdad, said: "The religion men are liars. Young people don't believe them. Guys my age are not interested in religion anymore."

The shift in Iraq runs counter to trends of rising religious practice among young people across much of the Middle East, where religion has replaced nationalism as a unifying ideology. While religious extremists are admired by a number of young people in other parts of the Arab world, Iraq offers a test case of what could happen when extremist

theories are applied. Fingers caught in the act of smoking were broken. Long hair was cut and force-fed to its wearer. In that laboratory, disillusionment with Islamic leaders took hold.

It is far from clear whether the shift means a wholesale turn away from religion. A tremendous piety still predominates in the private lives of young Iraqis, and religious leaders, despite the increased skepticism, still wield tremendous power. Measuring religious adherence, furthermore, is a tricky business in Iraq, where access to cities and towns far from Baghdad is limited.

But a shift seems to be registering, at least anecdotally, in the choices some young Iraqis are making.

Professors reported difficulty in recruiting graduate students for religion classes. Attendance at weekly prayers appears to be down, even in areas where the violence has largely subsided, according to worshipers and imams in Baghdad and Fallujah. In two visits to the weekly prayer session in Baghdad of the followers of the militant Shiite cleric [Muqtada al-Sadr](#) this fall, vastly smaller crowds attended than had in 2004 or 2005. Such patterns, if lasting, could lead to a weakening of the political power of religious leaders in Iraq. In a nod to those changing tastes, political parties are dropping overt references to religion.

‘You Cost Us This’

“In the beginning, they gave their eyes and minds to the clerics; they trusted them,” said Abu Mahmoud, a moderate Sunni cleric in Baghdad, who now works deprogramming religious extremists in American detention. “It’s painful to admit, but it’s changed. People have lost too much. They say to the clerics and the parties: You cost us this.” “When they behead someone, they say ‘Allahu Akbar,’ they read Koranic verse,” said a moderate Shiite sheik from Baghdad, using the phrase for “God is great.” “The young people, they think that is Islam,” he said. “So Islam is a failure, not only in the students’ minds, but also in the community.”

A professor at Baghdad University’s School of Law, who identified herself only as Bushra, said of her students: “They have changed their views about religion. They started to hate religious men. They make jokes about them because they feel disgusted by them.”

That was not always the case. [Saddam Hussein](#) encouraged religion in Iraqi society in his later years, building Sunni mosques and injecting more religion into the public school curriculum, but always made sure it served his authoritarian needs.

Shiites, considered to be an opposing political force and a threat to Mr. Hussein’s power, were kept under close watch. Young Shiites who worshiped were seen as political subversives and risked attracting the attention of the police. For that reason, the American liberation tasted sweetest to the Shiites, who for the first time were able to worship freely. They soon became a potent political force, as religious political leaders appealed to their

shared and painful past and their respect for the Shiite religious hierarchy. “After 2003, you couldn’t put your foot into the husseiniya, it was so crowded with worshipers,” said Sayed Sabah, a Shiite religious leader from Baghdad, referring to a Shiite place of prayer.

Religion had moved abruptly into the Shiite public space, but often in ways that made educated, religious Iraqis uncomfortable. Militias were offering Koran courses. Titles came cheaply. In Mr. Mahmoud’s neighborhood, a butcher with no knowledge of Islam became the leader of a mosque.

A moderate Shiite cleric, Sheik Qasim, recalled watching in amazement as a former student, who never earned more than mediocre marks, whizzed by stalled traffic in a long convoy of sport utility vehicles in central Baghdad. He had become a religious leader. “I thought I would get out of the car, grab him and slap him!” said the sheik. “These people don’t deserve their positions.”

An official for the Ministry of Education in Baghdad, a secular Shiite, described the newfound faith like this: “It was like they wanted to put on a new, stylish outfit.”

Religious Sunnis, for their part, also experienced a heady swell in mosque attendance, but soon became the hosts for groups of religious extremists, foreign and Iraqi, who were preparing to fight the United States.

Zane Mohammed, a gangly 19-year-old with an earnest face, watched with curiosity as the first Islamists in his Baghdad neighborhood came to barbershops, tea parlors and carpentry stores before taking over the mosques. They were neither uneducated nor poor, he said, though they focused on those who were. Then, one morning while waiting for a bus to school, he watched a man walk up to a neighbor, a college professor whose sect Mr. Mohammed did not know, shoot the neighbor at point blank range three times, and walk back to his car as calmly “as if he was leaving a grocery store.” “Nobody is thinking,” Mr. Mohammed said in an interview in October. “We use our minds just to know what to eat. This is something I am very sad about. We hear things and just believe them.”

Weary of Bloodshed

By 2006, even those who had initially taken part in the violence were growing weary. Haydar, a grade-school dropout, was proud to tell his family he was following a Shiite cleric in a fight against American soldiers in the summer of 2004. Two years later, however, he found himself in the company of gangsters. Young militia members were abusing drugs. Gift mopeds had become gift guns. In three years, Haydar saw five killings, mostly of Sunnis, including that of a Sunni cab driver shot for his car.

It was just as bad, if not worse, for young Sunnis. Rubbed raw by [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#), a homegrown Sunni insurgent group that American intelligence says is led by foreigners, they found themselves stranded in neighborhoods that were governed by seventh-century rules. During an interview with a dozen Sunni teenage boys in a

Baghdad detention facility on several sticky days in September, several of them expressed relief at being in jail, so they could wear shorts, a form of dress they would have been punished for in their neighborhoods.

Some Iraqis argue that the religious-based politics was much more about identity than faith. When Shiites voted for religious parties in large numbers in an election in 2005, it was more an effort to show their numbers, than a victory of the religious over the secular. “It was a fight to prove our existence,” said a young Shiite journalist from Sadr City. “We were embracing our existence, not religion.”

The war dragged on, and young people from both the Shiite and Sunni sects became more broadly involved. Criminals had begun using teenagers and younger boys to carry out killings. The number of Iraqi juveniles in American detention was up more than sevenfold in November from April last year, and Iraq’s main prison for youth, situated in Baghdad, has triple the prewar population.

Different Motivations

But while younger people were taking a more active role in the violence, their motivation was less likely than that of the adults to be religion-driven. Of the 900 juvenile detainees in American custody in November, fewer than 10 percent claimed to be fighting a holy war, according to the American military. About one-third of adults said they were.

A worker in the American detention system said that by her estimate, only about a third of the adult detainee population, which is overwhelmingly Sunni, prayed. “As a group, they are not religious,” said Maj. Gen. Douglas Stone, the head of detainee operations for the American military. “When we ask if they are doing it for jihad, the answer is no.”

Muath, a slender, 19-year-old Sunni with distant eyes and hollow cheeks, is typical. He was selling cellphone credits and plastic flowers, struggling to keep his mother and five young siblings afloat, when an insurgent recruiter in western Baghdad, a man in his 30s who is a regular customer, offered him cash last spring to be part of an insurgent group whose motivations were a mix of money and sect. Muath, the only wage earner in his family, agreed. Suddenly his family could afford to eat meat again, he said in an interview last September.

Indeed, at least part of the religious violence in Baghdad had money at its heart. An officer at the Kadhimiya detention center, where Muath was being held last fall, said recordings of beheadings fetched much higher prices than those of shooting executions in the CD markets, which explains why even nonreligious kidnappers will behead hostages. “The terrorist loves the money,” said Capt. Omar, a prison worker who did not want to be identified by his full name. “The money has big magic. I give him \$10,000 to do small thing. You think he refuse?”

When Muath was arrested last year, the police found two hostages, Shiite brothers, in a safe house that Muath told them about. Photographs showed the men looking wide-eyed into the camera; dark welts covered their bodies.

Violent struggle against the United States was easy to romanticize at a distance. “I used to love [Osama bin Laden](#),” proclaimed a 24-year-old Iraqi college student. She was referring to how she felt before the war took hold in her native Baghdad. The Sept. 11, 2001, strike at American supremacy was satisfying, and the deaths abstract. Now, the student recites the familiar complaints: Her college has segregated the security checks; guards told her to stop wearing a revealing skirt; she covers her head for safety. “Now I hate Islam,” she said, sitting in her family’s unadorned living room in central Baghdad. “[Al Qaeda](#) and the Mahdi Army are spreading hatred. People are being killed for nothing.”

Worried Parents

Parents have taken new precautions to keep their children out of trouble. Abu Tahsin, a Shiite from northern Baghdad, said that when his extended family had built a Shiite mosque, they did not register it with the religious authorities, even though it would have brought privileges, because they did not want to become entangled with any of the main religious Shiite groups that control Baghdad.

In Fallujah, a Sunni city west of Baghdad that had been overrun by Al Qaeda, Sheik Khalid al-Mahamedie, a moderate cleric, said fathers now came with their sons to mosques to meet the instructors of Koran courses. Families used to worry most about their daughters in adolescence, but now, the sheik said, they worry more about their sons. “Before, parents warned their sons not to smoke or drink,” said Mohammed Ali al-Jumaili, a Fallujah father with a 20-year-old son. “Now all their energy is concentrated on not letting them be involved with terrorism.”

Recruiters are relentless, and, as it turns out, clever, peddling things their young targets need. General Stone compares it to as a sales pitch a pimp gives to a prospective prostitute. American military officers at the American detention center said it was the Qaeda detainees who were best prepared for group sessions and asked the most questions.

A Qaeda recruiter approached Mr. Mohammed, the 19-year-old, on a college campus with the offer of English lessons. Though lessons had been a personal ambition of Mr. Mohammed’s for months, once he knew what the man was after, he politely avoided him. “When you talk with them, you find them very modern, very smart,” said Mr. Mohammed, a non-religious Shiite, who recalled feigning disdain for his own sect to avoid suspicion.

The population they focused on, however, was poor and uneducated. About 60 percent of the American adult detainee population is illiterate, and is unable to even read the Koran that religious recruiters are preaching. That leads to strange twists. One young detainee, a client of Abu Mahmoud, the moderate Sunni cleric, was convinced that he had to kill his

parents when he was released, because they were married in an insufficiently Islamic way. General Stone is trying to rectify the problem by offering religion classes taught by moderates.

There is a new favorite game in the lively household of the young Baghdad journalist. When they see a man with a turban on television, they yell and crack jokes. In one joke, people are warned not to give their cellphone numbers to a religious man. "If he knows the number, he'll steal the phone's credit," the journalist said. "The sheiks are making a society of nonbelievers."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 6, 2008

A front-page article on Tuesday about the religious disillusionment among young people in Iraq carried an incomplete list of reporting credits. In addition to three Iraqi reporters who contributed from Baghdad, where the article was written, Iraqi employees of The Times interviewed residents in Basra, Fallujah, Baqubah and Mosul.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/04/world/middleeast/04youth.html>

February 17, 2008

GENERATION FAITHFUL

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 Ahram 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 Shari’ah, 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 Zaynab, 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 stalemata 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 Shari’ah. 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 Zaynab 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.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/world/middleeast/17youth.html>