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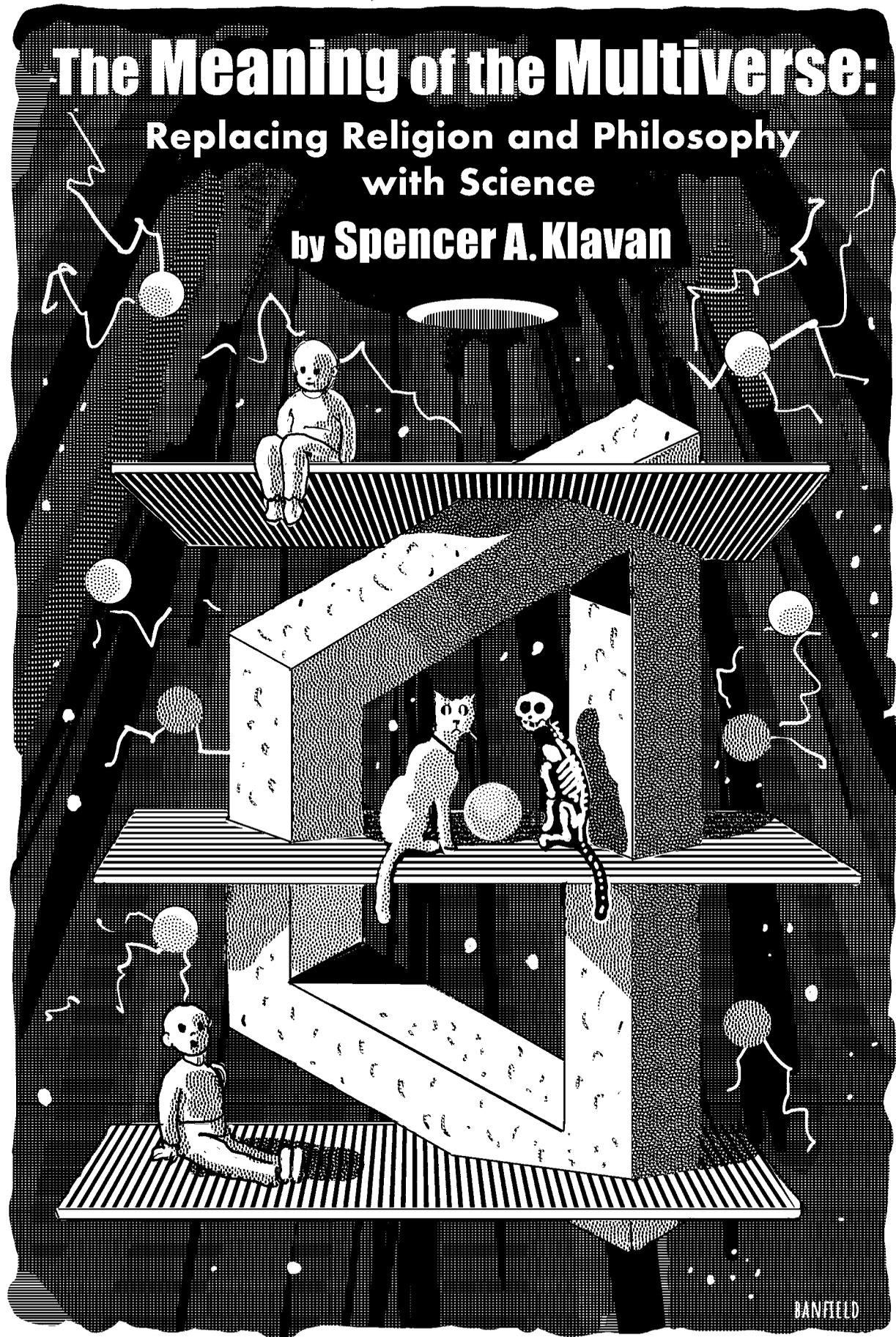
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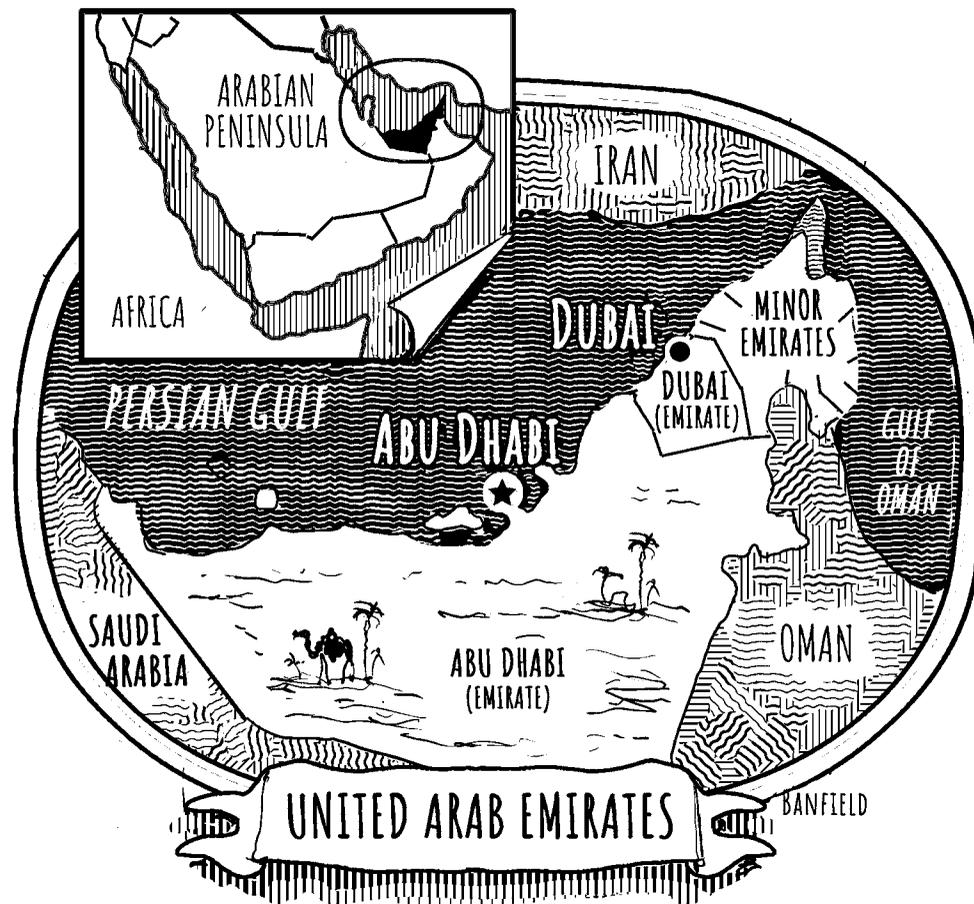
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Essay by Michael Anton

THE ROAD TO DUBAI

The United Arab Emirates' liberal authoritarianism.



IS ANY PHRASE TODAY MORE MELLIFLUOUS than “our democracy”? At once sanctimonious, dishonest, and accusatory, there is almost no end to the way these two words are weaponized by our elites to gaslight, admonish, and offend. But for now, let’s focus on just one. An implicit assumption of those who use the phrase is that no other form of government works nearly as well—or is even, in the final analysis, legitimate.

These sentiments underlie our elites’ extraordinary hostility to those nations of central and eastern Europe that don’t toe the neo-liberal line: above all Hungary, but really any outliers anywhere in the world.

I recently had a chance to see Hungary up close, as a visiting fellow at the Danube Institute. On the same extended absence from the United States, I also spent two weeks in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), part of an American delegation led by Christian Whiton and Stephen Yates, two former colleagues from my days in the national security bureaucracy. The two countries appear at first glance to have nothing in common. Yet on reflection, I found similarities (and differences) with each

other as well as with our own country that are worth considering in these troubled times.

Our elites don’t despise the UAE nearly as much as they hate Hungary. For one thing, the former is not European and so is not blamed for departures from up-to-the-minute managerial woke orthodoxy, the same way that (for instance) Muslims in the West generally get a pass for not being down with the latest LGBTQ diktat. Another reason is money—and not just oil. The UAE, through its largest city Dubai, has placed itself at the center of a huge portion of the global economy. Dubai today is to the Middle East, much of Africa, and (increasingly) South Asia what Hong Kong has long been to the Western Pacific: the business, financial, and legal capital of the entire region. If you want to make money anywhere within a thousand miles, your quest inevitably will take you there—often. And since lots of people do, it pays to keep the cheap insults against your eventual hosts to a minimum.

This is not to say that the UAE gets a free pass. All the usual NGO complaints are made against the country, including human rights

violations, draconian punishments, and lack of civil liberties. In addition, there is intense (if limited, because few care) anger at the UAE’s military interventionism, particularly in Yemen. Yet these charges—which are far from completely unfounded—do not result in the same level of Western hatred as for Hungary.

Whereas Hungary styles itself an “illiberal democracy,” the UAE’s system can be described as “liberal authoritarianism.” One may question how a state with an admitted lack of what we in the West consider core rights could be “liberal.” I’ll endeavor to explain.

Tense Transition

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES IS DEFINITELY undemocratic. Our hosts—officials from the unfailingly polite foreign ministry—liked to boast of the various assemblies and councils that vote on this or that. I have no doubt their pride was genuine and no wish to offend them, but the political scientist in me must call a spade a spade: the UAE is an authoritarian state. Everything of any importance is decided by the emirs at the

local level and by the president (or “the sheikh,” as everyone calls him) at the national.

A brief history lesson: the “emirates” that make up the UAE are seven hereditary tribal monarchies whose continuities date back to the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1971, Zayed bin Sultan, emir of oil-rich Abu Dhabi, welded six of them together, adding the seventh the following year, into the country we know today, and which he ruled until his death in 2004.

Those seven emirates are in, as they say, a rough neighborhood: the Arabian Desert behind them, the Persian Gulf in front, Iran looming to the north, a not-always-friendly Saudi Arabia to their west, and just to the northeast, the Strait of Hormuz—since the rise of the petro-economy, earth’s most important and contested chokepoint, through which passes a third of the liquid natural gas and a quarter of the oil the world consumes daily. When cash-strapped Britain informed the Gulf emirs that it would soon be withdrawing Royal Navy protection that had been guaranteed since shortly after World War I, Sheikh Zayed quickly concluded that the lightly populated and (then) defenseless emirates would be easy prey to Iran, and perhaps others. His answer was to unify along the lines of an ancient defensive league: strength in numbers at the national level, autonomy in domestic affairs. Originally, Bahrain and Qatar were to join as well but opted out at the last minute. Today, each emirate is akin to a U.S. state, with its own government, governor (emir), and local laws. Indeed, as I would learn somewhat to my dismay, federalism is healthier in the United Arab Emirates than in the United States of America.

Matters of national security and foreign policy are decided by the sheikh, of whom to date there have only been three: Zayed, his eldest son Khalifa (who died this year, while we were there), and his third son (and Khalifa’s half-brother) Mohamed bin Zayed, or “MBZ.” In the national security bureaucracy, much shorthand is used, to save time but also to confuse outsiders. Not so long ago, the three acronyms constantly on the lips of everyone who had anything to do with the Middle East were MBN, MBS, and MBZ. The first two (Mohammed bin Nayef and Mohammed bin Salman) were contenders for the Saudi throne; one still is. There is no primogeniture in Saudi Arabia (or in the Arab world generally). The next king isn’t necessarily, and mostly isn’t, son of the last. In fact, the present and prior five kings of Saudi Arabia have all been sons of the first.

How a new Saudi king is selected is mysterious. Rex Tillerson may have been a bust as Donald Trump’s secretary of state, but with 40 years in the oil business, he knows something about Saudi Arabia. He once said in my

hearing, “When the time comes, they go into a tent, and when they come out, there’s a new king. We don’t have any insight into what goes on inside.”

This mode has its advantages. The regency problem can be avoided, at least for heirs who are too young. (Saudi kings don’t retire, so sometimes regents are necessary for the older ones.) Obvious idiots and degenerates can be bypassed. Deal-making can smooth over family quarrels and extend a shaky internal peace. At its best, this form of elective monarchy enables a *via media* between the advantages of heredity and meritocracy, akin to the election-by-adoption that produced Rome’s “five good emperors” from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius.

Lost is the certitude about whose turn is next, and that there’s nothing anyone can do to change it. This makes transitions especially tense. In the Saudi case, the next one will be the tensest yet. The king to emerge from that tent will be the first who is not a son of Abdulaziz al Saud. The stakes are therefore very high. To which branch of the family will the holy cities of Mecca and Medina—the most sacred sites for nearly 2 billion Muslims—be entrusted? Who, exactly, will control the world’s second-largest proven oil reserves, and by far the easiest to extract and ship?

For a while the answer was MBN, the highly respected Saudi interior minister (not a steward of the forests, or desert as the case may be—more like a combination attorney general-FBI director, with full access to CIA/NSA-like technology) who was elevated to crown prince in 2015. That is something like being named prince of Wales—except that you can be removed at the monarch’s discretion. Which he was, in 2017, and replaced by MBS, the then-31-year-old son of the reigning king. MBN was subsequently (in 2020) charged with treason and remains under some form of house arrest.

Back in the Emirates, MBZ—who informed observers allege had a hand in MBN’s downfall and MBS’s elevation—faces no such problems. For one thing, the dominance of Abu Dhabi over the rest of the UAE is so complete that there is never any question but that the emir of Abu Dhabi will, perforce, be the sheikh of the entire country. It’s not just the oil, which Abu Dhabi has in abundance while the other emirates do not. (Dubai has a small amount, but oil now makes up less than 1% of its economy.) Abu Dhabi also accounts for 87% of the country’s land area, about a third of its total population, and nearly two thirds of its GDP. And everywhere you go, you are reminded that the founder of the country was an emir of Abu Dhabi descended from a long line of emirs of Abu Dhabi.

As for the succession more narrowly construed, Sheikh Khalifa suffered a stroke in

2014. This left the machinery of state in the hands of MBZ—since 2003 a senior official in the UAE government, and before that, an officer in the UAE military and a pilot in its air force. He is also a graduate of Sandhurst, Winston Churchill’s alma mater.

Most Impressive

IN MY TIME IN THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION, I had occasion to sit in on most of the president’s meetings with foreign leaders and to listen to nearly all such phone calls (standard practice in the national security bureaucracy). I therefore got to see and hear MBZ in action. He is, first of all, extremely amusing—in the way of a man who is comfortable with his place near or at the top of the world and who uses his sense of humor to lighten the mood and put those around him at ease. He is obviously smart and well informed. He not merely held his own in the conversations I witnessed with American officials; he ran circles around most of them.

In that first encounter, in May 2017, another aide who was in nearly all of those meetings with me leaned over and whispered, “Most impressive foreign leader I’ve seen yet.” I agreed. Many others do as well. Three years ago, the *New York Times* called MBZ the most powerful Arab ruler and one of the most powerful men on earth—this despite the UAE having a third as much oil as Saudi Arabia and less than a third of its population. Given the immense size of the UAE’s sovereign wealth funds, most of which MBZ controls, it may also make sense to consider him the world’s richest man. Sorry, Elon.

Much of MBZ’s standing is the result of assiduous cultivation of foreign, especially American, leaders and officials, plus serious spending on lobbying. It also doesn’t hurt that, via a combination of foreign procurement and domestic development, he’s built quite an armed force, which he uses to deter Iranian adventurism (depending on your point of view, the UAE is either properly wary of, or paranoid about, Iran) and intervene throughout the region.

The “Emiratis,” as the natives are called, will tell you that Sheikh Mohamed is beloved at home. This is the reason, two of them said, that the country was able to accept the 2020 Abraham Accords, which established full diplomatic relations with Israel, with so little rancor despite seven decades of Arab-Israeli animosity and a touchy incident in 2010 when the Emiratis accused the Mossad of assassinating Hamas commander Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in a Dubai hotel room. (He was definitely assassinated; who, exactly, was behind it has never been definitively proved, or at least not publicly disclosed.) Relations improved rapidly,



however, in part because fear of Iran has driven the Israelis and the Emiratis together, and also because Israeli businesses want access to Dubai's market connections and the Emiratis want their business.

"The people trust the leadership," we were flatly assured. An Emirati cabinet official told us of her very old-fashioned mother, not a fan of Israel to put it politely, wanting her whole life to visit the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The Accords completed, she finally went—and was shocked at how pleasant the whole experience was. "All this is because of the sheikh," she said.

One would expect Emiratis to praise their leader. The UAE's many expatriates, though, report much the same. One told us of seeing the sheikh not infrequently out at restaurants, without security, greeting well-wishers and happily consenting to selfies with his admiring subjects. Actual Emiratis confirmed this account and even showed us such photos on their own phones.

We were skeptical of the "no security" claim. No visible bodyguards talking into their sleeves, with white plastic worms curling out of their ears? Maybe. Or maybe they're just hanging back? Or maybe ubiquitous UAE surveillance obviates the need for a heavy-handed security detail? I was told before I came that my every movement would be watched. "There are cameras everywhere, running face recognition soft-

ware." Interesting! You don't notice it until you look for it—and then once you do, the whole country is like a Vegas casino, with dark red domes peering down from every ceiling.

But what are they looking for?

Keeping the Peace

IN MY (LIMITED) OBSERVATION, AND from conversation with various expats, it seems that the Emiratis are looking for direct threats to their rule and/or the use of their soil or assets to support radicalism. In their view, the prior decade's so-called "Arab Spring" was a vindication of their worst fears. Naïve Westerners exulted that here was the spontaneous emergence of democracy that George W. Bush had promised, and the world had long awaited. What the Emiratis saw was mass destabilization and the possibility that radicals would take over.

And many Arab regimes *did* fall, and in many places, radicals *did* take over. But not in the UAE—which was saved no less by its ruling house's popularity than by its omnipresent surveillance and unsentimental intelligence service. This is not the place to hatch a conspiracy. As one expat—a bona fide Hollywood liberal—told my group, "If you commit an ordinary crime, you'll get a real trial and will be treated fairly. But if you did it, you

shouldn't expect to get away with it, and punishments are harsh. If you are even suspected of some kind of national security crime," he continued, "well, you'll just disappear and no one will ever hear from you again."

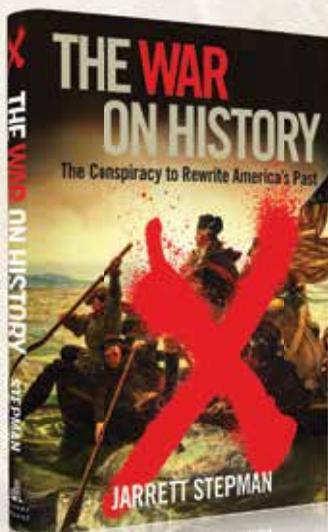
We Western lambs were momentarily stunned at such candor. Our foreign ministry handler was appalled. Here was the worst accusation of the hectoring Western NGOs just validated by a bigmouth expat—whom the ministry itself had arranged for us to meet! But the thing, having been said, could not be unsaid. Once safely out of earshot (or so we thought), a few of us Americans later dissected that particular revelation amongst ourselves. Were we being surveilled just then? If so, nothing came of it.

The truth about the UAE—and this is what makes its authoritarianism "liberal"—appears to be that, if you're not out to get the ruling families, you can do almost anything you want. Within limits. There is no freedom of speech. We met with journalists who insisted that the government applies no prior restraint, but also noted that "everyone knows where the lines are." There is, above all, absolutely no freedom to criticize the government.

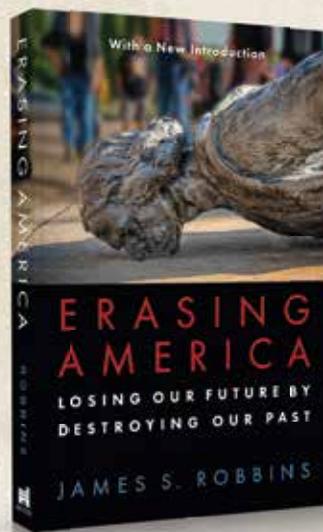
Religion is another matter. Islam is the country's official faith, practiced by 76% of its inhabitants, about whom a further word needs to be said. Depending on which source

TOPPLING STATUES. RE-WRITING HISTORY.

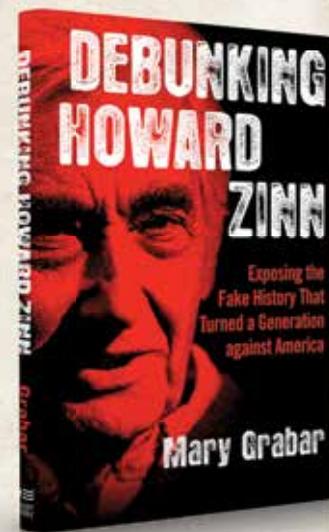
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you consult, the United Arab Emirates is anywhere between 10% and 15% Emirati (the CIA World Factbook says 11.6%). You can spot them easily, as they are the only people wearing so-called “national costume”: for the men, a long, trim white robe (*kandura*), a flowing white headdress (*ghutra*) with its headband (*agal*), typically black, and white open-toed sandals. The women wear a loose cloak (*abaya*) and mostly, though not always, some form of head covering.

The Gulf sun is oppressive, and in my Western suit I quickly realized how eminently sensible and suited to its environment the national costume is. I did feel slightly bad for the women, however, who all seemed to wear sunlight-soaking black or dark blue rather than the men’s reflective white. I wanted to ask about that, just as I wanted to ask if it was a rule or merely a custom that outsiders, not even other Arabs, of whom there are hundreds of thousands in the UAE, do not wear those clothes. But I feared that the questions might come off as rude. I surmised that, being a minority—and a small one at that—in their own country, Emiratis choose to signify through their dress that they truly belong.

The Dubai Model

NOT THAT THE UAE IS INHOSPITABLE; not in the least. One may say that the country’s whole business model is hospitality of one sort or another. At the individual level, this might take the form of an Arabic coffee ceremony, an elaborate ritual in which not only is the coffee ground and brewed but the beans roasted before your eyes. To the coffee snobs out there, if you think you know good coffee now, wait till you taste this. The pale color belies the intense flavor. There really is nothing like it in the West. (Be warned: given the quality of the beans and especially the spices used—up to and including saffron—buying a pot at your hotel will cost at least as much as a bottle of wine, about which more below.)

But the macro-level is where UAE hospitality really distinguishes itself. Before the discovery of oil in the 1950s, Abu Dhabi’s economy centered on pearl diving, Dubai’s on fishing. Pearls being worth more than fish, Abu Dhabi was richer even back then, so in 1901, the emir of Dubai (great-grandfather of the present emir) opened the city to trade and shipping by eliminating all import and export duties, attracting merchants from all over the world, but particularly from the Persian Gulf and the Indies. Oil facilitated and perpetuates the country we know today. The implicit deal between the seven emirates seems to be: in exchange for unity and deference to Abu

Dhabi’s leadership, the latter’s oil wealth will be spread around.

Petrodollars financed much of Abu Dhabi’s, and especially Dubai’s, impressive, eclectic skylines. Like many developing or recently developed countries, the UAE is very proud of things that Americans long ago lost interest in. Not only the world’s largest mall but the world’s tallest building, the Burj Khalifa—the one Tom Cruise climbs, rappels, and jumps off in *Mission Impossible 4*—are in Dubai. I’m old enough to remember when Donald Trump, outraged that Chicago had stolen the honor of having the world’s tallest building, offered to erect a taller one in New York. Today, the highest skyscraper in Manhattan, One World Trade Center, ranks only seventh.

Another driving force for unification was a desire to get beyond oil, both as the sole anchor of the country’s economy and as its chief energy source. Hence the construction of the Arab world’s first nuclear power plant which, when its third and fourth reactors come on-

From the perspective of democracy, what is the real difference between deference to unelected “experts” and obeisance to hereditary sheikhs?

line next year, will supply a quarter of the country’s electricity.

But the main driver of diversification has been the development of Dubai, already an important trading center, into a global business (and now tourist) hub. The Emiratis (or Sheikh Zayed) seemed to intuit that for the country to be anything more than a minor player, even in a region full of minor players, it would need more wealth, more technology, and thus more people—more than it could reasonably expect from natural population growth, at least in the medium term. Also, for whatever reason, native Emiratis prefer government or military service over private employment, so economic growth at the level the sheikh and the other emirs desire also requires expats. Thus, in a sense, did the whole country copy the “Dubai model” and open itself up to the world.

And the world came, and is still coming. A senior official in the UAE government told us that applications for residency permits exceed supply, allowing the government to be especially choosy. They are looking, essentially, for two

sorts of people. At the lower end, they need cooks, waiters, maids, etc., to staff the country’s, and especially Dubai’s, large and growing service economy. They also need people to build those tall buildings. This has gotten the Emiratis some bad press in the past, with workers (mostly from South Asia) complaining of long hours, low pay, and unsafe conditions.

At the upper end, they want entrepreneurs, bankers, techies, and dreamers. Emirati money backs a lot of fantastical projects that may or may not pan out, but that more cautious investors hemmed in by strict return-on-investment and cost-benefit analysis calculations would likely pass over. Emirati officials enthusiastically told us that the next green energy breakthroughs would be made there. That might have been petrostate P.R., but the Westerners they’ve enticed to relocate from Silicon Valley and elsewhere in techland to work on those projects don’t think so.

Another category of expat is those to whom one might broadly apply the term “cancelled”: people who, for whatever reason, can no longer work in their chosen field in the West, and who can’t or don’t want to retire or change careers. So long as you didn’t do anything criminal or incompetent, the Emiratis really don’t care about the root of your dispute with your ex-partners, or why you got hounded out of your last job for offending some millennial Oberlin graduate. They also don’t care if you’re a bit long in the tooth. “Age discrimination is real,” one expat told us, and proceeded to explain how he got shut out of the entertainment industry in America but was courted by the Emiratis for the expertise he brought to the table.

A final category might be frequent business travelers who come for a few days, or a week, or a month—as long as it takes to do the deal—but who consider somewhere else home. These are mostly Europeans, Americans, and Chinese. The latter especially do a lot of business with the UAE government and in developing regions to which Dubai is the gateway. Emirati officials genuinely seemed to like Americans and to value the Emirati-American security partnership (though they are far from enamored with the Biden Administration), but concerning China, their consistent message to our delegation was “don’t make us choose.”

Quality of Life

JUST AS THERE IS AN IMPLICIT DEAL AMONG the seven emirates, the UAE’s implicit deal with foreigners is: come here to work, or spend, or both, as the case may be. You can earn good money (the UAE’s per-capita income is slightly higher than America’s). Your taxes will be low and regulations kept



to a minimum. Your basic rights will be protected (there is virtually no crime or disorder). Quality of life is high, if you can stand the heat (Abu Dhabi exceeds 100 degrees for at least 100 consecutive days every year; balmy Dubai is typically two or three degrees cooler). The restaurants and shopping are excellent. Services are abundant. Everything is clean, and everything works. There is even, in Abu Dhabi, a branch of the Louvre with landmark examples of Eastern and Western art from before ancient Greece to beyond the Impressionists, including one of the world's 34 undisputed Vermeers (*The Astronomer*).

The expats we talked to assured us that their kind—at least the well-educated, highly compensated ones—are treated well. One said, “I once asked a senior guy in another country”—unspecified, but obviously Saudi Arabia—“whether sex was work or fun. ‘Fun,’ he said. ‘If it was work, I’d have an expat do it.’ That attitude doesn’t exist here.”

You can worship freely. Islam is official, but other faiths are tolerated. There would otherwise be no way to attract and keep 9 million expats, a third of whom are not Muslim. There are churches, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist temples, even one synagogue. Bibles are not illegal. In the country's many high-end jewelry shops, one sees elegant crosses for sale.

But there is nothing like our Western understanding of religious freedom. Faiths other than Islam are *tolerated*, in the original understanding of that word; they have no “rights.” If, as a Christian, Jew, or miscellaneous, you object to something or other, your options are to shut up or leave. The brightest red line is proselytization: if you're not Muslim, that will definitely get you in trouble.

And possibly even if you are. Islam is no less supervised than any other faith—really, more so. The UAE, and MBZ in particular, take a very hard line against radical Islam. And not, one suspects, in the way many Saudis have done—which is to say, assure American officials that they're serious about it, while radical networks operate in the country and even have ties to the government and royal family. The Saudis, though, know that radical Islam has serious purchase in their society. It has little among the Emiratis, but some with the UAE's foreign Muslims, many of whom serve in the military. While there is a mandatory 16-month service for Emirati males between the ages of 18 and 30, the country's armed forces are still about a third foreign. Western officers are common in the technician and specialist ranks. The UAE is an attractive place to go for retired soldiers who've secured their pensions, have useful military

skills, and don't want to live out their lives as Walmart greeters. Arabs and other Muslim soldiers concentrate in combat arms. In a leaked State Department cable, MBZ is reported to have worried that not a few of his troops might respond to the call of some “holy man from Mecca or Medina” urging them to Islamist revolution. Which further explains the government's omnipresent surveillance and humorless intolerance of radicals.

Ordinary vice, by contrast, is mostly tolerated. Booze is available in hotels and restaurants that cater to Westerners, though not everywhere. (It is prohibited in Sharjah, one of the seven emirates and home to the UAE's third-largest city.) Where you can find it, prices are high. It was explained to me that, to be Sharia-compliant, sales of alcohol to non-Muslims must be heavily taxed, with the excess revenue going to Muslim charities. In practice, this meant that a bottle of wine one might expect to buy in America for \$15, or appear on a restaurant list for \$40, costs \$80 in Dubai. Frustrating—but a dry Dubai would be much less attractive to transiting or beachcombing foreigners. Laws against public drunkenness are enforced, however, and illicit drugs are absolutely not tolerated. In fact, we were advised to declare any prescription medication for approval before entry, just to be safe.

One expat reassured us (that at any rate was my interpretation of his intent) that there is a thriving homosexual community in the UAE, despite homosexual activity being illegal. They're out there, he said, and so long as they don't flaunt it, nothing happens to them. I had no way, or inclination, to validate that assertion and so took his word for it. I was also told that prostitutes populate the high-end hotel bars of Dubai, but I could not spot these posited ladies of the evening. Perhaps being raised by an upstanding family, in innocent times, and for 25 years in a happy marriage, I lacked the eye?

Feminism 1.5

THERE WERE CERTAINLY A LOT OF WELL-dressed, attractive women. Everywhere. Emirati ladies nearly all wear the *abaya*, as noted. They differentiate themselves in two ways. First, their headgear ranged from none at all, to the restrictive *hijab*, which covers every strand of hair, to the looser *shaya*, which is more like a scarf and allows careful coils to be seen on top and at the sides. The latter is modest without being austere—you might say, almost haute couture.

Where Emirati women cut loose is on their feet. I have never seen such an array of fabulous shoes. It was like being in Imelda Mar-

cos's closet, but with live models. The contrast between the walking Jimmy Choo showroom and the ubiquitous male white Birkenstock was striking.

These observations do not apply to the expats or especially the tourists. They will, and do, wear anything. Cocktail dresses, plunge necklines, push-up bras, four-inch heels—maybe those were the hookers after all? The men, mostly shorts and T-shirts. In their defense, it's hot!

I saw more bikinis than burkas. In fact, I don't recall seeing one of the latter at all. The women at the hotel pools dressed in a decidedly non-Sharia-compliant way. On the second day, our delegation was taken to an upscale beach club for lunch. We, fully dressed, ate in the bar; outside looked like South Beach. On the way out, one of my companions said to me, “I think they took us here on purpose, to show us that the country isn't as backward as we might expect.” That fact came into sharp focus at another meeting with government officials in which not only the minister but all her top aides were female. Our delegation, at eight-to-two male, looked positively Paleolithic by comparison.

For Emirati women, the UAE is somewhere between Feminism 1.0 and 2.0. (For expats, the country is indistinguishable from the advanced West.) All official barriers to female employment have been removed. Women work, or not, as need and inclination direct. But a country that wishes to be seen as modern by the modern West cannot stop there, and in 2015 the government created a “Gender Balance Council” whose mission is pretty well summed up by its name. Get those numbers up! Women today make up 70% of UAE university graduates, a higher rate than in the U.S.

For now, the UAE appears to have successfully combined feminism lite with Islam and traditionalism. One wonders how long this can last—or whether the modernization push will provoke any pushback. As modern as the UAE is, it remains an outlier in many ways, not least in that all its elites sincerely believe in God and actively practice their faith. Most of our meals began with a prayer, both vaguely Islamic and also non-sectarian—i.e., calculated not to offend non-Muslim guests while eliciting reverence. For example, as a fabulous spread was laid out before us, our host said, “Before we enjoy this bounty, let us all remember where it comes from.” Perhaps the most impressive thing we saw was Abu Dhabi's Grand Mosque, a no-expense-spared passion project of Sheikh Zayed's that, like Europe's great cathedrals, could not have been built by an unbelieving society. Is such piety compatible with modernity over the long term? The

experience of the West, which while perhaps not dispositive is still our main body of evidence, suggests it isn't.

Glass Houses

ONE MIGHT SAY THAT THE UAE IS AN exemplary Hobbesian state. Fundamental rights are secured. *Political* rights—the rights of citizens to influence and even direct the government—are all but nonexistent, certainly for expats. But how many people really care more about voting than about security and plenty? The choice, at any rate, is entirely yours. If you don't like the deal, don't come; if you tire of it, leave.

I got a little taste of UAE authoritarianism when, the day before we were to leave, I (and two others) tested positive for COVID (the whole delegation was tested every day). No problem, I was going back to Hungary, which doesn't require a negative test for entry. But there *was* a problem. First, neither UAE airline—Abu Dhabi's Etihad or Dubai's Emirates—would let anyone fly with a positive test. (I might mention, as an aside, that if one measure of a country is the quality of its airlines, then the UAE is a very impressive country.) But that didn't matter anyway, because the Emirate of Dubai, whose Health Authority had conducted the test, imposed a mandatory ten-day quarantine. There was no getting around it. The government knew I had it, knew where I was, and there was all that surveillance. At least I was in Dubai, I was told. The mandatory quarantine in Abu Dhabi is 15 days, not ten. And neither emirate recognizes the other's certificate of completion of quarantine. That's federalism! Which was another problem, because my return flight was booked from Abu Dhabi.

I would eventually leave from Dubai. But not without documentation of the date of my first positive PCR test, a doctor's affirmation of recovery from COVID, and the aforementioned certificate of completion of quarantine. All three of which had Q.R. codes, which at the airport were scanned three times each: at check-in, at security, and at the gate. I don't know about you, but I don't know how to fake one Q.R. code, much less three.

I was at one point accused of having broken quarantine even though I hadn't. Face recognition software failure? What might have happened if I had? Instead of a five-star hotel room, with room service paid for by the ministry, I would have been taken to a camp. It was all smoothed over but served as a reminder of the potential power of a powerful state. Yet to those inclined to take this as confirmation of Emirati despotism, I would ask

how my experience differed from the punitive lockdown measures common throughout Blue America, much of western Europe, and the Antipodes (to say nothing of China). Ye who live in authoritarian glass houses should be wary of casting the first stone.

One might also say that, if not the entire UAE, at least the country experienced by expats represents the culmination of a certain understanding of modernity: one centered around technology and progress, getting and spending, the body over the soul. When put that way, the UAE deal might no longer sound so attractive to some. But isn't that the society we've been turning our own countries into for decades? It's not as if the Emiratis invented the joyless quest for joy. Their own spiritual life appears strong; it's not their fault (except perhaps as enablers) if godless Westerners want to while away their lives in pointless consumption.

One nontrivial difference between the Emirati state and ours is that theirs works better. I think this is a big part of the reason why the UAE, and to come full circle, Hungary, are anathema to our elites. Both countries' successes prove that there are viable alternatives to "our"—that is, our ruling class's—"democracy." History was supposed to have ended when the managerial class came to power, and all other societies were supposed to become more like ours. Many did. Some are still trying. But the UAE and Hungary didn't, and don't want to.

It's telling, I think, that our ruling class exaggerates modern Hungary's differences from Western managerial liberalism while denying their own system's many similarities to the UAE's. The less that elections actually influence the direction of our government, the more loudly our leaders insist on shouting the holy word. Our elites (or the subset of them who don't need Emirati oil or access to Dubai conference rooms) hector the UAE for being insufficiently "democratic" even as our own country gets less democratic by the day and protects basic rights more and more ineffectually—when it's not deliberately attacking them. From the perspective of "democracy" (or its lack), what is the real difference between deference to unelected "experts" and obeisance to hereditary sheikhs?

In the UAE one can at least go outside and be reasonably assured of the safety of one's person and property—and, failing that, that any offender will face swift justice. In present-day Blue America, lunatics who lunge at (Republican) gubernatorial candidates with knives are released from custody the same day. A good Western liberal may recoil at anti-blasphemy laws, but—in an overwhelmingly and histori-

cally Muslim country—they make much more sense than the shifting demands of wokeness. The drivers of cancel culture lecturing the Emiratis about free speech is especially rich. Besides, it's only good manners not to offend your hosts. The American ruling class is not, or at least is not supposed to be, our hosts. They are supposed to be our fellow citizens, to and around whom we are supposed to be able to say whatever we want.

Plus, while governments in the West seem determined to lower their countries' living standards—"You'll own nothing and be happy," intones the Davos slogan—through higher prices, restrictive regulation, and constrained supplies of energy and other commodities, the UAE is just as determined to raise its own.

It will be alleged that I am advocating "authoritarianism" over "democracy," placing safety, order and prosperity above "our core values." Those who levy this charge unwittingly make a damning admission. They presuppose that we must choose between democracy on one hand and stability and plenty on the other, that the former cannot produce the latter. But it used to. So why can't we have all three?

In modern America, we have too little of all of them. If we had a real democracy, elected officials would heed the people and give them what they insist they want: crime control, a secure southern border, reduced immigration, inflation relief, abundant energy, safe distance from foreign wars. Instead, they get the opposite.

The uncomfortable truth is that the United States and most of the West are in certain ways becoming more, not less, like the United Arab Emirates: more "diverse," more authoritarian, more reliant on surveillance and censorship. Worse, we're doing so without the latter's real advantages: competent government, fair treatment, order and predictability, rising living standards, freedom to work and (mostly) live as one chooses.

The Emiratis—apart from the UAE simply being their country, which they have no wish to relinquish control of—seem to understand that there is no democratic way to rule a state in which your own people or ruling class is only a tenth of the population, with the other nine tenths polyglot foreigners. Democracy requires cohesion, which is a big reason why democracy works in 85% Hungarian Hungary.

I think our rulers understand this, too, which their constant bleating about "our democracy" is meant to obscure.

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