



Vices in the Middle East: Censorship and Substance Control Laws in the UAE

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Introduction

Gambling, alcohol, and pornography are restricted in a variety of ways across the Middle East. The predominant religion within the region — Islam — forbids anything that can be considered “shameful, indecent, evil, rebellious, and oppressive” according to the Quran and, given Islam’s influence over the Middle Eastern sphere, has heavily influenced state laws governing activities seen as unethical.

Research Question

To what extent does tourism act as a force of liberalization in the United Arab Emirates? What social liberties are encroached upon in the Middle East?

Methods

Examination of international news media such as Al Jazeera, AP, Reuters, and reports and statistics on tourism in Dubai, as well as the United Arab Emirates’ most recent penal code to trace the most recent trends and establish a link between the tourism industry and drinking laws. Additionally, I will also conduct interviews with Arab exchange students at the University of Oregon to trace shifting public opinion on the issue.

Tourism’s Effects

Tourism has mostly influenced the sale of alcohol within the United Arab Emirates to expatriates and visitors, but sale till remains extremely restricted to most citizens, requiring a paid license in some areas and outright prohibited in others.. Alcohol also has additional taxes attached to them, making it incredibly expensive. Certain hotels allow tourist couples to sleep in the same room without being married.

Substance Control and Censorship

Psychotropics and narcotics are, of course, banned in the Middle East as well as opioids (going so far as to ban poppyseeds), though black market trade exists especially in affluent communities. Tobacco either restricted or banned. There is a significant amount of censoring government criticism (execution of several journalists, UAE 5) and material identified as obscene, typically meaning unapproved pornography. Physical displays of affection in public are severely limited, especially between unmarried couples. All VOIP services not through United Arab Emirates telecommunications companies Etisalat and du are blocked. Location spoofing via VPN is a punishable offense. Overall, there is a significant amount of both substance control censorship in the United Arab Emirates and the Middle East as a whole.

Conclusions

There are discrepancies between the rights of different classes within the UAE. Tourists and expatriates are not held to the exact same standard as the average citizen. I doubt tourism’s role as a real vector for social change. While it certainly exposes more of the world to the UAE and adds economic incentives to relax some substance control regulations, there is no real pressure for change to occur. Especially with the criminalization of government criticism, the capacity of social evolution is severely limited. Additionally, the religious roots of the UAE’s government stems social change, particularly with the devaluation of women in family courts.

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Acknowledgments

I’d like to thank Matthias Vogel for his support and encouragement during this project. I acknowledge that the University of Oregon was built on Kalapuya Illhi, the homeland of the Kalapuya people from which they were forcibly removed the United States Government.