

Roll the dice and try your luck on Arab history through the ages

Locally produced board game brings the region's past to life in imaginative new ways

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BEIRUT: What is the name of the main temple at Baalbek? How many Mongol invasions did the Mamluks fend off? When did Kuwait gain its independence? No, these questions are not the start of a history lesson. Rather,

they are part of a new board game launched in Lebanon this summer, where players compete to earn "points of knowledge" and show off their understanding of Arab history.

Rahala, an Arabic word that means "explorers" in English, is a game that is playable in both languages. It had its official

launch in Beirut on July 11, 2006, but as an exercise in documenting over 4,000 years of Arab wars and achievements, it was duly overshadowed by the Middle East's most recent war, which broke out the next day.

Rahala's creator, Reem Askalan, first realized the need to compile Arab history for the

masses while she was pursuing a graduate degree in Islamic studies at New York University.

"If you wanted to know anything about Arab history you had to go to an academic source," she says. "I was looking for a medium that would simplify the information and make people interested in learning."

Askalan considered creating an "Arab History for Dummy's" and other book projects before returning to school, this time to the Massachusetts Institute for Technology for urban planning.

"The idea remained brewing in my mind until I met Jawdat Kazoun in 2000, who was a game player and he introduced me to games I hadn't played since I was nine. Suddenly it clicked: Why not do a board game?"

Kazoun came on board as the game's designer and, in 2002, Askalan devoted her time to making *Rahala* a reality.

The game itself, intended for ages 15 and up, may be a mystery at first and prospective players should make sure they read, and reread, the instructions before they begin to play. The board is a flowery hexagon-shaped labyrinth guiding the players between six eras of Arab history.

Like *Trivial Pursuit*, the aim of *Rahala* is to travel between topics, correctly answering questions to earn "points of knowledge" as you pass. Unlike *Trivial Pursuit*, and most other board games, the goal is not to complete the game the fastest but to collect the most points by the end of the game.

Some 4,000 years of history are divided into six decks of

question cards. The yellow deck represents the "Ancient Civilizations Era" (20th century BC-fourth century BC), starting with the spread of writing until the death of Alexander the Great, covering the Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Phoenician and Canaanite civilizations.

The orange cards follow the Hellenic period and the Byzantine Empire, focusing on the rise and spread of Christianity through to and including Byzantium.

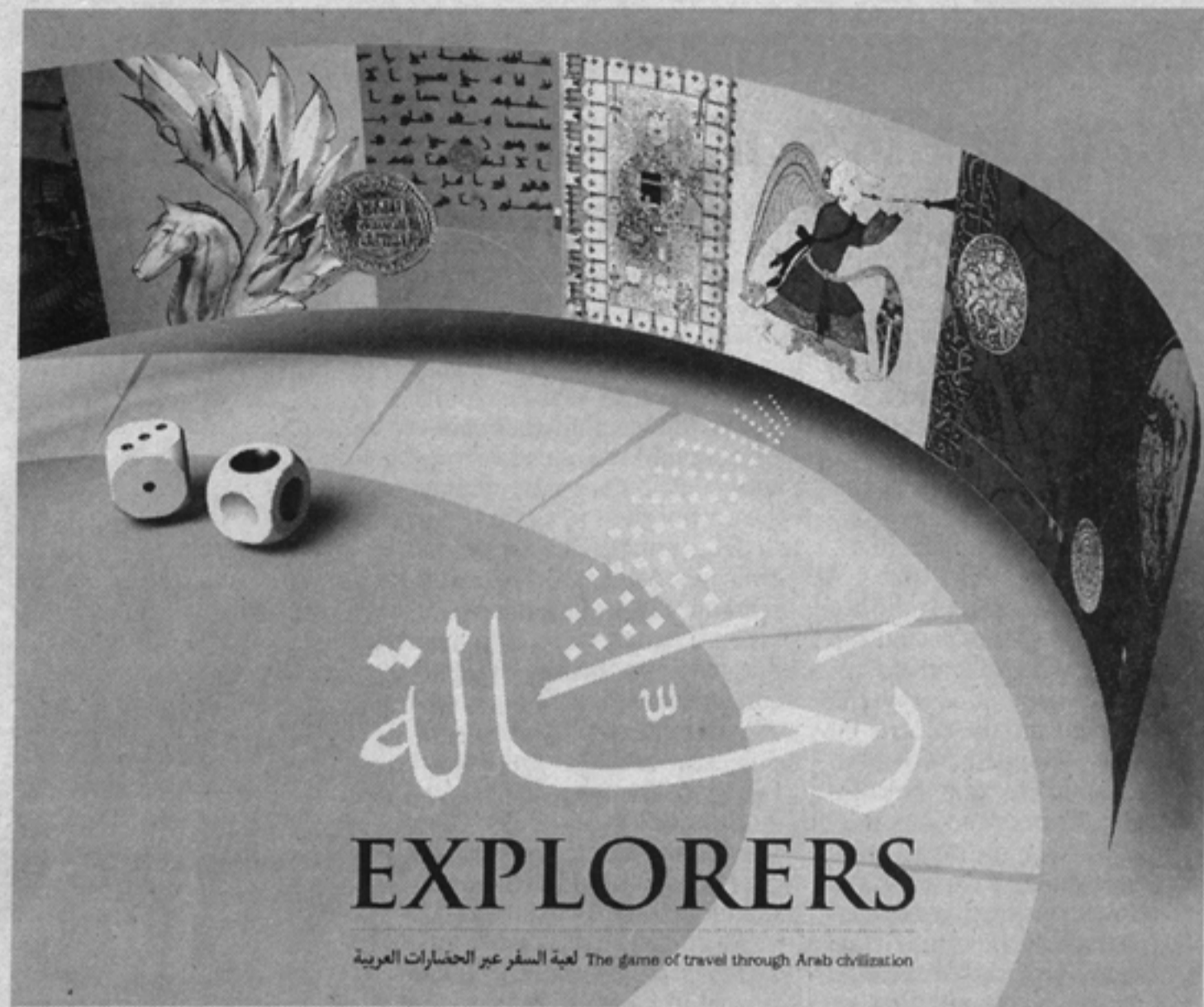
Questions on "The Rise of Islam" (fifth century AD-eighth century AD) are symbolized by the green cards and proceed until the fall of the Umayyad Dynasty, covering the Islamic conquests and the spread of Islam and Arab societies.

"The Age of Discovery" (eighth century AD-12th century AD), the blue deck, covers scientific discoveries and inventions and innovations in art, architecture, music, literature and philosophy.

The Mamluk and Ottoman eras (12th century AD-19th century AD) follow with the red deck, asking questions about non-Arab dynasties that came to rule the Arab-Muslim world, including the Crusades and the wars against the Mongols.

The last deck of cards is black and poses questions about modern times (19th century AD-20th century AD) after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the oil boom and the rise of modern Arab states.

All 360 trivia cards, most of which contain two multiple choice questions, were written by Askalan, who read hundreds of books in both English and



The game can be played in both Arabic and English and is designed for players aged 15 and up.

Arabic to fill out the cards, which were then checked over by university professors. The questions are well-researched, fascinating and bound to provoke hours of fun.

"No one wants to play with me any more," Askalan says, admitting that she now knows the answers to all the cards. For those who dare to compete with the creator, she is not given the multiple choice options.

There is a seventh deck of card called "Open Questions." When players land on the open-question space they are given one minute to answer a question that has no right answer.

"When does freedom fighting end and terrorism begin?" one card asks. Another poses the question: "Is history true?" Players earn 10 points just for speaking with the option of obtaining another 10 points if the other players decide the argument was well-presented.

"Open questions are a way to

give players a break from academic questions. Each player has a different opinion so let them express it," explains Askalan.

For some, the \$56 price tag may seem shocking but this is not an ordinary board game. The price is cheap if one considers that a textbook containing an equal amount of information would cost well over \$100, and be far less exciting.

Askalan chose to market *Rahala* through Lebanese bookstores – such as the Virgin Megastore, CD-Theque and Librarie



Antoine – rather than placing the product in toy stores.

"Games are linked to kids. Arab culture does not exercise game playing and so to put this game in a toy shop where mothers go looking for children's toys would not be fair to the game."

Although currently only available in Lebanon, the game can be purchased elsewhere through *Rahala's* Web site, www.rahala.net. Askalan believes the game could also become a favorite among Arab expatriates or Westerners interested in Arab or Islamic history.

"Arabs living in the West are more used to a culture of games," Askalan offers as one possible reason why expatriates might be intrigued by her product. Nostalgia is another.

Well presented and well documented, although a bit overwhelming at first, *Rahala* may become a new key to unlock the Arab world's past for the next generation of thinkers.



Rahala guides players through six eras of Arab history, from 20th century BC to 20th century AD.