

Published as: Bassens, D. (2012), 'The World City-Concept Travels East': On Excessive Imagination and Limited Urban Sustainability in UAE World Cities. In: Derudder, B., Hoyler, M., Taylor, P.J., Witlox, F. (Eds.), *International Handbook of Globalization and World Cities*. Cheltenham/Northampton: Edward Edgar, p. 530-537.

'The World City-Concept Travels East': On Excessive Imagination and Limited Urban Sustainability in UAE World Cities

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This chapter discusses the fast-growing UAE cities Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which, although emblematic of urban-centred growth, have attracted surprisingly little attention in world cities literature. Although the 2009 debt crisis in Dubai has questioned urban sustainability in the wider Gulf region, both cities have been prospering as nodes of global flows of money, people and goods. Perhaps most indicative of this is the fast and massive population growth both cities have experienced in recent decades. In Dubai, population rose from ca. 40000 in the 1960s to more than 1.6 million in 2008 (www.dubai.ae, accessed February 10th 2010), while Abu Dhabi's urban population reached ca. 800000 in early 2010 (www.visitabudhabi.ae, accessed February 10th 2010), compared to a mere 25000 in the 1960s. A lot of the initial population growth resulted from the discovery of oil in the early part of this period. As a consequence, earlier forms of subsistence such as pearl diving, smuggling, and manual production lost their importance, while the influx of oil industry workers and windfall oil money transformed these formerly small settlements into a specific urban form which Khalaf (2006) identifies as 'oil cities'.

More recently, however, in a move to diversify their economies away from oil-dependency, the ruling families (Abu Dhabi's al-Nahyan and Dubai's al-Makhtoum) have endorsed the development of cities within their realm as centres of business, trade and advanced servicing - quite successfully, so it appears, as even during the global financial crisis, both Abu Dhabi and Dubai were identified as 'winning' financial centres, with banks maintaining high levels of profitability and capital base (see Derudder et al., 2010a). Also in terms of advanced producer services (APS) broadly defined (comprising accounting, advertising, finance, law and management consultancy), Gulf cities have become more important, as was illustrated in a longitudinal analysis of major APS firms between 2000 and 2008 (Derudder et al., 2010b). In addition, Abu Dhabi and Dubai have become global transport nodes of goods and people, both in terms of seaports (Jebel Ali and Port Rashid in Dubai) and accompanying free trade zones and maritime service providers (Jacobs and Hall, 2007), and also large-scale airports and international airlines such as Emirates, Etihad and so on (O'Connell, 2006). These variegated but coherent growth trends echo a broader geographical 'reOrientation' (Frank, 1998) and geo-economic shift in the world economy, where 'the Orient' - China in particular - is becoming the 'emerging market' on whom to keep a watchful eye. While 'traditional' world cities such as London and New York have been hit hard by the crisis, Chinese cities (most notably Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong) are booming, while Gulf cities are profiling themselves as hubs in between. But also in itself, the Gulf region, floating on oil money, remains a crucial source of global capital. Some of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), such as Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), which holds a massive US\$875 billion (Behrendt, 2008), and also high-net-worth private investors from that region have seized the opportunity to acquire assets in major key sectors and blue chip companies in 'the West'.

Accounts of Middle Eastern political economies have often been inclined towards an 'exceptionalist' reading of contemporary processes (see for instance Aarts, 1999 on Middle Eastern political and economic integration), which tends to explain the failure of external concepts of democracy, secularism, or market-led transition as a consequence of internal - cultural or religious - resistance. However, the sheer growth of Gulf cities and their broad insertion into global circuits of capital, goods and people recalls the very essence of Friedmann's (1986) seminal world city hypothesis, and suggests the world city prism of analysis as a *universal* category is relevant within the UAE's urban context. It is true, of course, that Gulf cities *can* be identified for their idiosyncratic political economies, notably their city-state character, the intermingling of state and corporate spheres, the role of Islam in urban development and finance, and so on. But instead of the simplistic view that the Middle East is 'not like any other region', there is a need for an analysis of the Middle East which at the same time addresses

issues in terms of *universal* categories, while being sensitive to *historical particularities*. This is a need which has long been recognised (see Halliday, 1987: 215-218, who elaborates on the essentialist and orientalist dimensions of Middle Eastern analyses). In this chapter, therefore, I map the idiosyncrasies of Gulf cities to inform a more 'global' perspective on world cities and aim to open-up the particularities of Gulf city economies, as an 'antidote' to analyses that leave out regional actors, ideologies, lifestyles and others. The resilience of the 'world city concept', both as an analytical lens and as a discursive field, lies precisely in its ability to 'travel' and to become regionalized and adapted to various political economic settings. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to discuss the evolution of Abu Dhabi and Dubai as 'emerging' Gulf world cities from three interrelated perspectives. First the growth of Abu Dhabi and Dubai as a complementary evolution of city-states within the UAE's federation is discussed. Second, I explore how 'world city discourse' is being employed in the construction of Abu Dhabi and, especially, Dubai as 'emerging' world cities. The focus here is specifically on the role of financial elites in building Dubai, and the Gulf region more generally, as a market for mainstream and 'Islamic', i.e. Shari'a-compliant markets. Third and finally, I question the sustainability (broadly defined) of these cities and their future as post-industrial sites of production from city-level and regional perspectives.

The UAE: a federation of quasi city-states

The rise of two booming cities along the Gulf in such close proximity – within a mere hour's drive from each other – reflects how under the conditions of the UAE's federal configuration, ruling Emirati elites have actively put 'the urban' at the centre of economic development of their territories. In fact, following an 'amalgamation' of previously autonomous emirates, a very idiosyncratic political economy of 'quasi city-states' (Sidaway, 2008) has emerged, characterized by great autonomy vis-à-vis other members of the federation, and by public/private entanglement of the ruling family and numerous government-related enterprises (GREs).

Regionally, the emergence of city-state entities can be framed within historical power relations among regional Emirati elites which mark processes of mutual political and economic cooperation and competition. In particular, when the British left the region in 1971, the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Fujairah, Umm al-Qaiwain and Ajman (and from 1972 also Ras al-Khaimah) along the so-called Trucial Coast decided to form a federation (UAE) in order to counter what they feared would be imminent interference from their strong neighbours Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although the individual emirates thereby chose to transfer

power to a higher echelon, from its inception the UAE was also the stage for conflicting interests and strife among its members, especially between Abu Dhabi and Dubai. As argued by Peck (2001: 150), much of this deep-seated rivalry can be traced back historically to the establishment of Dubai as a separate Sheikhdom in 1833 by the disaffected Al Bu Fasalāh subsection of the Bani Yas tribe of Abu Dhabi. Following this 'schism', Dubai and Abu Dhabi developed along different lines: Dubai as a cosmopolitan outward-looking mercantile city-state, while Abu Dhabi remained a more traditional tribal federation. From the nascent federation's initial meetings in the late 1960s on, the charismatic Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi played an instrumental role in forging a federation, relying on the oil wealth of Abu Dhabi and its clear territorial dominance in what would later be the UAE (Davidson, 2006). This move to consolidate 'national' power around Abu Dhabi (which would be home to the federation's capital and provide the new nation's president) encountered resistance from the leader of Dubai, Rashid al-Makthoum, who, although lacking the oil wealth of his neighbour, was able to negotiate a relatively strong influence for Dubai in the newly-forged federation, securing, for instance, the right of veto in the Supreme Council, provision of the federation's vice-president and an equal number of votes in the Federal National Council (Peck, 2001: 150). From its inception, then, the federal character of the UAE state and the actions and attitudes of geographically separated ruling families have allowed the development of multiple autonomous urban centres.

At the level of these individual emirates themselves, the lines between the emirate as a political entity (a 'city-state') and as a commercial/business enterprise have been substantially blurred. Especially in Dubai – so-called 'Dubai Inc.' – a highly centralised and autocratic state power, embodied in the emir (Prince Mohammad Al-Makhtoum) and his family, is combined with a quasi corporate style of administration (Davis, 2006). Both Abu Dhabi's SWFs, such as ADIA and Mubadala Development Company, and Dubai's GREs, such as Dubai Holding or Dubai World and its subsidiaries (Nakheel, Dubai Ports World, etc.), have become the prime vehicles for ruling elites to diversify the economy away from oil dependency. In contrast to SWFs which are generally regarded as 'government-owned', GREs are more like 'semi-private entities' set up as independent companies, but which nevertheless embody the state's development strategies. Within this context, two modes of diversification can be identified.

On the one hand, both SWFs and GREs *channel and manage investments abroad*. Sovereign Gulf investors have become involved in the 'core' regions of the world economy, notably Europe and Northern America, both in terms of buying sovereign debt and acquiring corporate assets. Along with China and Japan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States have financed roughly a

quarter of the United States' current-account deficit, by investing heavily in US treasury bills (Abdelal et al., 2008). In terms of corporate assets, Gulf investors have turned to key sectors in 'the West' such as finance, the automotive industry, cultural institutions (e.g. The Louvre), and others. With the global financial crisis lurking in 2007, ADIA acquired a 5% share in Citigroup, while the Mubadala Development Company has bought itself into Ferrari, the Carlyle Group (a private equity firm), and the California-based chipmaker AMD. Generally, these numerous investments have a 'passive' character in the sense that they tend simply to hold assets to generate a stable flow of income. However, sometimes, as with the acquisition of the ports manager P&O by GRE Dubai Ports World in 2006, these investments generate suspicion about a possible underlying geostrategic agenda. In the aftermath of 9/11 the US congress regarded the prospect of the UAE's presence in North American ports as a possible security breach and blocked the acquisition of the North American arm of P&O (Abdelal et al., 2008).

On the other hand, GREs (but not so much SWFs) operate within a highly competitive and entrepreneurialist atmosphere to *attract foreign investments*, feeding into the growth of the city-state. Dubai's GREs in particular have been the prime vehicles for enacting the ruling families' 'visionary' city-building projects. As such they are involved in the development of luxurious tourist resorts (for instance the Jumeirah Resort, Burj al-Arab), building a state-of-the-art business and service infrastructure (Dubai International Financial Centre), logistics & trade hubs (Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone, Dubai Logistics City), knowledge and media centres (Dubai Media City, Dubai Internet City) and so on. Often foregrounded by high-profile architecture, these projects carry the intention to physically engineer and construct post-industrial sites of production through the attraction of regional and global investors.

Building UAE world cities: the role of global financial elites

Both the image and actual economic growth of UAE cities have been intensely related to their discursive constructions as attractive sites for global production and accumulation. In the efforts to make their city a node for global flows of capital, goods and people, UAE elites have operationalized world city discourses in their respective city-building projects. Mirroring examples of successful service-oriented urban economies (International Financial Centres (IFCs) such as Singapore and Hong Kong), or well-established 'global cities' (Sassen, 2001) such as New York and London, they have aimed to build instant world cities through rhetoric (city marketing), form (architecture), and function (port, IFC, etc.) (Bassens et al., 2010a; Davis, 2006). Dubai's strategy has subsequently served as a model for urban development – an 'urban growth machine' (Molotch, 1976) if you like – throughout the Middle East (for instance in Amman; see Parker, 2009). Paradoxically, its spirit of urban entrepreneurialism has given rise

to a 'post'-industrial city-state in an emirate which lacks any substantial industrial history, and, as irony would have it, this model of urban development was soon copied by cities throughout the wider Middle Eastern region. Before the 2009 Dubai debt crisis, the Dubai model promised to generate a success-story in itself, a unique safe haven for regional and international investments in the conflict-ridden Middle East. Dubai's ruling al-Makhtoum family itself has obviously played an instrumental role in the city's rapid development, creating the stage for international investments from a 'supply-side' perspective. They have aimed to make Dubai a global 'brand' (Bagaeen, 2007), mainly through the above-mentioned high-profile architectural projects and infrastructure developments, intended as the 'tangible' base of Dubai's construction as a world city. In addition, the fiscal and juridical environment has been relaxed in order to attract regional and global investments: for instance, since 2002, non-UAE nationals have been allowed to purchase property within the emirate of Dubai. However, from a 'demand-side' perspective, Dubai's growth does more than reflect the ambitions of its leaders alone. Actors operating at both global and regional scales have had an active interest in building an investor-friendly site for production and accumulation. The following two paragraphs explore these developments in greater depth.

First, on a global scale, business and financial elites within and around global APS firms, especially financial firms (such as large investment and commercial banks), have played a crucial role (Bassens et al. 2010b). Banking on both mainstream and 'alternative' (for instance, interest-free Islamic finance) 'emerging markets', financial elites in conjunction with the local ruling elite have discursively 'constructed' Dubai as an attractive investment market for property development, real estate, tourism, business, trade and so on. The reason, then, why oil-depleted Dubai has been able to realize its gargantuan dream on vast amounts of borrowed money is because of the built-up 'credit' the Dubai rulers were given by transnational networks of financial elites, based in IFCs – London in particular – and the booming UAE cities themselves. Looking for profitable new markets in the affluent Gulf, investment bankers introduced themselves not only into mainstream debt-based finance but also into Shari'a-compliant financial circuits, as illustrated by the importance of *sukuk* (Islamic asset-based/asset-backed notes) in Dubai's finance strategy. Drawing on Islamic economics, which refrains from *riba* (literally 'growth', but usually interpreted as interest) and avoids *gharar* (contractual uncertainty) and *maysir* (gambling, speculation) (see Bassens et al., 2011), the Islamic financial services (IFS) sector has seen rapid growth (e.g. 22.8% between 2008 and 2009, when its asset value amounted to US\$822 billion; The Banker, 2009). As a result of windfall oil money in the 1970s oil boom, the initial growth of the IFS sector was mainly driven by Gulf-based full-fledged Islamic banks (Dubai Islamic Bank, Bahrain Islamic Bank), which set out to operate in national

or regional markets. More recently, however, global banks have also entered Shari'a-compliant markets through 'Islamic windows' in order to tap into the rising demand for Shari'a-compliant financial products. Large UK banks such as Royal Bank of Scotland, Barclays Capital, HSBC, Standard Chartered in particular have been heavily involved in establishing Dubai as a financial hub, not only through the setting up of well-staffed regional headquarters (mostly in the Dubai International Financial Centre) but also as creditors of Dubai's 'world city project' through Islamic and conventional debt-based structures (now leaving them exposed to an estimated US\$19 billion in outstanding debt). By using the high credibility of the Islamic sector, 'mainstream' financial elites have developed Dubai as a prime 'emerging' market (compare with Sidaway & Pryke, 2000), while regional (Islamic) banks have mobilized Islam in an often orientalist discourse to attract Shari'a-compliant investment. Ironically, notwithstanding the Shari'a-base call for a return to the 'real' economy as a means of avoiding speculation and uncertainty – *sukuk* were designed to generate a steady flow of rent – all this 'imageneering' (compare with Lai, 2009 on the construction of Asian 'emerging' markets) has left Dubai extremely vulnerable to market bubbles, such as the collapse of property markets when the global financial crisis hit the region.

Second, the property bubble and the debt crisis which it induced when Dubai's GREs proved unable to redeem issued *sukuk* near the end of 2009 (see for instance the Dubai Palm developer Nakheel's US\$3,5 billion looming default) has highlighted regional interests in sustaining Dubai's image as a haven for investment. With its government-run agencies faltering, and Dubai's elites being either unwilling or unable to uphold Dubai's status as an emerging Gulf 'world city', the al-Nahyan from oil-rich Abu Dhabi decided to bail-out their neighbouring city-state, buying US\$10 billion of its soaring debt and thus enabling some of the most pressing debts to be redeemed. However, it is clear that this bail-out does not amount to a 'US\$10 billion blank check'. For the al-Nahyan, here lies the opportunity to strengthen their regional influence and 'fuel' an Abu Dhabi-led state-building project, possibly bringing an end to Dubai's days as an 'autonomous' city-state. The current crisis elucidates how cycles of urban competition/decentralization and urban cooperation/centralization often alternate, reflecting the respective rising and diminishing importance of the UAE state for the cities within its borders. As long as Dubai was booming, the al-Makhtoum downplayed its status as member of the federation, portraying it as an autonomous city-state, while the state-representing al-Nahyan in Abu Dhabi found political 'consolation' in providing the federation's president. Now that Dubai is in trouble, apart from being eager to save the national image of the UAE as a safe haven for investments, the latter may very well use the bail-out as an opportunity to strengthen their position in the UAE state, discourage regionalist tendencies and keep Dubai's previous

ambitions in check (Bassens et al., 2010b). The fate of the so-called Burj Dubai ('tower of Dubai') is perhaps most telling: although it had taken Dubai's rulers six years to build the highest tower in the world, just days before its opening the skyscraper was renamed 'Burj Khalifa', referring to Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the current ruler of Abu Dhabi. It is hard to imagine an event more symbolic of the region's underlying power configuration.

UAE cities: a hallmark of limited sustainability?

To conclude, as if we were dealing with real-life urban experiments, a focus on the UAE's 'instant world cities' (Bagaeen, 2007), which have emerged in a region lacking significant urban history, allows us to readdress the very premises of globalized urbanization, globalized urbanity, the global shift to post-industrial modes of production and rescaling processes towards the level of the city-state. Although strong in discourse and actual growth, the sustainability of the Gulf post-industrial city-state, which is arguably the dominant Gulf world city model, has never been without debate. Much of this chapter has elaborated upon the questionable economic sustainability of Gulf cities, which has been highlighted recently by Dubai's debt crisis. This particular focus, however, threatens to overshadow perhaps even more fundamental dimensions of the UAE's cities, namely their inability to somehow embed global flows of capital, knowledge and people into their fast-growing globalized urbanity in an ecologically and socially sustainable way. Ecologically, both cities are notorious for eyebrow-raising energy and water consumption, be it in the form of evergreen golf courts, indoor ski arenas, air-conditioned malls or massive desalinization programmes. In addition, the urban planning of both produces car dependency and generates excess commuting, as a result of a zone-based perspective on how cities are to function (for example Media City, Health City, Sports City). Yet here again is another paradox: it is the same Abu Dhabi, an exporter of *old school* carbon energy, which is building a 'visionary' zero-carbon emission city, MASDAR, within its territory – zero-carbon after it has been built of course. As a subsidiary of Mubadala Development Company, this project aims to produce sustainable neighbourhoods for as much as 40000 residents and a site for research and development of new energy technologies (<http://www.masdar.ae/en/home/index.aspx>, accessed 4 March 2010). However, while this new development might bring ecological relief, high property costs and legal barriers will no doubt make this a place for 'the happy few', the Emirati, and perhaps the expat community. Similar to lots of other high-profile property developments in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, MASDAR will be yet another example of how urban inequality, and in particular a three-tiered society, in effect a 'set of cities' (Elsheshtawy, 2008), of Emirati nationals, Western expats employed in business and services and Asian low-skilled workers, is spatially reproduced.

In conclusion, this leads us to reconsider the UAE's urban sustainability from a social dimension, or as Elsheshtawi (2010) has urged us to do, to look "behind the urban spectacle". In fact, the UAE's globalized urbanity – in infrastructure *and* lived experience – is the product of an army of low-skilled migrant workers, typically of South Asian origin, who constitute the majority of Abu Dhabi and Dubai's urban population. At the same time, recalling Smith (1995) and Robinson (2002), these Afghans, Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis and others sustain myriads of economic, ethnic, ideological, religious and other transurban linkages that have remained largely understudied in much contemporary world cities research. In the end, then, this chapter aims to draw attention to emerging/existing forms of transnationality that have been less studied, but which originate in Gulf cities themselves (for instance the globalizing Islamic financial services sector). Opening up these and other kinds of Gulf-based agency as a (analytical) source of transnationalism and globalization would add to a more 'global' perspective precisely because they would regionalize urbanization and urbanity, most certainly so in regions where 'global' cities such as London and New York as world city models appear to miss out on current urban realities.

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