

The Gulf Cities: A Composite and Evolving Urban Model

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Features shared by coastal cities from Kuwait to Ras al-Khaimah raise the hypothesis of a Gulf urban model epitomized by Dubai.

Spectacular Growth of the Urban Population

The exploitation of hydrocarbons has transformed societies with no previous urban tradition into urban societies. Today, 80% of the population in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) lives in urban areas, a figure that rises to 98% in the case of Kuwait and 99% in the case of Qatar.

In 1950, Kuwait City was the only city in the region with a population of more than 100,000; Manama, Doha, Dubai and Abu Dhabi had populations of just over 10,000. Twenty years on, the population of Kuwait had burgeoned to 500,000 and Dubai's to 250,000, whilst those of Manama, Doha, Dammam and Abu Dhabi had all passed the 100,000 mark. In the following decades, urban growth continued and, beginning in 1990, began to accelerate.

Whilst hydrocarbons are the main driver of urbanization, geopolitical factors shed light on the ways in which the urban hierarchy has been restructured. The independence of the British protectorates of Kuwait, in 1961, and the Trucial States, in 1971, elevated Kuwait City, Doha, Manama and Abu Dhabi to the rank of capitals. The 1990 Iraqi invasion significantly slowed Kuwait's growth until 2000, whilst the war in Lebanon and the embargo against Iran were not unrelated to the fortunes of Dubai, whose

dynamism – momentarily slowed by the 2009 crisis – took off again in 2011.

By 2015, the Arab side of the Gulf was home to a dozen cities with populations of more than 200,000, including five with populations of nearly or even more than a million. Dubai remains the largest city in the Gulf, but its 2.5 million inhabitants are not enough for it to crack the list of the world's 200 largest cities.

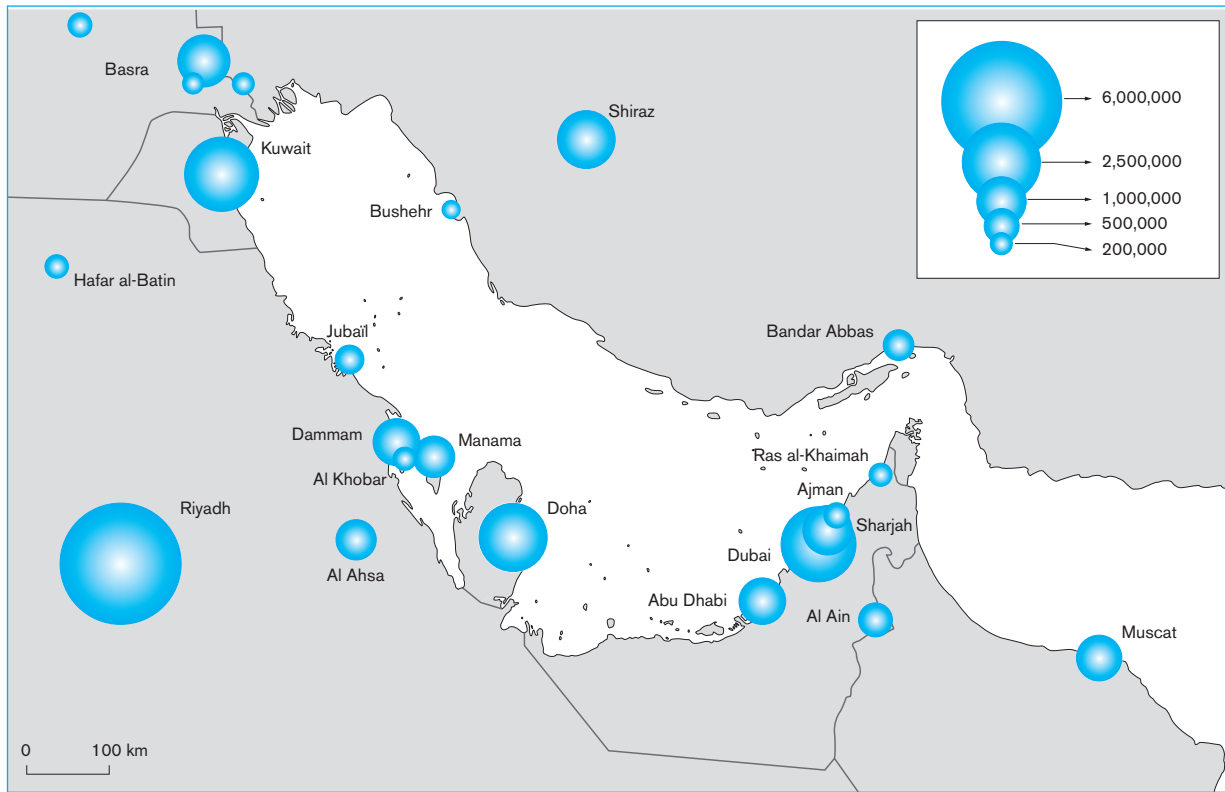
Multicultural Cities

Cosmopolitanism is a prominent feature of the Gulf cities, where foreigners account for between 60 and 90% of the population. The influx of Asian migrants is rapidly replacing the Arab component, which is mainly Egyptian. Whilst most of the population still comes from South and South-East Asia, the catchment area for migrants has expanded considerably to include the former USSR, followed by China. Dubai, whose population is 90% foreign, has emerged as the symbol of this diversity. However, although people there hail from countries around the world, Indians make up nearly half of the population; when the other South Asian nationalities (Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Nepalese and Sri Lankans) are taken into account, this total rises to three quarters.

The Gulf cities are multicultural in the sense that they are home to a large diversity of languages, religions, cuisines and traditional forms of dress. This multiculturalism is particular, as societies are organized based on a sharp division between nationals and foreigners. The only truly ethnic neighbourhoods, which are also characterized by the wealth of their residents, are paradoxically those populated by nationals. They live in imposing houses whose

MAP 3

The Gulf Cities (City Populations in 2015)



Source: Estimated by the author based on national censuses.

composite singularity ultimately gives rise to a local style of architecture, a blend of architectural traditions from around the world that takes traditional practices into account.

Upward and Outward Growth

Major landmarks in the urban space, skyscrapers feature prominently in depictions of Gulf cities, from the two iconic Kuwait Towers, inaugurated in 1979, to Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building (828 m., 160 storeys) and the pride of Dubai, completed in 2010. In Abu Dhabi, as the city gradually remakes itself, the regulations governing maximum building heights are being revised. The emirate's main oil and financial institutions are headquartered in recently built luxury towers on the waterfront; the newly built areas near the centre include high-rise buildings. In Manama, where building heights used to be capped at four storeys, six fifty-storey towers have been built since 2009.

Since the 1990s, the Gulf cities' horizontal growth has largely taken the form of secure, gated commu-

nities of tens to hundreds of standardized houses. Imported from North America, this model, in which the level of facilities and services varies depending on the community's standing, falls neatly within the prevailing security logic in the region. Likewise, the recent construction of worker villages surrounded by tall walls meets the need to provide the poor with much more decent living conditions than the former worker camps, but also reflects the desire to relegate and control them. Although the urban sprawl has led to increasingly long commutes and more frequent traffic jams, to date, only Dubai has an underground system, and bus systems in the region are underdeveloped. This growth has also led to the development of the coastline.

In addition to the futuristic towers, the artificial islands, shaped like palm trees or a world map, are also part of the image of Dubai, where the line between the virtual and the real is not always clear. The initial plan consisted of three such islands: Palm Jumeirah, the smallest, which has been completed; Palm Jebel Ali, the construction of which has been suspended; and Palm Deira, which was to have been built off the coast of the city centre

but which will never see the light of day, as it encroached on the territorial waters of Sharjah. For now, Dubai World is no more than a large sandbank due to the suspension of the works on it several years ago. Nor is Dubai alone: Bahrain has followed its lead, building artificial islands shaped like crescents and fish, whilst Doha has built one shaped like a pearl oyster. The construction of artificial streams is a more recent trend. Additionally, embankment works have been used to considerably increase the original surface area of the island of Abu Dhabi and of Bahrain, allowing them to gain land from the sea for various purposes (extension of the Corniche in Abu Dhabi; airport in Doha; land reclamation at Dubai's deep-water port in Jebel Ali; real estate programmes in Manama).

The Development of Coastal Conurbations

The major cities of the Gulf grew up around small ports or fishing villages. The earliest planners gave them geometric, semi-radio-concentric (Kuwait, Doha) or orthogonal (Al Khobar, Abu Dhabi) street plans depending on the site, and developed a sea-front, the Corniche, with a seawall-promenade, a wide parallel avenue and green spaces dominated by a row of buildings. From these initial hubs, the cities spread out over neighbouring localities where industrial areas and areas of low-income housing were created, forming urban agglomerations. The one in Doha includes, in addition to Doha itself (pop. 587,055 in 2015), Al Rayyan (pop. 589,531) and Doha's Industrial Area (pop. 364,710). In Kuwait City, the city centre accounts for only 16% of the agglomeration it forms with its satellite towns. The linear expansion of neighbouring agglomerations has led them to merge. In Saudi Arabia, the metropolitan area of Dammam gathers under a single common authority a conurbation with a population of nearly 1.5 million that, since the 1980s, has included Dammam, Dharan and Al Khobar. Likewise, since the 1990s, Dubai has formed a conurbation with Sharjah and Ajman consisting of a polycentric urban strip some 70 km long that is home to 3.5 million people. In addition to competition and imitation effects to attract skills and capital, uneven investment capacities, which affect the quality of the infrastructure and urban amenities, have created hierarchies in the

cities' attractiveness and established complementarities with regard to their roles. Currently, efforts are being made to strengthen the interrelationships between Gulf cities with high-speed rail projects and bridges intended to bring them closer, whilst the Gulf Cooperation Council is increasingly seeking to reduce duplications and interconnect the oil and gas distribution networks.

Urban Policies to Promote Diversification

Gulf cities have traditionally taken a proactive approach. The earliest master plans were designed by foreign consulting firms. Today, they are produced by municipalities or ad hoc government agencies, such as the Urban Planning Council, which planned the expansion of mainland Abu Dhabi and the development of previously uninhabited natural islands. The post-oil era has emerged as a major issue; current urban development plans are only one part of the many documents setting out economic strategies, generally with a horizon of 2030, reminiscent of the Singaporean model.

To encourage the transition from a rentier economy to a productive one, free zones are given pride of place, especially in Qatar and the UAE, with a large number in Dubai

The desire to develop resources at home has led to the creation of the industrial city of Jubail, the development of small monofunctional cities near oil (Ruwais, Ras Tanura) or gas (Ras Laffan) terminals, and the establishment of large areas of heavy industry in the outskirts of major cities. To encourage the transition from a rentier economy to a productive one, free zones are given pride of place, especially in Qatar and the UAE, with a large number in Dubai. The Jebel Ali free zone, founded in 1985, is of a global scale, with more than 7,000 companies, including major Western and Japanese companies and transnational firms. The Dubai International Financial Centre likewise bears witness to the Gulf cities' ambition to be-

come financial hubs, as is also on display in Manama, whose “offshore banking units” are comparable to Singapore’s Asian Currency Units.

International tourism is considered an activity to be encouraged. The hotel industry, which is dominated by international hotels managed by major global and regional chains, is characterized by a clear overcapacity

Real estate has become a major part of revenue recycling. In the traditional, customary system, land, under collective ownership, was managed by sheiks, who offered their countrymen, for the duration of their lives, land on which they could build houses or buildings, which they could then rent, but never sell, bequeath or mortgage. Reforms enacted around 2005 removed this obstacle by legalizing private ownership and allowing foreigners to access certain places for a certain period of time. This encouraged speculation: the conjunction of the subprime crisis with the bursting of a speculative real estate bubble explains the bankruptcy from which Dubai had to be bailed out by Abu Dhabi. Developers and promoters have become major players in urban dynamics. The proliferation of high-end real estate projects has led to a surplus supply that is unaligned with the strong demand for affordable housing.

International tourism is considered an activity to be encouraged. The hotel industry, which is dominated by international hotels managed by major global and regional chains, is characterized by a clear overcapacity. The growing ranks of malls serve as both tourist attractions and shopping centres for the resident population. The major sport and cultural facilities, the museums built by the big names in *starchitecture*, and the media events are all part of a regional marketing that goes beyond mere tourism advertising. Heritage, largely intangible, plays a dual role in terms of identity and tourism: whilst traditional life is the subject of folkloric re-enactments, the old neighbourhoods of market towns are being restored.

Conclusion

The economic might of the Gulf cities at the head of macrocephalic urban networks affords them a place on the global stage that does not correspond to their demographic weight. Far smaller than most global cities, which tend to have populations of more than 10 million, they are relying on their undeniable integration in the globalized world to ensure the post-oil era. Their spectacular growth has overshadowed the issue of their sustainability. Although it is now highlighted in the official discourse, it has resulted more in dramatic gestures that fall short (the green city of Masdar) than in substantive changes. With their focus on environmental aspects, especially more efficient water and energy management, sustainable cities as seen from the Gulf obscure the issues of governance and social inclusion. The cityscape – the American-style skyline, the business districts reminiscent of those of emerging Asian countries, the vaguely Middle Eastern character, the nods to local identity (sailing dhows, pearls, palm trees, falcons) – is the visible face of multiple hybridizations that have produced an original, composite and evolving, yet vulnerable model of urban development.

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