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The discovery of crude oil in the 1930s and 1940s spurred rapid growth and modernization, turning the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman into some of the world’s most affluent countries in a few decades.

While oil provided the financial resources for these nations to thrive, it was the innovative thinking of political leaders and business elites that has shaped the region’s rapid and distinctive urbanization. Additionally, openness to expatriates, both highly skilled and unskilled, has been made necessary by the juxtaposition of rapidly expanding economies and small, indigenous populations. This has given many of the region’s most important cities an international character and a cosmopolitan flavor. In cities like Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Doha, for example, 85 percent of the residents, if not more, are foreigners.

This article illustrates emerging trends very well. Although many other examples would be instructive, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Doha are certainly among the most dynamic and innovative of the Gulf’s cities. In the UAE, originally a loose federation of seven emirates known as the Trucial States, the country’s founding president, Sheikh Rashid Al Maktoum, created the emirate’s wealth for numerous construction projects. Among the new buildings were hospitals, schools, mosques, and homes. Those early projects paved the way for the development of industries that expanded Abu Dhabi’s economic base, contributing to its emergence as a leader among the emirates. When the UAE was formally established as a nation in December 1971, Abu Dhabi became the country’s capital as well.

Since that time, Abu Dhabi has become a sought-after destination for tourists, attracted by its white, sandy beaches, world-class hotels, elegant shops, and numerous fine restaurants. It is home to the luxurious Emirates Palace Hotel, built at a cost of $3 billion and situated on more than 200 acres of lavish gardens and well-manicured grounds. The $3 billion hotel is only the beginning of Abu Dhabi’s ambitious building plans, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. One of the most comprehensive of the new developments is Saadiyat Island, a massive complex built on an island 500 yards off the coast of the city. The island will eventually be home to the emirate’s capital, become the country’s city as well.

Until today, Abu Dhabi has had a special free zone, offering tax-free status and 100 percent foreign ownership.

The remaining thousand acres outside the city wall is planned to be a power-generating activities. Among the most important installations will be a photovoltaic factory and a wind farm, desalination plant, water treatment plant, and recycling center. The photovoltaic facilities will be completed first and will provide clean energy to power the construction project.

Even as Abu Dhabi champions sustainable energy alternatives, business is booming in the neighboring emirate of Dubai, about an hour and a half drive to the northwest. The city has taken aggressive steps to become a haven for international business. These measures have been designed to move Dubai into a knowledge-based economy. Ironically, only 6 percent of Dubai’s GDP is based in the oil sector. Ninety-four percent is based in manufacturing, tourism, and services.

Dubai’s Technology and Media Free Zone is home to an increasing number of multinational corporations. Many are attracted by the zone’s tax-free environment and the ability to operate as an entirely foreign-owned entity. Home to Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City, and Dubai Knowledge Village (KV), the zone provides the infrastructure and environments for organizations and educational institutions to expand into new markets. FT giants such as Microsoft, Cisco Systems, IBM, HP, and Dell all call Internet City home. Media City services more than 50 news outlets, including CNN and Reuters.

Dubai’s leaders also plan to help build the region’s talent pool through KV and through Dubai International Academic City (DIAC). The latter is a separate facility launched by KV in 2007 and devoted exclusively to high-quality education. With over 5000 students, KV’s $250 million campus is home to universities from all over the globe, as well as human resource companies, professional training centers, and research and development organizations. Together, KV and DIAC currently host 20 universities from 10 countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Australia, France, and the Indian Subcontinent. One of these is Muhammad University, which recently established a branch campus in DIAC and enrolled its inaugural class this fall.

The UAE is not alone in its international education pursuits. Neighboring Qatar is also taking strides to improve the quality of life for its citizens, including the expansion of opportunities for advanced training in education and research. In Doha, Qatar’s capital, a 2,500-acre campus houses the largest number of American universities outside the United States, as well as a branch campus in DIAC and enrolled its inaugural class this fall.

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