

4/14/2022

The Middle East Program Dubai: Is it a City for the Future?



The City of Dubai with its marina. Photo Credit: Move Hub

John O'Connell
The Eurasia Center, Middle East Program
www.eurasiacenter.org
The Eurasia Business Coalition
www.eurasianbusiness.org

Dubai: Is It Really a “City of the Future”?



An oasis among the dunes, Dubai's desert lakes. Photo Credit: Euronews, Dubai.

Dubai: An Oasis in the Desert

Dubai is well regarded as an up-and-coming global hub. Located in the oil-rich Persian Gulf between the established networks of Europe and the emerging economies of South Asia, the city is prime to be a center of trade, innovation, and wealth. Although it began as nothing but a small port, the discovery of oil led to substantial economic growth for the city, which provided it with vast wealth. By the 1990s, Sheik Maktoum, who governed the Dubai Emirate, launched a new initiative to prepare Dubai for a world where oil has been depleted and shifted to diversify the Emirate's economy, particularly towards tourism. Billions of dollars of oil profits were reinvested into creating the modern city of Dubai, a paradigm for foreign direct investment and tourism. This led to the rapid urbanization and expansion of the city as it is known today. In the span of a generation, Dubai went from being a fishing center on the Persian Gulf to a global metropolis, home to the world's tallest skyscraper, man-made islands shaped like countries, and hundreds of other tourist attractions that make it an international beacon of tourism. Dubai and the United Arab Emirates have become the success story of the Middle East. The only question is this, "Is it sustainable?"



Migrant workers in Dubai. Photo Credit: Harrison Jacobs, Business Insider

A Look at Dubai's Growth Model

Dubai is rapidly growing in multiple directions, including GDP, population, and city size. Yet, most of the population will not live in new luxurious developments like those of the Marina or dozens of other projects. Almost ninety percent of the city's three million people are expats from other countries such as India and Pakistan, enticed by the promise of a better salary to work in the construction and other industries that the wealthy native Arab population do not wish to labor in. The city has long been under scrutiny for mistreating these workers in multiple ways such as 12-hour shifts and withholding both pay and passports to keep these workers from returning to their home countries after experiencing these conditions. The astonishing tourist attractions of the city – some out of a science fiction novel – are built on a system of exploitation and brutality, a system that should not exist or be necessary in a so-called “city of the future.”

City Planning in Deserts

Dubai is not located in a very beneficial position when it comes to global climate change. Temperatures on the Arabian Peninsula is warming twice as fast as the global average and Dubai has seen temperatures over 122 degrees Fahrenheit (50 degrees Celsius), with the possibility of even higher temperatures in the future. This has led to an increased risk of heat waves in the city. Since Dubai was constructed with methods encouraging urban expansion rather than dense communities, these heat waves present a significant problem for those living within the city. Essentially, this means that residents of the city are generally healthier due to relying on cars rather than walking to travel. In addition, residents face a higher chance of from heat stroke and other ailments caused by the extreme heat.



Skyline of Dubai from the outside of the city. Photo Credit: Mathieu Helie

Dubai is also known for its dramatic man-made islands such as Palm Jumeirah and the World Islands which are visible from space and exude from the relatively straight coastline of the city. Despite their stunning beauty, these islands are plagued by a myriad of difficulties, such as a lack of access to city services and the increasingly significant issue of rising sea levels. These islands are also sinking into the Gulf as the waters rise and these major investments are causing the environmental destruction of reef habitats. If appropriate action is not taken to combat these forces, these islands will suffer the fate of becoming nothing but abandoned sand bars within the next half-century. At the same time, Dubai still faces the ongoing risk from a multitude of climate factors. And yet, the city continues to pursue growth in the style of “bigger equals better,” leading to an unsustainable growth model and a city more vulnerable to climate change than ever before. Taking these factors into account, it is no wonder that Dubai has emerged as one of the highest carbon footprints of any city on Earth.

The Future of a Futuristic City

Based on its present situation, Dubai can be described as being at a crossroads. Over the last decade, numerous officials and global scholars have issued calls to the rulers of the Emirate to create a more sustainable environment for the inhabitants. Despite concerns about being ineffective and ignoring the problem at hand, new regulations are being discussed involving migrant workers, foreign direct investment, and sustainable development. The coming decade will be crucial for Dubai to define its path for the upcoming century. Will Dubai be a sustainable gem in the Middle East, or a forgotten city swallowed up by the scorching desert? Only time will tell.

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