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**GCC's Evolving Cities and the Dearth in Urban Planning
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Introduction

In the past couple of decades, the GCC region has undergone unprecedented degrees of development. With urbanization in the region surpassing the global average, an array of big-budget infrastructure projects and a tech-savvy new generation, the region is one to watch. Since the oil boom in the 1970s, the region has unraveled showing [tremendous growth](#). GCC today boasts of 85 per cent urbanization, this is further expected to rise to 90 per cent by [2050](#).

The world-class smart city megaprojects in Dubai and Doha have peaked the interest of the global community. The global events by both cities – the ongoing 2020 World Expo in Dubai (which faced a delay due to the Covid-19 pandemic) and the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar – feature smart technologies such as air-conditioned sports stadiums and driverless cars. Abu Dhabi's Masdar City initiative and Qatar's Lusail city are both being developed as smart [cities](#). Meanwhile, Oman has hosted its first Smart City summit. A smart city is one that utilizes existing information in planning for the optimum utilization of limited resources to ensure cost reduction, optimum efficiency and better quality of life. It will appraise intractable challenges such as climate change, growing populations and limited [budgets](#).

Today, Gulf monarchies are increasingly moving towards economic diversification and investing beyond the oil industry. Studies, however, reveal

inconsistencies between the master-plans and the socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics of the GCC. Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on sustainable urbanism is landing the region in a quandary regarding environment. Recently, Qatar [reshuffled](#) the ministry of municipality and environment and created a new ministry dedicated for environment. This is symbolic of the commitment towards sustainable construction and development.

The fact that most of the [master-plans](#) are made by Westerners could be a causal factor for these discrepancies. Such discrepancies stem from developmental plans that reflect an Orientalist approach and lack of understanding of the GCC's historical transnational nature; hence affecting the feasibility of the plans. Development policies are expected to be designed for the creation of resilient, inclusive, safe and sustainable cities. An orientalist approach to development policies will fail to capture the true essence and dimensionality of the region. Thus, leaving shortfalls in the creation of modern cities in the Arabian Gulf.

The GCC's transnational dimension: the role of Tujjar

Many scholars from the West argue that the history of the GCC region is merely seventy to a hundred years old. This is a folly. The Arabian Gulf's longstanding transnational nature and existence as a global space with high degree of dimensionality is a

cornerstone in understanding and formulating city concept in the region. The Gulf region was never completely Persian, Arabic, African, or Indian. With the politicization of national identities in the 1970s and 80s however, multiculturalism and transnationalism is being underplayed. Prior to this, transnational elite culture was celebrated. People did not have to Arabize to gain acceptance or influence. However, this emphasis of the Arab identity cannot do away with history of transnationalism. The GCC, till date, remains a transnational space, but only the nature of transnationalism has changed. Previously, the GCC used to be a melting pot of cultures; today, it is simply a mixing pot. An easy example to understand this shift will be attires. Prior to 1970s and 1980s, elites of the GCC wore outfits that were a hybrid of Arab *kandura* with an Indian or Persian headdress and spoke Farsi, Gujarati or Hindi fluently. However, post 1980s, the Arab merchant elite would restrict himself to wearing a *Najdi shmagh*, *ghutra* and to speaking Arabic in [public](#).

Understanding the region's transnational dimensionality is crucial in creating modern global cities. Transnationalism was largely caused by the pre-oil *Tujjar* (merchants). Merchant families connected eastern Arabia to the rest of the world. Evidences for such trade networks in the [Uruk](#) period and [6th millennium B.C.](#) have been found. Heterogeneity, duality, cosmopolitanism, geographic fluidity, and blending of cultures were synonymous with the pre-oil merchant elites. They practiced fishing, pearling, sailing dhows, passenger trade and agency work. The characteristic extensive business networks that

functioned as conglomerates across various countries and possession of substantial property holdings made them the wealthiest and most influential after the ruling elite.

Merchants' control over the mobile pearling and nomadic workforce, through their ability to leave for friendlier ports, worked as a check on the rulers' power. The movement of the workforce meant the lack of revenue, leading to the historic governing coalition of a quiet and informal understanding between the rulers and merchants in the region. Eventually, the group identity and kinship caused the emergence of a cohesive, strong, self-conscious merchant class; the common tie being the production process. Rulers' financial dependence on the *tujjar* bolstered the merchant-ruler relationships. Post-oil discovery, rentier incomes increased state-autonomy, and the *tujjar* took a step back from the realm of politics.

The case of Dubai

Merchant-ruler ties is crucial in the Gulf monarchies' development. In Kuwait, for instance, merchants were a small, coherent, elite group with political power. When the gap between them and the rulers increased, they formed an articulate politically organized merchant elite and created educational councils and political institutions (such as the Kuwait municipality). As for the case of Dubai, the culture of urbanization and even the recent economic diversification model stemmed from the former ruler Shaikh Maktoum bin Hasher's pro-business [policies](#).

Dubai has traditionally been a cosmopolitan mercantile city-state. Commerce was the *Shaikhdom's* main source of income. Despite the risk of over-dependence on the merchants, Shaikh Maktoum abolished taxes and customs to promote trade. This led to the creation of a sophisticated mercantile community which played a fundamental role in restructuring and implementing economic, educational, political and modernization [reforms](#); in other words, urban planning. Merchants in Dubai continue to play a crucial role in reformulating political structure and economic affairs. The UAE's decision to provide selective citizenship is thus a natural progression. [Britannica](#) defines citizenship as a relationship between an individual and a state to which the individual owes allegiance and in turn is entitled to its protection.

Aims and Challenges

The aims of urbanization in the GCC are three-fold. First, to provide for the growing populations. The GCC's population has swollen due to the expatriate workers. [Qatar's](#) population jumped from 600,000 at the start of the millennium to over 2.9 million in [2020](#). In [Kuwait](#) and [Bahrain](#), the respective populations have nearly doubled since 2000. Second, to diversify the generated incomes. Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision and Dubai Plan 2021 emphasize the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach. Third, to showcase the region's capabilities to the world. This is a matter of pride that is shared across the region.

Digital transformation and literacy have become concerns due to the underutilization of the available e-

commerce, m-government and cloud services. In the [2020 Portulans Institute's Network Readiness Index](#), the GCC states did not boast high ranks: Saudi Arabia at #41, Qatar at #38 and UAE at #30. However, the GCC ranked much higher for skills and usage of information and communications technology (ICT): Saudi Arabia at #12, Qatar at #10, and UAE at #1. As for the level of access to ICT, Saudi Arabia ranks at #19, UAE at #10 and Qatar at #2. Today, Riyadh has emerged as the world leader of schools with internet access. A further top-down hurdle would be getting accustomed to the new-norm of decreasing oil incomes and reducing petro-chemical dependency; thus, applying restraints on infrastructural projects' expenditure.

Sometimes, society is ahead of the government. Other times, the case is vice-versa. Such imbalance in this equilibrium can cause discord between the society and the government in power, which in turn would trigger domestic instability. Finding a balance between modernization and tradition is a challenge the Gulf region faces. GCC states are trying to resist the cultural influence from the West and other regions through the opening of heritage museums, replacement of Persian and Indian headdresses with the *Najdi shmagh* and *ghutrah*, and [likewise](#). Nevertheless, this strife between globalization and tradition may unravel in the pursuit of ultra-modern cities.

The way forward

Urbanization and urban concept existed in the Arabian Gulf from before the oil boom. Any regional futuristic urbanism must not ignore the region's historical urban and city concepts.

Adopting an orientalist approach to urban planning and city concept in the Gulf monarchies is not wise. Participatory planning systems are important. The [lack](#) of participation of national or regional planners in these developmental projects could potentially hamper sustainable urbanism. For the realization of the ambitions of the GCC states, rich innovative developmental plans that converge strategic planning, effective land use, and sensitivity towards the socio-cultural, transnational, economic layers of the states are crucial. A dearth could prove detrimental.

About the author

Lakshmi Venugopal Menon is a Ph.D. student at the Gulf Studies Program. Her areas of research include Politics, Security, Peace and Conflict in the Gulf. Including the multimodal relations between the region and South Asia, with a focus on migration, labor, people-to-people relations and demography.

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