"A historic account for Urbanization in the United Arab Emirates; links to the future"

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Abstract
Cities of the United Arab Emirates are the gift of their suitable locations on the Gulf as safe havens for fishing and pearl-hunting ships which made the livelihood of the small population since the 1500's when the origins of the existing population moved in[2]. Cities on the Gulf never attained a very high urban status prior to the discovery of oil because their environmental settings were poor compared to the neighboring wall-established urban centers in Oman, Iraq, Iran, and India. Stopping for food supplies, fuel, and water was more plausible on the shores of Oman Sultanate which had better natural resources and a stable independent government as early as the 1300's. Settlements on the southern shores of the Gulf were only catering for the local population and spontaneous stops of ships crossing the gulf to the major port city of Basra at the times of the Muslim Khaliphate which ended by the 1500's when its capital moved to Istanbul in Turkey. Pearl hunting was the only craft indigenous to the area that gave it a good name up to the 1900's.

***Keywords:** Historic Account, Urbanization*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Economy of the area was feudal depending on fishing, animal husbandry, and trade and could only expand into the hinterlands depending on the availability of pastures after a good rainy season. This feudal economy was only capable of supporting small settlements that were left isolated due to the natural difficulty of land transportation through the salty shallows which made most of the landscape close to the Gulf shores.

Distribution of settlements was consequently dispersed, independent, and never dominated under one rule as it was difficult for a single feudal economy to provide security and peace for the whole area. In areas where the population was capable of depending on agriculture and animal husbandry with better land transportation; more stable and unified government was attained[3].

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Western interest in the Gulf area

Western interest in the area began as early as the 1500's when the Portuguese expedition of Magellan discovered the route to India with the help of a local Gulf sailor (Ibn Majid). By the year 1509 local war ships were united to stop the spread of Portuguese power in the Gulf area but were defeated in "Diwo" naval battle off the shores of India (Al-Kasimi, 1993, p.30). The same period of time witnessed the rise of the Ottomans as a major power that overthrew the wall-established Muslim Khaliphate in Bagdad and shifted the capital of the Muslim World to Istanbul. Small emirates on the Gulf shores were out of the reach of the Istanbul government, which was trying to make a stronghold on other Muslim states in North Africa, Egypt, Iraq, and the holy lands in the Arab Peninsula. Various ruling tribes in the Gulf region thus became independent from Istanbul while having control over small parts of Africa (Zanzibar, Mauritius, and parts of Tanzania), Northern side of the Gulf (Lingah, Gasham,..etc.)[4] and even locations on the Western side of the Indian Peninsula with which they had strong trade connections. Intrusion of the western powers in the area was threatening the local interest in having their own independent, stable and strong governments, which lead to military friction and hostilities.

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[2] See Al-Kasimi 93 p.46 and Rashid 89, p18-25.
[3] Emirate of Abu-Dhabi (the largest of the seven Emirates further west) is a good example because of its vast pastures deep in the hinterlands and better land transportation into the Arabian Peninsula.
[4] The issue of having control over colonies on the Iranian side of the Gulf and on the Eastern shores of Africa is a fact however most references do not point out the Kasimis in particular.

Figure 1 1522 map of the Gulf[5]

It was not till 1622 that the British forces were able to expel the Portuguese from their strong hold of Hermosa on the tip of the Gulf, as the East Indian Company became a major interest to the British Empire. An interest which turned bloody at 1809 and 1819 when the British navy destroyed and put the whole city of Ras al-Khaimah on fire to assure their full control over the Gulf. The Kasimi tribes who had their livelihood centered around sea-life were ruling the area extending from nowadays Sharjah (South-west) up to Ras Musandam (North-East) with their Capital located in the city of Ras al-Khaimah.   Their nautical power (not yet an organized navy) of the Kasimi was up to 63 large war ships and 810 small ships as projected by the British sources at 1806 to the extent that the Eastern India Company signed a treaty with them to allow the British ships to sail into and near the Gulf and at the same time giving the Kasimi full right of trade in the Indian sea[6].

However, the treaty was not respected and there was a bloody clash between the British navy raided the Kasimi in there capital city of Ras al-Khaimah at 1809 in which the city was completely gunned down from the navy ships. The Kasimi were strong enough to rebuild their naval ships within five years and recall there ships which were sailing the Indian and African waters to have another clash with the British navy at 1816 in which the British navy had to retreat (Rashid, p. 56). Clashes between the British navy and the Kasimi were based on alleged piracy claims by British ships, an image accentuated by British maps of that time which referred to the area dwelled by the Kasimi as the "The Pirate Coast"[7].   Clashes between the two sides continued in the Gulf and off the shores of India till 1819 when a final and a ferocious confrontation took place and the Kasimi capital city of Ras al-Khaimah was completely destroyed.

Figure 2 Battles inside Ras al-Khaimah city 1809[8]

Kasimi naval power was estimated at 1819 by the British as composed of 89 large ships with canons and 161 small ships with a total of 10300 worrier men (Rashid, p.77). Starting 1820 a peace treaty was signed and the presence of the British navy in the Gulf became permanent and having the upper hand with a special provision of the treaty that ended the Kasimi presence on the Iranian coast of the Gulf[9].

3.0 DESCRIPTION OF OLD SETTLEMENTS ON THE GULF
Description of the urban structure of any UAE city is only available through old maps and sketches drafted by the early explorers and adventurers since no written (not to mention sketched or drawn) account of the urbanization

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[5] Map by Fries/Servetus 1522/1523 Arabia, Heritage Map Museum, Middle East and Africa, Internet source: www. Carto.com
[6] See Rashid 1989, p.43-51, and Hanzal 1995 for the detailed documents of 1806.
[7] Most British maps of the area e.g. map 120.01,in Records of Oman, originally published 1837 for the Royal Geographic Society in London.
[8] The Picture adapted from Al-Kasimi p.50
[9] See Rashid p.83-87 and Hanzal 1989 for the treaty document.

is available.   Main Arabic references to old settlements like those of Yakot al Hamawy, al-Maqrizi, and Al-Tabary, up to the sixteenth century do not mention any major settlement in the area.   The only available reference to the urban mass of an UAE city is that of Ras al-Khaimah as described by the British navy officers who drew the battle of 1819 in which a watch tower or two can be seen in the landscape.

However, if we consider the sheer number of worriers and ships participating in Ras al-Khaimah battle from the side of the Kasimi (as defined by the British navy) we might speculate the number of their general population to be around fifty to sixty thousand distributed among the city of Ras al-Khaimah and its environs.   Such a high population figure would definitely require some sizable urban development that for some reason was ignored by most travelers to the area.   The only historic material available for researchers about the history of existing UAE cities is that related to aerial photography during the 1930's which were done for the purpose of oil exploration. History of urbanization prior to that might only have references in oral history and undocumented resources.

3.1 City structure and city components

All major UAE cities –which make the original seven emirates confederation-- are built on a or around a Creek[10] in order to ensure their inhabitants a safe haven for their fishing and pearl-hunting ships from possible extreme weather conditions and the gulf tide. This internal location was a necessary measure for the good keeping of the fishing, pearl hunting, and trade vessels, which made the livelihood of the population. Cities' location on double water fronts also increased the possibility of fish catching from the Gulf and the creek in all sorts of climates and tide conditions, especially so when we consider the small number of population till the 1900s.   However, the main explanation for that island-like location is the protection from any possible land invasions and raids by other tribesmen within the region. Sometimes the location was a real island as that of Abu-Dhabi where it can be reached only through the shallow waters when the tide is low. Adding to the defensive locations; land transportation was already difficult along the shores because of the many salty shallows (Sabkha fields in Arabic) that restrained caravan movement. Hostilities against such settlements were only possible from the seaside; for which the existence of the Creek was a second defense line.   As a result of the above discussion the "creek" became a general city component in all major UAE cities.

Figure 3   al-Sharjah map at 1935 showing the Gulf and Creek

This feeling of safety on the creek shore lead to the creation of the Urban mass right on the creek front while watchtowers and forts were created either on the Gulf shore or on the desert fringes of the city. Another general city component of old UAE cities is its defensive system which included the fort, the watch towers, and the walls, either as an integrated system containing all aliments or as separate items dispersed all over the landscape.

All cities had forts of some kind; at least one for the ruler's residence.   Forts sometimes were reduced to the size of a watchtower with a small space inside only at strategic locations for early alarm before any defense might be necessary.   However, during the 1800's most of the watchtowers and forts on the shores of the UAE east of Abu-Dhabi were destroyed and the erection of new ones was banned by the British as a means of controlling hostilities within the area.

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[10] Creek is "Khor" in Arabic = a small body of water branching off the Arabian Gulf that might be linear or taking the shape of a small inland lake

Figure 4   Fort of Ajman 1950

In most of the UAE cities the ruler's palace was integrated within the fort which was a symbol on the emirate status and might.   Limited economic resources for many emirates made the term "palace" unattainable in reality depending on each emirate's wealth, surplus revenue and number of people.   The heart of any city was not the fort, nor the palace, nor the city harbor on the creek but rather the mosque and its surrounding markets (suqs or bazaars) which made the center for daily civil activities.   Based on the feudal economic system and the limited resources of the population, the goods exchanged in those markets were limited in value and volume.

4.0 EPILOGUE: A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

Modern urbanization in the UAE is only three decades old and has already altered the lifestyle of the people, and caused a redistribution of the population among the seven emirates depending on the newly provided employment potentials and services and not on the traditional distribution of tribes across the land.   In order to achieve that much change during a very short period of time; UAE cities turned to the international planning standards which paid no (or very little) attention to the traditional city structure and its basic components.   A close monitor was applied on all new city plans which were prepared by foreign consulting offices to ensure the basic services such as: a mosque for each residential quarter, adequate number of schools and a suitably located health center for each city district.   However, the traditional intimate pedestrian movement systems throughout the community, distribution of properly scaled urban spaces for outdoor activities within the residential areas, and the traditional integration among urban activities were not observed.

Efficient as they are; modern urban developments in the UAE – as they are in most other countries with fast track urbanization – lost a great deal of their local identity and urban character.   In business and commercial districts of UAE cities such a loss of identity might be understood within the context of "globalization" of businesses across international boundaries.   In residential quarters, modern layout of the buildings is not resisted as the traditional settings of narrow and winding streets do not fulfill the desired ease of access to the dwelling door step in response to the high car ownership rates prevailing in the community.   However, such a loss of identity in residential areas might be considered curable and temporary as a great number of the population still have their personal recollection of how life looked like less than thirty years ago.

Under such circumstance a strong trend for historic preservation and conservation of whole urban sites is only a need by the community at large to defend its roots and demonstrate to the younger generations the older life style in the city before it is for-ever gone.   A dichotomy between traditional and modern urbanization is not a case in UAE cities since the traditional urban settings are only kept for festivities and recreational cultural activities and is not developed for normal day-to-day functioning.

Figure 5 Urban fabric of Dubai city at 1951

With air conditioning becoming a basic need easily provided for all segments of the population; traditional layout and design of buildings which had their virtues in providing better environmental conditions might not even be fully desirable as they cannot provide modern life luxuries that is becoming a standard for newer developments. To sum up on the issue of "what is the urban future of UAE cities is going to look like", thorough research in the fields of architecture, urban design, and building environment need to be carried out un-biased by any sentimental image stereotypes about the past.

A somehow culturally appropriate urban development codes that does not conflict with the country's economic ambitions while conforming to modern life styles is yet to be developed so that a new urban character might be defined. In a world of harsh and fast moving economic realities; on the long run; urbanization is definitely going to be strongly affected by the laws of economic profitability more than by its fulfillment of "cultural desires" that are not backed by strong economic capabilities as proved to be true in most cities of the world since the turn of the century. The look into the future needs to be realistic, culturally responsive, dynamic, and yet fulfilling to the "sentimental" needs of the community to feel unique and deeply rooted into history.

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