

‘Message in a bottle (from Mecca)’

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Over 3000 years ago, in a part of Arabia defined by inhospitable mountains and desert sands, a great city rose from the barren earth. The waters of Zam Zam gushing from where Abraham's infant son Ismail kicked the ground remain a powerful representation of the birth of Mecca and the dawning of a new era in the Arabian Peninsula. Yet, Mecca's trajectory was determined not merely by these sacred connotations, but by the ingenuity of its people. It was the Quraysh tribe who transformed a city without vegetation and natural resources into the beating heart of western Arabia. By securing trade routes (*ilaf*) and establishing a solid framework for commerce and dispute resolution, the Quraysh provided Mecca with a purpose and a future. From lacking any discernable logic for its existence, Mecca became part of a regional network of trade and culture, connecting the great empires of Byzantium, Persia, and beyond.

In the modern Arab World, rarely have we seen a city rise from obscurity to global prominence in the space of a generation for anything other than negative reasons. Indeed, the trend has often been in the opposite direction, with great cities seeing their fortunes falter and decline; one of the most emotive examples being our beloved Beirut, repeatedly subjected to war and calamity. But recently, a small city in the Arabian Gulf dared to believe in its ability to shape its own future. Suddenly, towers began to rise from the desert, new islands were built in the sea, and we started hearing the 'D' word – Dubai.

Cynics were quick to dismiss what was often decried as Gulf largesse. With so much of the Gulf states' coffers having been squandered on transient trivialities in the preceding decades in view of their *rentierist* oil economies, there was a belief by many that Dubai would go down the same path. Lacking the hydrocarbon resources of its neighbours, it was depicted as a "bubble" that would eventually burst. Yet, Dubai's chosen political economy course was one of determined development rather than simply self-indulgent excess. Adopting a Western economic model, Dubai reasoned that the only limits on their advancement were the limits of their own boldness and creativity. In the face of great scepticism, Dubai captured the imagination of the region and the world, becoming a symbol of a new visionary spirit in the Gulf.

Dubai was resolute in its determination to thrust itself into the international economic and financial system. Like the leaders of Mecca, the leaders of Dubai saw creativity and innovation, particularly with trade, as their greatest resource. As such, Dubai enacted new investment laws, undertook colossal infrastructure projects, and charted a course to becoming a regional hub for finance, enterprise, commerce, media, and the arts. Whilst the city's skyscrapers struck some as mere imitators of New York, for Dubai they represented a synthesis of modern technology and traditional ingenuity.

The city became the model for efficiency and ambition, inspiring others in the Gulf and the wider Arab World. When building Amman's new Abdali downtown district, Jordan looked to Dubai. When re-evaluating their New Valley cities project, Egypt looked to Dubai. When planning the new Economic City to bear his name, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia looked to Dubai. It became the city where ideas were implemented, where regional and international companies, corporations, institutions, and organisations established bases, and where modern Arab intellectuals sought creative freedom.

Dubai's ambitions went far beyond the attainment of wealth. Exhibiting the personal commitment of its ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Dubai committed itself to supporting philanthropy and the furtherance of civil society in the Arab World with such praiseworthy initiatives as the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation, and Dubai Cares. Perhaps

even more inspirational was the investment in the education and advancement of the youth in an effort to cultivate the new leaders of tomorrow. Though I was not a frequent visitor to Dubai, in 2004 I was invited by Sheikh Mohammed to participate in these efforts as part of the fundamental belief that a new generation of Dubaians and Arabs must take their place in determining the future of Dubai and the Arab World.

By 2007, Dubai's achievements were plain for all to see. No longer a city living in the shadow of others, Dubai was now the place to where people from across the world flocked to realise their dreams. The irony is that this recognition of Dubai's success coincided with the beginning of the global economic turmoil now enveloping us all. What took the world by surprise took Dubai by surprise as well. The international financial system, of which Dubai had long sought to become a part, now cruelly repaid Dubai's labours by undermining the confidence that had been so crucial to its success. Though the "bubble" did burst in Dubai, the irony is that it is not the "bubble" of which critics had been talking, but rather the "bubble" of the global economy. Had the city remained isolated from the fabric of the global economy, it would not now be reeling from the global downturn in the same way.

It is regrettable that Dubai's current difficulties were greeted by much *schadenfreude* among those who had long seen the city as an upstart. Articles quickly began appearing in the international press that noted gleefully the effects of the credit crunch on Dubai's economy, with a recurring prediction that its grand towers would soon become hallow monuments to a lost dream. As negative as this celebration of misfortune was, the most perplexing reaction was in the Gulf itself. Rather than seeing an opportunity to lend support to a city which had generated so much excitement and inspiration, many of our brethren in the Gulf almost took pride in the diminution of Dubai. Those who had looked on with envy as Dubai built its success out of its own endeavours, saw the changing winds of the global economy as a welcome reckoning.

Yet, one might argue that the naysayers are premature in their prognostications.

Dubai flew too close to the Sun, burnt its wings, and is now paying the price. But Dubai will learn from this experience. Indeed, every facet of Dubai's remarkable rise has been predicated on learning, innovating, and planning for the future. When the next chapter of the region's history opens, we may see a Dubai of even greater ambition, tempered by an understanding of past mistakes. More than anything, it will reap the rewards of the investment that it has made in its young leaders.

As the old guard stand down, young Dubaians schooled in executive management and good governance will take their place. In a part of the world where the younger generation are often filled with hopelessness, Dubai's foresight in building the foundations for tomorrow means that its citizens will enjoy economic opportunities of which those of neighbouring lands can only dream. Passing the torch of leadership from one generation to the next will see the rise of those with a greater focus on the intersection between management and strategy, and the need for forecasting before execution, the very approach which sustainable development requires. Perhaps it is in this future that the promise of Dubai will truly be delivered, and its real investment realised.

Coming from Mecca, an ancient city that dared to succeed through God's blessings and its own people's efforts, my message to Dubai is to get up, shake off the dust, and continue down the path that it has chosen so boldly. Though many of us in the region are silent in our support, we hope and believe that Dubai, and its young leaders of tomorrow, can once more inspire and succeed.