“City-States: A Continuing Global Phenomenon”

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I came to Abu Dhabi for another stop in a series of quick visits that I have made to cities around the world. In addition to presenting a lecture and participating in academic meetings, this visit got me interested in the city itself—at once its uniqueness and also the ways it reflects world-wide change. In particular, I began to wonder about city-states and their role in the unfolding of global society.

As a world historian by profession, I research and write on large-scale change in human society, over both short and long periods of time. Within world history I have focused on Africa and the African Diaspora, which led me to interest in African settlers in the Gulf, both contemporary and historical. But because I also wear the hat of a migration historian, I found Abu Dhabi to be interesting because of the full range of its in-migration and out-migration.

My week-long trip to the Gulf region included four days in Abu Dhabi, where I made visits to several parts of the city. On one day I was treated to a four-hour tour of the city, guided by an experienced driver and tour guide, Pakistani-born, who had been in Abu Dhabi for thirteen years. He had worked his way into taxi driving and then into providing tours such as the one in which he showed me the city. We drove through the new city to the great mosque, the old city, the Persian port, past the palaces, and with a stop at the museum. The driver described the old city as it had been over a decade ago, when it was clustered around the Persian port, before its rapid expansion filled out the peninsula. He said he lived alone but had been able to return to Pakistan periodically to visit with family. These were some of the local and unique dimensions of Abu Dhabi, with comparison to the other Gulf states. Quite a different perspective emerges if one considers the recurring role of city-states in world history.

As I began thinking about city-states in general, I realized that Abu Dhabi is among the best examples of city-states in today’s world. Thinking back in time, one immediately
encounters the prominence of Genoa and Venice in the medieval and early modern world; recollection of ancient and classical times brings forth the city-states of Carthage and Athens. Perhaps the similarities among these cities are superficial, but they raise the possibility that city-states may have played a recurring role not only in commerce but also in politics, in artistic and architectural advances, in production of knowledge, and even in their social structures and their military activities. The concentration of city-states in maritime life became obvious, at least for the past three thousand years.

With these initial comparisons I began a free-form consideration of the roles of city-states in past and present. Most obvious has been their commercial role. City-states are overwhelmingly maritime, and they tend to arise at key junctures along trade routes and at ecological boundaries: Singapore is at the juncture of the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. City-states never exist in isolation—their very existence depends on relationships with other political and social units. They are small and self-governing units, linking commerce to rural areas, to other cities, and to large political units such as empires. The economic role of city-states has not been limited to commerce—it has included financial centers, centers of manufacturing and even of raw materials (as with petroleum products in the Gulf states, Brunei, and Trinidad).

Governance in city-states has been highly varied: it has included monarchies, republics, and colonial administration. For city-states to function well, in addition, it has been necessary for the governance to allow for an active and even contentious oligarchy, representing the varying interests among merchants and financiers. Because of the importance of trade, governance in city-states takes place not only within the realm, but also as relations with other political units. Further, there is virtually always a military dimension to the city-state. At one extreme, city-states have their own armies and navies and to defend and extend the realm; at another extreme, city-states have no army but provide support and
materials for the military of larger states that act to protect them. In between these extremes, city-states participate in a variety of political and military alliances. The Ryukyu kingdom, an early modern trading center of the islands between Japan and Taiwan, maintained independence by balancing ties with Japan and China.

City-states become cosmopolitan centers at several levels. They attract visitors and settlers from many regions, and they must allow for continuity and interchange among language and cultural groups. In architecture and urban design, both the ruling elite and other cultural groups develop architectural monuments and characteristic city spaces: the Acropolis in Athens, the Doge’s Palace in Venice, and the great mosque in Kilwa are examples. By the same token, city-states become centers of the development and exchange of knowledge, so that scholars, schools, and even universities arise within them. City-states are too small to serve as the center of a major religion, but they are likely to include people of many faiths and need to maintain means for their coexistence.

The social structure of city-states has been at once fluid and hierarchical. Athens is famous for the level of democracy among its citizens, but it is also famous for the large number of enslaved workers and domestics who kept the city running. Not uncommonly, men and women from the bottom strata of society could rise to positions of recognition and authority; even more frequently new arrivals came at the lowest level, and members of elite families fell to the lower levels of society. Thus the cosmopolitan nature of city-states sustained itself both at the elite level and at the level of commoners.

To summarize, I characterize city-states with regard to four main factors: politics, long-distance trade, population/migration, and culture.

- In politics: the city-state is an independent political power dominated by a single city, not governed by a large state.
• In economy: city-states are major nodes in wider economic systems, playing roles in transit, production, and/or finance.

• In population: city-state populations are heavily migrant; they are polyglot, they fluctuate through continuing migration, and they have a steep social hierarchy from wealthy elites to the impoverished and oppressed.

• In culture: city-states are cosmopolitan centers, gathering and displaying creativity in art, architecture, and knowledge of many sorts.

Looking a little farther, I contrast city-states with imperial ports and colonial ports, two other types of cities that resemble city-states in many particulars, yet have the essential difference of lacking political independence. Imperial ports were ports of the imperial homeland, under the direct rule of a great state. Constantinople is perhaps the best example of this category, as it was at once a great port and the imperial capital for almost all of the 1700 years of its existence (its name was changed to Istanbul in 1930). Alexandria is another such imperial port: it has long been a major Egyptian port and a cosmopolitan center, but almost never a city-state. Among other imperial ports that were not also capital cities, one may consider Liverpool, Cádiz, Nagasaki, Marseille, Alexandria, and Adulis (the Red Sea port under Axum that serviced trade between Egypt and India in the first millennium CE). Cities that were at once capitals and port cities included Lisbon, Constantinople, London, and Sri Vijaya. For all these ports, subordination to a large state limited the autonomy of government and society.

The second similar yet distinctive category is that of colonial ports, commercial centers that were under imperial rule but distant from the imperial center. Manila and Havana fit this category: both became major cities and great ports, with considerable autonomy, yet they remained under Spanish rule, as did Hong Kong and Singapore under British rule and
Luanda as Portugal’s main center of slave trade. In the colonial Caribbean, Curaçao and St. Eustatius stood out as cosmopolitan ports under Dutch rule. In these cases the colonial rulers, while distant, nonetheless controlled the politics and finances of the city.

City-states have experienced both rise and fall, moving from one status to another in politics, trade, and social conditions. One purpose of narrating and comparing the transitions of city-states is to learn what special circumstances enable city-states to thrive. Perhaps the most obvious transformation is the rise of city-states through the expansion in trade. Tyre (in today’s Lebanon) grew through expanded trade. Colonists from Tyre build Carthage, which itself grew through trade. Athens followed by expanding trade of the northeast Mediterranean. Kilwa, Malindi, and other Swahili states arose in medieval times. As the Atlantic slave trade grew in seventeenth-century Africa, Ouidah, Bonny, and Loango arose as city-states. Honolulu arose as a great Pacific entrepot in the nineteenth century. Most of these city-states, however, were taken over by empires before long.

Movements of city-states from one category to another have been complex. Athens, Carthage, Venice, Amsterdam, and Zanzibar expanded from city-states to become centers of large empires. Hormuz shifted among the categories of city-state (in the fifteenth century), colonial port (under the Portuguese in the sixteenth century), and imperial port (under Iranian rule in the seventeenth century). Further, city-states arise at the edge of shrinking empires. Zanzibar arose as a city-state as Portuguese power declined in the Indian Ocean; Singapore, while initially part of post-colonial Malaysia, gained its independence, as did Brunei. Similarly Hong Kong, released from its colonial status by Great Britain, created a city-state position of semi-independence from China. The Gulf states from the United Arab Emirates to Kuwait gained independence as Britain left the Gulf. As the Soviet Union collapsed and yielded to independence of its republics, Latvia and its port of Riga regained a much earlier status as an independent Baltic port.
In migration, city-states share in the worldwide movement of migrants. As centers of commerce, city-states have often sent migrants to distant destinations, either as short-term visitors or as permanent settlers: Genoese settlers were to be found throughout the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and eventually in the Atlantic. More evident has been the flow of in-migrants into city-states. The city-states of today are populated primarily by immigrant workers at all levels and from many regions. In Abu Dhabi, for instance, the laborers come especially from South Asian nations, the university faculty comes particularly from major universities worldwide, and other professionals come from the Middle East and North Africa. Parallel migrant populations have developed for Singapore and Trinidad in the present, and for the Ryukyus and Hormuz in the past. The political independence of city-states has tended to make their population more varied.

While the experiences of city-states have been recurrent and wide-ranging, they have varied over time and in their location. A simplified chronology of city-states shows both the continuity and the changes in positions of city-states. The earliest studies of city-states go back to the second and third millennium BCE: these were especially mainland city-states of Mesopotamia and Anatolia, in days before the rise of empires when city-states were the largest political units known. By the first millennium BCE, however, city-states had come to coexist with empires: the histories of Carthage, Athens, Rome, and other Mediterranean city-states seemed to show that the growth of empire was inevitable and that city-states were doomed to be absorbed. Yet the fall of Rome showed the vulnerability of empires and brought the rise of new city-states.

Later in the first millennium, the rise of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific brought new port towns, including Adulis, Calicut on India’s Malabar Coast, and Guangzhou in South China. Most central of these was Sri Vijaya, in southeast Sumatra, which rose from city-state to become a trading empire from the seventh to the eleventh
century, facilitating trade from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. In northern Europe during the same centuries, Viking adventurers founded city-states such as Dublin and the Norman Kingdom of Sicily.

From the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, East African city-states arose in Kilwa, Malindi, and Mombasa; the island Ryukyu kingdom arose to mediate trade among China, Korea, and Japan; Venice and Genoa became great trading powers of the Mediterranean; and the Hanseatic League linked a series of city-states in the North Sea and the Baltic, including Riga. With the circumnavigation of the globe in the sixteenth century, Spanish and Portuguese empires established colonial ports in Hormuz, Melaka, Macao, Havana, and Manila. With time, competing empires and independent city-states rose in importance: Amsterdam and African ports such as Ouidah and Loango. New city-states emerged in the nineteenth century, for instance in Zanzibar and Honolulu, but the British gained control of the Gulf and Zanzibar, while Americans gained control of Honolulu and Japan annexed the Ryukyus.

But in the late twentieth century the imperial process reversed itself for Britain and other colonial powers. As the British withdrew, Singapore and Hong Kong became independent city-states, accompanied by Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Brunei, and also by Trinidad and Barbados. France, Portugal, and the Netherlands gave up colonies, yielding some city-states; Riga emerged from the dissolving Soviet Union. For several of these, petroleum wealth was central to their importance, yet the governments in each case sought to diversify their economies.

Does this historical and comparative review of city-states provide a new view of Abu Dhabi today? Does it show Abu Dhabi as a fairly typical city-state or identify it as unique compared with others? One interesting dimension is the experience of city-states with regional federations. The ancient Greeks formed leagues of city-states; they were followed,
many centuries later, by the Hanseatic League of Baltic and North Sea trading cities – and by
the informal alliances of medieval Swahili city-states. In the twentieth century, territories in
several parts of the British Empire formed into federations, including the Malaysian
Federation and the Federation of the British West Indies. As these colonial federations broke
up with independence, some territories became city-states, notably Singapore and Trinidad.

These federations provide an obvious parallel with the postcolonial federations of
Gulf states, solidified with the 1981 formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in a
meeting at the very Abu Dhabi hotel where I stayed, the Intercontinental. The GCC is an
interesting and relatively successful result of the complex political history of the Arabian
peninsula in the past two centuries. Most visibly it has resulted in the rise of city-states that
are cosmopolitan and tourist centers. Tourism leads in Dubai, Doha has the bay and its
Museum of Islamic Art; Abu Dhabi has its Corniche. Etihad Airways, Emirates Airlines,
Qatar Airways, Cathay Pacific Airways and Singapore Airlines compete as leaders in global
travel. Monaco, a well-established city-state, has almost slipped into obscurity.

The rise of scholarly centers in city-states is a new development, but it is not
unprecedented: Venice was a great center of learning, in contact with Constantinople; it was
preceded by Norman Sicily. Today the numerous universities of Singapore, Hong Kong, and
the Gulf stand out for their attention to global interconnections. For instance, the Department
of History at NYU Abu Dhabi has developed an innovative undergraduate major based on
foundations that are at once global and regional; its faculty members have designed their
curriculum within the framework of the world’s great oceanic basins. The department invited
me to speak in its lecture series on “Globalizing Histories” and gave me a chance to
emphasize regional and global aspects of the African Diaspora. In my week-long trip to the
Gulf region I also visited Doha and took part in a conference on interdisciplinarity organized
by the Department of History at the University of Qatar. It was organized by Professor
Ahmed Abushouk, who has published studies on political, cultural, and educational history for the region from his Sudanese homeland along the Indian Ocean coast to Malaysia, where he taught for years at the International Islamic University – Malaysia. After the conference he hosted a lunch at his home that included colleagues from the university, many of them from Sudan – another example of the continuing influence of the diaspora from Africa.

The rapid rise of Abu Dhabi and other Gulf city-states has been remarkable. One can ask whether they will remain a permanent part of the world scene. How long do city-states survive? Each of the urban centers has been built up sufficiently that it will last for quite some time. For the city-state as a political unit, it depends not only on the character of local administration but also on shifting global patterns. The nineteenth-century expansion of empires resulted in absorption of independent city-states into larger states; the decolonization of the twentieth-century allowed for re-establishment of some city-states and creation of some new ones. For Abu Dhabi and the other Gulf states, neither Great Britain, the United States, nor any other great power seems likely to impose control over the state. On the other hand, the autonomy of each city-state might be ceded to a larger unit if the GCC federation were to become more centralized, or if a pan-Arab state were to form.

On the other hand, what I have learned from my visit and from these reflections is that city-states are an ongoing aspect of the human social order. They change with time in their specific functions and roles, but they are dependable as centers of cosmopolitan exchange and, with that, as centers of social inequality and cultural variety. For the moment, it appears that city-states are growing in number and in influence.