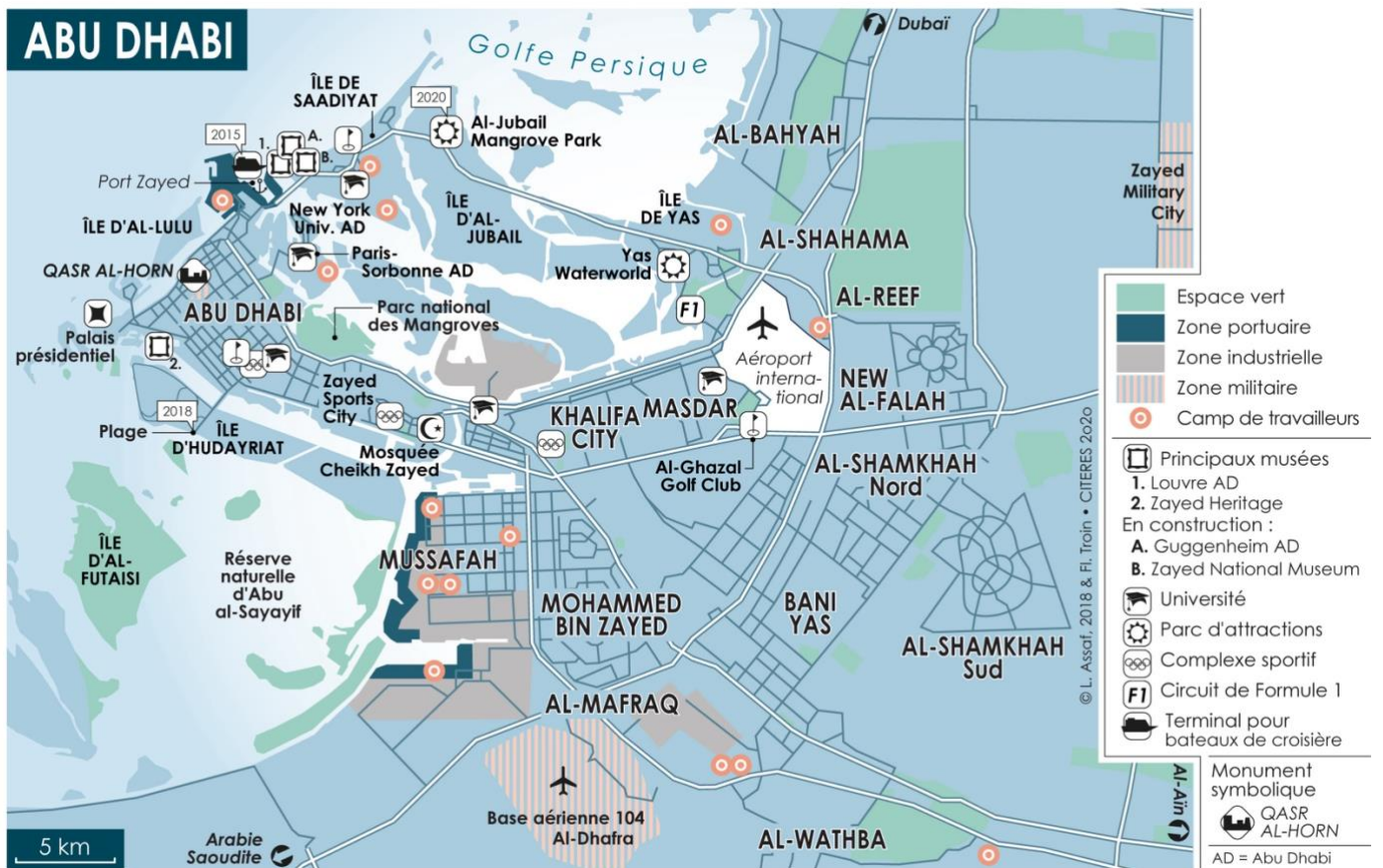
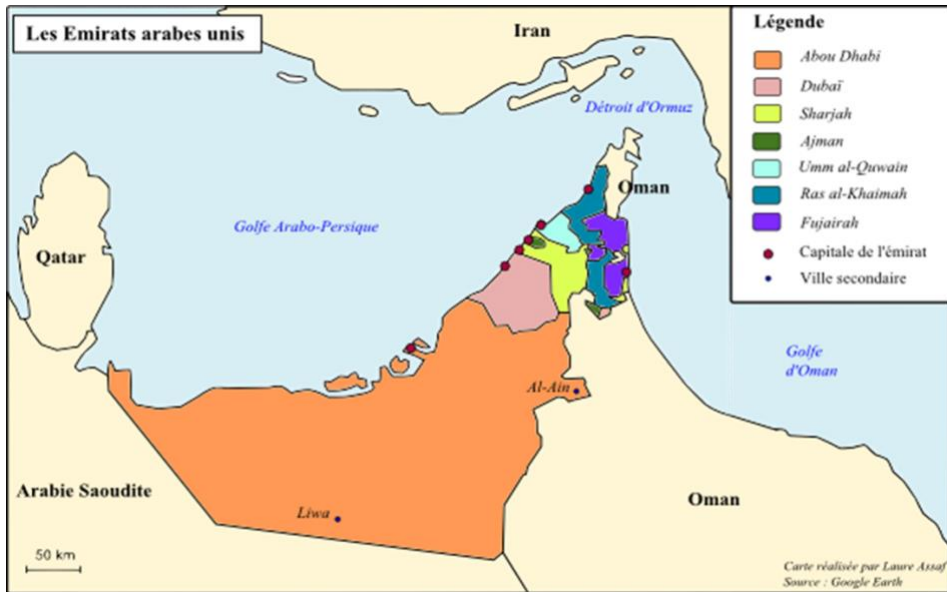


ABU DHABI CITY PROFILE



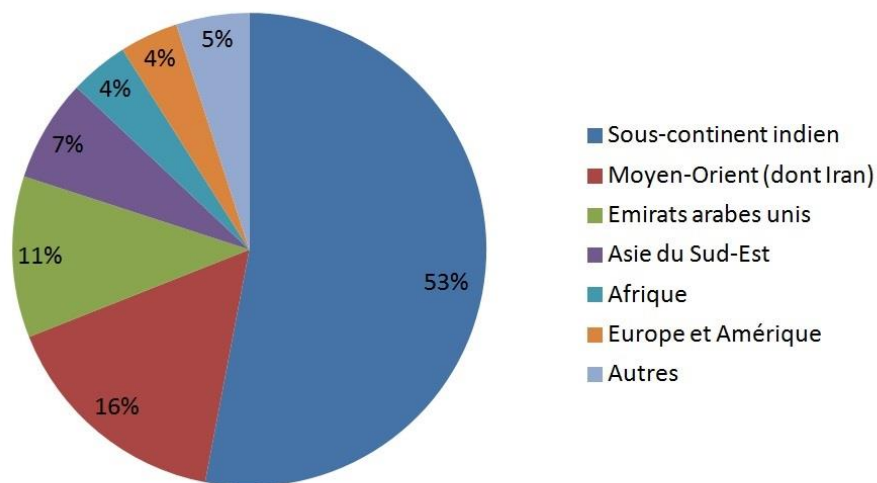
1. General information

The city of Abu Dhabi is both the capital of the emirate of Abu Dhabi and of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a federation of seven emirates. The Emir of Abu Dhabi (since May 2022), Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, is also the president of the UAE.

Demography

The importance of predominantly male migrant workers has led to a specific demographic situation wherein citizens represent a minority of the population; it is also marked by an imbalanced sex ratio. The Abu Dhabi region (i.e. the capital and its periphery) counted 1.81 million inhabitants in 2016 (2.9 million for the emirate). Among them, around 38% were women and 62% men; around 84% were foreign residents and 16% were Emirati citizens¹.

Composition de la population des Émirats arabes unis selon le lieu d'origine



Source : Jure SNOJE, « UAE's population – by nationality », *BQ magazine*, 12 avril 2015.

Geography

The emirate of Abu Dhabi represents 67,340 sq. km (84% of the UAE's territory). It concentrates the majority of the country's hydrocarbon reserves (96% of the oil reserves, and around 94% of the natural gas reserves). Its economy still largely relies on oil exportation, which represents around a third of the GDP. In terms of its national context, AD has relations of both cooperation and rivalry with Dubai, which has often been described as the economic capital, before the 2008 global financial crisis and its financial bailout by Abu Dhabi. The northern emirates were historical centralities (trading ports in the pre-oil era and agricultural centers) but less well-endowed with hydrocarbons; today, they entertain clientelist relations with Abu Dhabi, whose government funds part of their infrastructure.

¹ Note: these are the latest official statistical data available, dating from 2016. Source : Statistics Center – Abu Dhabi, *Statistical Yearbook of Abu Dhabi 2020*, Online publication, May 2020.

2. Urban history

Abu Dhabi's urbanization is fairly recent, starting from the mid-1960s. Its urban growth has been accompanied by a strong growth in population, due largely to labor migrations. Abu Dhabi is also characterized by its important ties – both historical and tribal – with its hinterland, notably the oases of Liwa and Al Ain, where the ruling family comes from.

Populations started settling on the main island (now the city center) towards the mid-18th century. They were members of a large tribal confederation called the Banî Yâs (in the interior). At the time, Bedouin populations engaged in seasonal economic activities: they alternated between fishing on the coast and harvesting dates in the oases of the interior.

Settlement in Abu Dhabi becomes more permanent with the pearl trade (late 18th to early 20th century). The seat of tribal power moved to Abu Dhabi: in 1793 was built the Qasr al-Hosn, the fortified residence of the tribal rulers which would remain the only permanent building for a long time.

The Al Nahyan, based in Abu Dhabi, come from one of the Bani Yas tribal clans – the ruling family of Dubai comes from another clan, which seceded at the beginning of the 19th century.

From the 1820s until the creation of the union on December 2, 1971, Abu Dhabi was part of the Trucial States under British rule. Treaties with the British mainly concerned maritime trade and international relations; they did not involve any development of the territory until oil was found. In 1962, when the commercial exploitation of oil began, Abu Dhabi was a small fishing village with around 4,000 inhabitants.

Its fate changed in 1966, when Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan, then governor of Al Ain, took over as ruler of Abu Dhabi after deposing his elder brother, Shakhbout, with the help of the British. Zayed had the project of building an independent federation that would bring together the emirates of the region. He embarked on a program of fast-paced urbanization in order to turn Abu Dhabi into the capital of the new country.

3. Stages & politics of urbanisation

Making Abu Dhabi an Arab capital

The development of Abu Dhabi was primarily the result of a political will: the city was created as a future capital. The first stages of this development involved the creation of urban infrastructures, none of which existed in the early 1960s (roads, networks of electricity and drinking water, sewers).

After the foundation of the country, one of the primary objectives of early urban development was to settle nomadic populations, while redistributing oil revenues to build the legitimacy of the new state. This was achieved through allocating residential, industrial, and commercial land to citizens, who were able to build on them or lease them as a source of revenue. The most disadvantaged Bedouin populations benefitted from the construction of “popular housing” (*buyût cha'biyya*) – in the UAE, land allocation is entirely controlled by the state.

Zayed's project was to make Abu Dhabi a modern Arab capital. This is reflected in the urbanism and architecture of the time: a mix of Islamic-inspired patterns and Western modernist

principles (like an orthogonal grid) which came to characterize the city's landscape. This project is also visible in the choice of buildings: Abu Dhabi became endowed with a mosque in every neighborhood and a central souk, but also a sports city, bus station, and cultural foundation. This was also the time when the headquarters of the main federal institutions were created.

These early stages of development led to massive labor migration, and to a population growth which rapidly bypassed every prediction. As a result, the city was expanded towards the continent but also towards the sea, through reclamation: the successive embankments made the total surface of the island grow from 6,000 to more than 9,400 ha within twenty years.

Contemporary transformations

The beginning of the 21st century ushers in a new phase of urbanization – in particular after 2004, the date of the death of Zayed, succeeded by his son Khalifa. The architectures become more spectacular, with the proliferation of shopping malls, luxury hotels, or monuments such as the Great Mosque. Regulations limiting the height of buildings are removed, leading to the multiplication of skyscrapers and the destruction of many older buildings (e.g. in 2006, the souk that had been built in 1968 was destroyed to give way to a shopping mall project).

New developments respond to the leitmotiv of economic diversification, which aims to prepare for the post-oil era by investing in tourism and the “knowledge economy” (even if the economy of the emirate remains largely dependent on oil rent). At the heart of new urbanism projects lays the ambition to put Abu Dhabi “on the map”, to make it a “global destination” and build the city's brand.

At the urban scale, this is embodied in the new semi-artificial islands with themed developments, such as Yas, devoted to entertainment, which hosts amusement parks and a Formula 1 circuit; or Saadiyat with the “museum district”. However, a lot of these projects have been canceled or delayed, such as the “green city” of Masdar, supposed to embody the emirate's progress towards a sustainable economy, which experienced a huge slow-down.

The cultural ambition of the capital, and its orientation towards the regional and global scene, is also noticeable in the organization of events such as the book fair, art fair, or in its educational investments, with the establishment at the end of the 2000s of two prestigious foreign universities, Paris Sorbonne and New York University.

This economic shift towards diversification goes hand in hand with a political shift. Since the mid-2000s, and even more so after the Arab Spring, the UAE has adopted an active diplomatic and military role in the region, through financial support for certain regimes and military and political actors (in Egypt, Sudan, Libya); direct military involvement (in the war in Yemen and in the international coalition against the Islamic State); and diplomatic disputes (notably with Qatar and Iran). Mohammed bin Zayed led these actions first as Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and now as Emir and President.

4. The actors of urbanisation and their interactions

The system of actors in place is composed of federal and local public institutions, investment companies dependent on the government (of para-public status) and private promoters

sometimes grouped in joint ventures, whose shareholders are generally close to the government, revealing the blurring of the boundaries between public and private spheres in the UAE.

Local and federal public institutions are often intertwined. The Abu Dhabi municipality is part of the Department of Urban Planning and Municipalities, which groups together the other municipalities of the emirate and which seems to be the decision-making and planning institution, while the municipality is confined to infrastructure management and services to its citizens. This became evident in 2017, when the Department of Urban Planning and Municipalities also absorbed the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council. Created in 2007 and directed by the Emir, this government agency has for 10 years carried the Abu Dhabi 2030 Plan, a pioneer of long-term “strategic visions” in the Gulf, aiming to accompany the city in its accession to the rank of “global capitals”, to make it less dependent on hydrocarbons by developing the private sector and to conform it to the requirements of sustainable development.

Economic planning and urban planning are thus merged and henceforth come under the same institution, renamed in 2019 Department of Municipalities and Transport, thus overseeing the municipality and working in close partnership with the Ministry of the Economy and the other national institutions of the UAE, but also with a large number of international institutions and foreign consultants and design offices. This change of name shows, beyond the “transport” display – a major stake insofar as there is a need to reduce the place of the automobile in urban development – that the rhythms of institutional recomposition are proportional to those of urbanisation.

The para-public and private actorial scene is also in permanent evolution and recomposition. The Mubadala investment company depends directly on the Abu Dhabi government. It was created by the merger of the International Petroleum Investment Company and the Abu Dhabi Investment Council in 2017, and is now one of the most powerful investment funds in the UAE: an arm of economic diversification, operating in 50 countries. In Abu Dhabi, Mubadala finances numerous real estate and infrastructure projects contributing to economic growth, notably through financial partnerships with private developers (Masdar City, Al Waha Capital, Yahsat for the development of smart cities, Al-Marya island, etc.).

It is impossible here to provide an exhaustive list of private promoters playing an important role in the development of AD (<https://abudhabioffplan.ae/developers>), as well as to establish the degree of their proximity to the government. Again, the sector is highly evolving. For example, the Al-Maabar joint venture, which in 2004 brought together the 4 most important developers of Abu Dhabi, does not seem to be active today. We owe it a certain number of achievements which contributed to the international influence of the capital city, from the development of the “global city” rhetoric to its “catching up” with Dubai in the 2010s.

Today, Aldar presents itself as the market leader, not only in Abu Dhabi but in the whole UAE. This company is the one developing most of the new real estate projects on the capital’s central islands, in Yas, Reem, or Saadiyat. The company's investment arm is also responsible for the construction and/or financing of numerous schools (secondary and higher education), clinics, and hotels. Other companies are present on the construction market such as SDIC (specifically dedicated to the development of Saadiyat Island), Imkan or Baraka, it being understood that the main developers established in Dubai, Damac and Emaar, are not absent from Abu Dhabi, notably through the partnerships they have with secondary developers of the city.

5. Urbanisation problems: Urban Sprawl, informal settlements, pollution etc.

Abu Dhabi is characterized – much like many other Gulf cities – by its constant urban development. The city is famous for its landscape of cranes, with many buildings, especially in the downtown area along the Corniche, being regularly destroyed and new ones being built. The Corniche itself was entirely remodeled in the early 2000s in order to “beautify” the city’s skyline and create beach areas through reclamation – a process which generated much nostalgia among residents familiar with the old Corniche.

More recently, the city’s expansion to the nearby semi-artificial islands and to the mainland has led to an increase in residential segregations. While urban development on the main island had created high-density areas where heterogeneous populations crossed paths, this expansion has resulted in the multiplication of gated communities (one example is the Raha beach compounds, where three gated communities are located one after the other on reclaimed land: Zeina, Muneera, Bandar). In parallel, industrial areas have dedicated workers’ accommodations on the outskirts of the city – from the traditional ‘labour camps’ to specific neighbourhoods like ICAD. These places ensure both the surveillance of low-income workers and their isolation from (and invisibility to) the rest of the capital.

Another characteristic of the capital so far is the weakness of its public transportation system. While there have been efforts in the past decade to create more bus lines and improve the Abu Dhabi metropole’s bus system – used daily by many low-income residents –, buses are still too slow and with long waiting times to become an attractive means of transportation for those who can afford cars or taxis. Many companies provide buses to pick up their employees in the morning and drop them off in the evening.

At the scale of urban policies, Abu Dhabi is in competition for its attractiveness to businesses and investors with its direct neighbor, Dubai, but also with the new cities of Saudi Arabia – like the already-famous Neom.

At a moment when the state promotes “Emiratisation” policies (i.e. the replacement of foreigners by citizens in the workforce), urban planning institutions face the challenge of training local professionals. These institutions have indeed historically relied on foreign consultants – from the foundation of the first urban planning department in 1968 by the Egyptian urbanist Abdulrahman Makhlouf, to the creation in 2007 of the Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council, which counted only 40% of Emirati employees.

6. Environment and social uncertainties

In the UAE, like in other countries of the Arabian Peninsula, increasing population, rapid urbanization, agricultural production, and the construction of infrastructures and energy-heavy industries have intensified demand for already stressed resources, especially in the past three decades. Water management and food (in)security are two important environmental concerns in the UAE. Desalination now constitutes one of the foremost sources of water in the region. The UAE, which is the second-biggest producer of desalinated water after Saudi Arabia, desalinates the equivalent of 9 million cubic meters of water, roughly the size of 3.6 million Olympic pools, in exchange for \$18 million. The desalination capacity of Abu Dhabi in particular increased by over 360 percent between 1998 and 2007.

At the urban level, policies targeting these environmental concerns do not only participate in the urban evolution of the city of Abu Dhabi but they also feed into the image of a capital tending to decrease its dependency vis-à-vis hydrocarbon resources, notably by expanding the so-called knowledge economy. For Abu Dhabi, climate change and future energy scarcity emerged as business opportunities such as in the well-known project of Masdar city. The Masdar Institute was established there and is supervised by the Technology and Development Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Knowledge production is therefore one of the most prominent ways in which the UAE handles climate change mitigation as well as adaptation, investing in the construction of hubs that will implement technical adjustments in the coming decades. Since 2010 and 2011, through Masdar and other initiatives like the World Future Energy Summit, an annual trade show dedicated to renewable energy and clean technologies, Abu Dhabi seemed to be at the forefront of the emergent renewable energy and clean technology development.

The perception and understanding of renewable energy and clean technology in the UAE, however, is that they can be used to create more businesses. In this sense, Masdar as a test was created to attract more businesses for the emirate of Abu Dhabi. Initially called “a zero carbon eco-city”, it eventually became a special economic zone for renewable energy and clean businesses. Hubs such as Masdar are at work to create technologies that can be exported, serving as methods of economic diversification as well as marketing and branding of the city. Initiatives such as Masdar and the establishing of other environmentally conscious companies served to change the image of Abu Dhabi from oil producer to technology developer conveying the image of a future city that would draw its wealth from the knowledge economy. Finally, these new institutions with global and regional ambition, are also used to train local citizens for the workforce, contributing to the Emiratization movement like in other sectors.

Among other environmental challenges, one can cite the damage done to the maritime flora and fauna by the intensive dredging and reclamation work conducted in the coastal areas; something that a few governmental programs, mainly oriented towards the protection of corals, mangroves, and sea turtles, have tried to curb or compensate (without challenging urban development projects). Finally, the dependency to air-conditioning technologies, and its high energetic cost, also presents a major issue.

7. Inhabitants' place in the city: Participations, mobilisations, résistances

Abu Dhabi is often considered as a more “Arab” and more family-friendly city than its neighbor Dubai. This reputation is partly linked to the presence of administrations, which had initially led to the recruitment of workers from Arab countries (before migration became predominantly South Asian from the 1980s). Many of these migrants have settled permanently, over two or even three generations. The density of the habitat on the main island has given rise to a cosmopolitan city centre: contrary to the clichés about Gulf cities, the blocks of buildings, the parks, or the corniche are places where residents of various nationalities meet and cross paths.

At the same time, intensive urban development continues. Around the main island, it is increasingly adopting the model of privatized development of large plots of land (even whole suburban cities). On the island and in particular around the city center, it gives rise to the

destruction and reconstruction of entire neighborhoods – often those occupied by disadvantaged populations, as recently in the case of the port (Mina). Recent developments therefore tend to reinforce segregation according to nationality and social class, by moving national populations to the suburbs and by creating closed residential communities, on the outskirts of the main island, intended for the wealthiest populations.

Abu Dhabi is therefore both a cosmopolitan and segregated urban society. Leisure and consumption practices and spaces are both segregated (by class, modes of consumption, morality – e.g. around alcohol or clothing), and sites where transgressions and diversions of the norms can take place.

Interestingly, in a highly repressive context, with no public expression of dissent, what comes closer to forms of political mobilization have been movements around urban heritage – residents expressing their attachment to buildings and monuments from the 1970s, and taking initiatives to protect them.

