



Abu Dhabi: From a Child's Wonder to a Nation's Rise

by Lubna Qassim

On the eve of 2 December, it was a family tradition to travel every year to Abu Dhabi and spend a few days there

I was about six years old, and I can still picture the Corniche at night: the towers dressed in flags and lights, the streets filled with celebration, and the whole city seeming to glow. For a child, it was magical.

I did not know then that those journeys would become some of my most cherished memories of Abu Dhabi. Nor could I have imagined how closely my own life would eventually become intertwined with the city.

I grew up between places. Singapore, London, Switzerland and the UAE were all part of my childhood. Moving between them taught me to notice what gives a city its character: its people, its culture, its rhythm, its relationship with nature and, ultimately, whether it makes you feel that you belong.

At 14, I left home for boarding school at Concord College in the UK. I remember standing before my teachers and classmates and introducing myself as being from the UAE.

No one in the room seemed to know where it was.

I remember that feeling. It was not embarrassment. It was simply a realisation of how small our country still seemed in the consciousness of the world.

By the time I graduated from university, the conversation had changed. The UAE was no longer a place people struggled to locate on a map. People wanted to come here, work here and understand what was happening.

Early in my career, while in private practice, I worked on the legislative framework for Saadiyat Island, when its future was still an idea being shaped in the 1990s. To see that vision today, developed into a community shaped around families, museums and spaces for culture and contemplation, is deeply moving.

You realise that cities, like people, sometimes take decades to reveal what they were always capable of becoming.

Later, as a government official, I was entrusted with leading a major economic-law reform exercise that had remained stalled for 26 years. The reform

required the modernisation of the UAE's economic laws and regulatory framework so that they could meet the needs of a rapidly developing economy and provide greater clarity and confidence for international institutional investors.

Fourteen laws were ultimately enacted out of the Capital. I experienced that as part of the larger process of building the institutions of a modern state. What followed went beyond legislation. It helped create a stronger foundation for institutional confidence and investment in a modern state.

Years later, a presidential appointment brought me back to Abu Dhabi to serve in the UAE's foreign service. My work then took me into international law, United Nations and international organisations and multilateral diplomacy, including representing the UAE as a senior diplomat before UN, international bodies and institutions.

I found myself representing a country that had changed profoundly from the one I had once struggled to explain to classmates abroad.

There was a particular poignancy in that. As a child, I had watched Abu Dhabi with wonder. As a young student abroad, I had struggled to explain where the UAE was. As a lawyer, government official and a senior diplomat, I later found myself helping to build, modernise and represent the country that had once seemed so unfamiliar to the world.

When I look at Abu Dhabi's journey, I see the enduring legacy of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan: a vision of development rooted in people, unity and service. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan carried that vision forward with wisdom and continuity, while His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan has advanced it with confidence, ambition and purpose. Today, His Highness Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan stands ready to carry that legacy into a new generation, protecting its values while guiding Abu Dhabi towards its next chapter.

What has been achieved here is not the result of one project or one period of prosperity. It is the result of a long view. It is the belief that a capital must provide not only economic opportunity, but also education, culture, security, beauty and belonging.

This is why Abu Dhabi's transformation feels different from simple urban expansion. It has been a project of confidence. The leadership did not ask the country to choose between heritage and modernity, or between prosperity and identity. It sought to make them reinforce one another.

What moves me most is not simply what Abu Dhabi has achieved.

It is what it is becoming.

Abu Dhabi's investment in culture is extraordinary. Art, museums, architecture, education, nature and public spaces are becoming part of the city's vocabulary. Culture is not simply sitting alongside economic ambition; it is becoming part of how Abu Dhabi understands itself and presents itself to the world.

These are not merely landmarks. They are statements about the kind of society Abu Dhabi wishes to be.

Having lived in several great cities, I have come to believe that the places that stay with us are not necessarily those with the tallest buildings or the greatest wealth. They are the ones with a soul, a distinctive rhythm, character and sense of belonging.

Abu Dhabi has something precious: its light, its sea, its desert, its mangroves, its space and a calm increasingly rare in a restless world.

As it grows, protecting those qualities may matter as much as everything it builds.

That is another mark of wise leadership: understanding that the future should not erase the past, and that progress is strongest when it carries memory with it.

I increasingly hear from professionals and families who came for opportunity and discovered something unexpected: they want to stay.

And that is perhaps the most meaningful achievement of all. Not that Abu Dhabi attracts people, but that it gives them reasons to remain. Not that it is admired from a distance, but that it is remembered with affection by those who have lived here.

Sometimes I think of that six-year-old girl standing beneath the lights of the Corniche.

And I think of the 14-year-old girl at boarding school who had to explain where the UAE was.

Those two memories, separated by years and experience, belong to the same story.

One was the wonder of discovering a city.

The other was the pride of watching the world discover a country.

Today, Abu Dhabi stands at another threshold. It is no longer asking whether it can become a global city. It has already done so.

A city is not ultimately measured only by its skyline, its institutions or its place on a global map. It is measured by what it awakens in people.

Abu Dhabi is becoming.

Its leadership has given it the confidence to look towards the world. Its people have given it warmth. Its history has given it depth. Its landscape has given it beauty.

Because the greatest legacy of a city is not what it says about itself.

It is what people feel when they remember it.

And when I remember Abu Dhabi, I see the lights of the Corniche, the flags moving in the night air, and a young girl looking out at a city she believed was already extraordinary.

She was right.

She simply could not yet imagine how far it would go.