A City built on Sand, Look Again

A Response to Atbin Moayedi. The Spectator published a critique of Dubai this week. It deserves a direct reply.

Atbin Moayedi has written what he presents as a geopolitical and cultural analysis of Dubai's decline. What he has actually written is a love letter to Iran, with Dubai as the unwilling backdrop. The conflict of interest is not subtle. A British-Swedish-Iranian venture capitalist with an evident emotional investment in a post-Islamic Republic Iran is, perhaps, not the most dispassionate guide to the Emirates' future.

Let us take the arguments on their own terms.
Moayedi calls the UAE an "authoritarian Islamic dictatorship." This is a striking phrase to deploy in a piece that repeatedly romanticises Iran as a civilizational giant awaiting rebirth. Iran is not merely authoritarian. It is the Islamic Republic, the world's only formally constituted theocratic state, currently attacking its neighbours and responsible for the very drone strikes Moayedi uses to indict Dubai. The cognitive dissonance here is not a footnote. It is the entire argument.

On the financial data, the numbers are real but the framing is selective. Markets fall in wartime. London's financial index lost roughly 25% in the first year of the Second World War. Nobody concluded that London had no future. Wartime market compression is a snapshot, not a verdict.

The cultural argument is weaker still. Moayedi contracts Dubai's alleged shallowness with Iran's millennia of civilizational depth, its ski resorts, its biodiversity, its Zoroastrian traditions. This is not a fair comparison. It is like comparing a 55-year-old nation state, built from a fishing village into a global logistic hub in a single generation, with one of the oldest civilisations on earth, and then declaring the younger one deficient for not having accumulated the same number of centuries. The UAE, as a modern state was founded in 1971. Dubai's modern transformation is, by any honest measure, one of the most remarkable urban developments stories in recorded history.

There is also something revealing about the charge that Dubai lacks culture. The Emirates sits at the confluence of some of the oldest trade routes in human history, the same maritime corridors that connected the India subcontinent, the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa and the Arabian Gulf for centuries before the word "influencer" existed. Its cultural fabric is not shallow. It is a mosaic, woven from Bedouin tradition, classical Islamic architecture and scholarship, the mercantile heritage of the Gulf's pearling communities, and the living presence of over 200 nationalities who have made it their home. The grand mosques, the poetry festivals, the preservation of falconry and camel culture as UNESCO-recognised heritage, the museums dedicated to Islamic art and Emirati history. None of this registers in Moayedi's account, because it does not fit the narrative. A culture is not measured by how long it has occupied the same borders. It is measured by what it has built, preserved and passed on. On that measure, the UAE has considerably more to say for itself than this article acknowledges.

The piece's central prediction, that a free and democratic Iran will render Dubai irrelevant, rests entirely on a political outcome that has not happened. The 170-page Iran Prosperity Project, which Moayedi cites approvingly, is a policy documents produced by political exiles. It may be admirable in ambition. It is not yet a country. Ventur capitalists, of all people, should know the difference between a pitch deck and a functioning enterprise.

There is also a basic structural point that the article ignores entirely. Dubai's value is not primarily as a lifestyle destination. It is a logistics node, a financial centre, a free trade corridor between East and West. These functions do not disappear because a neighbouring

state changes its government. Singapore does not lose its purpose because Indonesia holds elections, Hong Kong's entrepôt role was not contingent on China being a liberal democracy. Trade infrastructure has its own logic, and that logic is largely indifferent to the political preferences of venture capitalists writing in British magazines.

The article opens with a memorable image: Dubai as the glamorous partner you enjoy but would never marry. It closes with an equally vivid one: a free Iran as the civilizational giant reclaiming its throne. The prose is confident. The analysis, unfortunately, travels in the opposite direction from the writing, away from rigour and towards sentiment.

Moayedi is entitled to hope for a free Iran. So are millions of Iranians. But hope dressed as analysis, and advocacy dressed as obituary, should be recognized for what it is. Dubai is not finished. It has not even been fully built.