GLOBALIZATION began in the Middle East. It is the story of larger and larger numbers of people connecting and interacting with each other over greater expanses. But it would not have happened without climate change and population growth. Around 10,000 BCE, adaptation to climate change allowed some to settle. As the climate continued to change, people began to farm. Increasing aridity brought populations down to the major rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, where they could irrigate their crops. Cities began to form in Mesopotamia (now southern Iraq) in the 4th millennium. Irrigation increased the production of food, which increased the rate of population growth, and accelerated the growth of cities; this also occurred on other rivers that flowed through the arid zone, from the Nile in North Africa to the Oxus and Jaxartes in Central Asia to the Yellow River and the Yangtse in China.

When it was no longer necessary for every family to produce its own food, some began to develop new skills and produce commodities. The cities reached out for trade and formed an inter-urban trade network from the Middle East westward to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic and eastward to the Pacific and Japan. By the end of the 4th millennium, writing began to be adopted to record transactions, and in the following millennium it became a tool of administration. Cities became city-states. City-states became empires. And each empire grew bigger than the one before, from the Sumerians in the 4th millennium to the Persian empires (the Achaemenians, the Parthians, and the Sasanians) starting in the 6th century BCE, followed by the growth of Islamic civilization in the 7th century CE.

Islam spread along the trade routes east and west from the Middle East because it provided a legal system for the organization of society and trade. But since it did not provide a model for administration or government, each major city continued to function in the same way, with Persian, now written in the Arabic script, as the language of administration. By the 9th century Persian and the culture it carried was becoming the standard language of public affairs for the eastern half of the Islamic world. The process was intensified by the arrival of paper from China. The area from Baghdad to China and India became the largest culturally homogenized part of the world until the height of the colonial period in the 19th century.

Since the Middle East is at the center of the world’s largest landmass—Africa, Asia, and Europe—it became a global crossroads, the center of world trade and all globalizing developments through the ancient and medieval periods. Not only commodities but cultigens...
and cultural practices moved across Asia, between China, India, and the Middle East: walnuts, peaches, apricots, spinach, eggplant, and olives; tea and silk; paper, printing, paper money, gunpowder, and models of government; as well as more exotic products such as jasmine, henna, and indigo. This was long before similar exchange began between America and Europe.

Globalization is the evolutionary triumph of collaboration over competition. It could not have happened without population growth, but it is driven by the human instinct to interact in larger and larger numbers, from the growth of cities and the advance of global urbanization to the spread of printing, telegraph, telephone, wireless, digitization, and the explosion of modern social media. The most significant achievements in world history always came out of the world’s largest cities, in China and the Islamic world through the ancient and medieval periods, and more recently from the West. The proportion of the world’s population living in cities has from the beginning increased faster than the global population. Since 2007 over half the world’s population lives in cities, and the proportion is predicted to rise to over two thirds in the coming decades.

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