

What to Expect From the UAE: Joint War on Climate Change, 'Game-changer' Investment

Haifa University President Ron Robin is a rare Israeli who has spent an extended period in the Emirates. In an interview with TheMarker he talks about what will come from normalization

Like many other Israelis, Prof. Ron Robin watched the White House signing ceremony of agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain on television. But unlike almost anyone else in Israel, Robin knows the UAE from close up; he resided there to help recruit faculty for New York University's Abu Dhabi campus over a decade ago.

Born in Israel and currently president of the University of Haifa, Robin is an expert on modern American history and foreign policy who received his doctorate from Berkeley. He never concealed his Israeli origins during his years in Abu Dhabi, but his credentials enabled him to serve as a bridge between American and Emirati cultures. "People asked me how to overcome misunderstandings," Robin said in an interview with TheMarker, which is excerpted here.

Robin believes the economic component of relations with the UAE are critical. Apart from arms deals, he expects the UAE to make strategic investments in Israel. That could be both a "game changer" for the Israeli economy – but also give the UAE political and diplomatic leverage in the future. The two countries have a strong shared interest in finding solutions to climate change.

"I came to Abu Dhabi for the first time in 2007. While I didn't go into the street with an Israeli flag, the people who I dealt with understood I was Israeli. I didn't hide it because people would have assumed I had something to hide. Their immediate reaction was surprise and afterwards immense curiosity," he recalled.

He describes Emiratis as different from the Arabs in Israel's neighboring countries. "They are religious, but the Islam of Abu Dhabi is a lot more moderate than the Islam we know of Saudi Arabia or even our region. They identify with the main problems that preoccupy the Arab nation, but it's not at the forefront of their considerations," he explained.



Haifa University President Ron Robin Credit: Eyal Toueg

In that context, Emiratis support the Palestinians, but they are far more concerned with domestic issues and economic development. The agreement with Israel is a means to further the UAE's economic development, even as the Palestinians oppose it.

Strengthening the UAE's ties with the United States is another factor in normalizing relations with Israel. "They are very impressed with our political sophistication, and our ability to influence the American agenda. I was told that several times," Robin said.

PR exercise

As to the signing ceremony itself, Robin called it a public relations exercise. "What's important is the appendices to the agreement, which haven't been made public and I haven't seen. That's the fascinating part, and I'm not sure they will ever be made public."

"I know well how the UAE government behaves. We're talking about people with business acumen and a very keen sense of how to negotiate. There's a price tag that we don't know about or only partially know," he said.

Are you talking about big arms sales?

"Certainly there is an arms element, but we already know a large part of that. The problematic part was made public – the F-35s. But I assume there are other elements that touch on our relations with the Palestinians," he said, noting the UAE's important place economically and diplomatically in the Arab world.

As Robin sees it, the UAE isn't in a position to take a leading role on the Palestinian issue, but they do see themselves as being involved in a secondary way, perhaps as mediators.

Apart from arms, how does the UAE expect to gain from the agreement with Israel?

"I was flying between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv for eight years. It was my home during those eight years. I flew to Israel a lot, mainly through Jordan although often through Turkey. I was never the only one in the airplane taking that route. Trade relations have existed for a long time. What happened now is that these have emerged in public, and that will strengthen them and cause them to grow."



Bahrain's foreign minister, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu and UAE foreign minister display their copies of the signed Abraham Accords while Donald Trump looks on, at the White House, September 15, 2020. Credit: Tom Brenner/Reuters

He says "the "big money" in Abu Dhabi is in Mubadala Investment Company, the UAE's sovereign wealth fund, which he says invests all over the world across many different industries.

"I assume that if the fund comes to Israel, it will make strategic investments – not buying some startup but something strategic," he says. "I'm not knowledgeable enough about the world of high-tech to point to a company. I'm talking about something similar to Intel's purchase of Mobileye – it's possible to imagine investments on that scale. Mubadala is a game changer. It's a fund that can change the face of an economy. We can only hope that it will find fertile ground here in Israel for its investing. It will decide what direction the company it invests in takes. It will buy a small stake."

Mubadala's assets amount to an estimated \$230 billion, but counting the UAE's other sovereign wealth funds total assets under management come to \$1.3 trillion. They are under the control of the family of Mohammed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince and de facto leader of the UAE. It's job is to diversify Abu Dhabi's economy and ensure its economic future once oil runs out.

"The investments [in Israel] will be strategic, and when we reach a crisis with the Palestinians, when the Emirates want to have their say, unlike other countries that threaten like Jordan, Egypt and Turkey to recall the ambassador, the UAE can wield an economic threat."

That weakens our bargaining position in some ways.

"Again, without knowing what is in the appendices, I would be very surprised if that doesn't happen. Investments will leverage their ability to influence the diplomatic landscape here – mainly vis-a-vis the Palestinians."

Explain Tzipi Livni

Robin recalls that during his time in Abu Dhabi he received a call from the office of a senior government official, whose assistant, when asked why he was being invited for a meeting, said that the official's daughter had not been accepted to the NYU program. Robin came to the meeting with the daughter's file and began to explain why her application had been rejected.

"He reassured me with a wave of his hand that signaled that that wasn't the reason he had invited me. He looked at me and said. 'Tell me, I don't understand something – how could Tzipi Livni win the most Knesset mandates and not be the prime minister? What kind of democracy is this?'"

Robin spent the next hour explaining the mysteries of Israeli politics. "It [the incident] showed me how curious they are about what happens in Israel and how the political system works. They understand that Israel has enormous political influence. They try to understand it. We appear strange and unintelligible."

What opportunities are there for us as Israelis in Abu Dhabi and Dubai?

"I'll point to a subject that isn't self-evident. The world is experiencing a climate crisis, which we're witnessing right now in the United States [due to the mass forest fires]. But we are also experiencing it in our part of the world. The forecast in Abu Dhabi is that temperatures will rise in another 25 to 30 years to the point that it will be difficult to live there under such conditions.

"Temperatures today can reach 45 degrees [Celsius] and they will exceed 50 in the future. Even today there is already a serious problem in the Arab Gulf because sea temperatures have risen enough to impact marine ecology dramatically, with a big impact on fishing and the ability to engage in aquaculture, which is important to the UAE.

"We [in Israel] are experiencing similar things. Water temperatures in the Mediterranean Basin are rising in ways not yet felt in the oceans In other words, there's an opportunity for cooperation almost immediately regarding marine ecology."

He described Abu Dhabi as being "on the brink of crisis" and warned that Israel will be in the same situation in another few years. Rainfall levels in Israel are declining, which means we will have to rely more on aquaculture and not on conventional farming.



Credit: Kamran Jebreili/AP

"These are existential issues, both for Israel and for the Persian Gulf," he says. "It's not sexy like high-tech and arms sales, but it's an existential issue that requires immediate cooperation."

Cooperation will extend beyond business to the academic world. On that account, Robin said Haifa University has an edge, pointing to its seaside location, its large Israeli Arab student population and his own connection with Abu Dhabi.

"I guess I'm not the only president working to establish cooperation with them," he says. "More than that, I do not want to say, so as not to torpedo anything."

He says there are three strong academic institutions in the UAE – NYU Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence and United Arab Emirates University. "I suppose these are the three institutions with which Israel will build a relationship," says Robin.

In which areas of research do they specialize?

"One I already spoke about – the sea. The second is everything connected with cybersecurity, and here there's a certain sensitivity that we will have to overcome. Also digital medicine, an area that's growing at the national and international levels. Abu Dhabi has a giant campus of the Cleveland Clinic, an American hospital that is leading the research into digital and personalized medicine."