



H.E. Majid Al-Suwaidi

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Majid Al-Suwaidi was appointed to his current post in September 2015. Most recently, he served as Lead Negotiator on Climate Change, Energy and Sustainability for the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. He worked closely with the Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to negotiate the landmark climate change agreement, which was adopted at the Paris Climate Conference (COP21) in 2015. Al-Suwaidi was also instrumental in the advancement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He previously worked as a reservoir geologist in the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). An ADNOC Scholar, Al-Suwaidi received his undergraduate degree from Brunel University in the United Kingdom and graduate MSc degree from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia.*

### How do you define the role that the UAE plays in the Middle East today?

The UAE is a bright spot in our region. This country has developed to the highest standard of countries in the world and is setting an example to countries in our region for what a modern Muslim state looks like. In many ways, the UAE is a beacon to people in our region and a fantastic development story. We've taken a country that was dependent on oil and gas and worked to transform and grow the economy, while also developing our people. It is a testament to our leadership and their vision to make this country into what it has become. This is recognized by the U.S. government and other partners who work closely with us. The UAE is a great place for people to come and visit whether for tourism, leisure or business. This is the lens through which we see the UAE as a hub that connects the world.

An interesting fact is that one-third of the world's population can reach the UAE via a four-hour flight, and that makes the UAE the perfect place for people to come together. We have world-class conferences and, in 2020, we

# A Development Story

## An Interview with His Excellency Majid Al-Suwaidi, Consul General of the United Arab Emirates in New York

will host the next World Expo in Dubai, which will attract 25 million visitors. This represents how the UAE has become a connecting point for Africa, the Middle East and Asia, as well as Europe and America.

Many people think of the UAE only as an oil and gas producing country, even though 70 percent of the economy comes from activities other than oil and gas production. This is targeted to be 80 percent by 2021. We are well on track to having a truly diversified economy and this should be celebrated and encouraged because it benefits everyone in our region and abroad.

### What have been the key sectors for development?

The UAE has led impressive development in many sectors and has become a gateway to the world for trade, tourism and business. Dubai started with world-class ports and created duty-free zones. Today, Dubai Ports is one of the largest companies in the world.

UAE exports have grown tremendously. In total, 2017 UAE exports to the U.S. alone reached \$4.3 billion – a 44 percent increase since 2015.

The UAE manufacturing industry has also been an important part of our development story. Our country manufactures a range of products, from aluminum, steel and petrochemicals to tile and cement. The industry represented roughly 11 percent of our GDP in 2015 and plans to push that number to 25 percent by 2025 are underway.

Our two airlines, Emirates and Etihad, are experiencing a period of phenomenal growth and are key to connecting people to our region.

The UAE healthcare sector has dramatically expanded over the past four decades, and tourism has grown off the back of this. This has helped Dubai become the international tourism destination it is today.

We see Formula One in Abu Dhabi, the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the growing art and culture scene in Sharjah as other excellent examples of our diversification strategy.

### Would you highlight the government's investment in education?

I am very proud that our leadership has focused on investing in the people from the beginning. They believe that investing in health and education is fundamental to developing our country.

Our government is targeting the development of a knowledge-based economy and that means investing in education. I was sent abroad to the UK for my undergraduate studies and was funded by a national oil company at that time. Now, there are many scholarships to support students.

We also have partnerships with institutions like New York University, which are symbols of the government's commitment to providing the highest standard of education for young people.

This is all representative of our commitment to invest in youth and prepare them to innovate new industries and lead in a knowledge-based economy. Our leadership recently appointed the world's first Minister of Artificial Intelligence, Omar bin Sultan Al Olama, who is just 27 years old.

The UAE has a population of about nine million people, many of whom are young people from around our region and the world. The UAE has become a symbol of opportunity and optimism for young people in our region.

Our country is pursuing ambitious plans to put a probe on Mars and is seeking top talent to help us get there. It's opportunities like this that draw young entrepreneurs and skilled talent to Dubai and Abu Dhabi to become part of our developing story. The energy feeds off itself.

### What do you tell investors about security and stability issues in the region?

We need to face the fact that we live in a globalized world and every company needs to be thinking about how it is serving the market outside of its home country.

It's a globalized world, but it's also one that is unstable, and this can be challenging, especially in our region. The UAE has been able to attract businesses to the region because we offer a safe space to operate, robust market opportunities and a governance structure that eases foreign direct investment in the country.

We have world-class companies that are based in the UAE now, like ExxonMobil, Shell, Halliburton, GE and Microsoft – they are choosing the UAE because of the proximity and ease of doing business.

The UAE provides added opportunity for businesses setting up operations in our country through free zones. Free zones allow for 100 percent ownership by a company so they don't

need a local partner and it's tax-free, which allows them to operate quite successfully.

Employees from these companies also enjoy living in a great area where there are excellent schools and healthcare services, as well as leisure activities.

### **How has the UAE been a leader in addressing climate change?**

Climate change is dear to my heart because I worked on it for four years as lead climate negotiator for the UAE.

In many ways, the climate change issue represents how the UAE approaches a challenge. Most people might see the climate change issue as a huge challenge for an oil and gas producing country and, therefore, they should steer clear of it.

Our leadership, however, saw it a different way – this was something we could turn into an opportunity and could be part of our diversification story.

Our founding father, Sheikh Zayed, was an environmentalist and conservationist himself, and set the stage for the UAE's long tradition of environmental stewardship.

Before we had oil and gas, we were dependent upon pearls. My grandfather saw that industry disappear with the invention of the artificial pearl by the Japanese.

When our country was founded, Sheikh Zayed saw that we were blessed with oil and gas, but felt that it was just like the pearl and could easily be taken away. He wanted to reinvest the proceeds of these blessings in ways that would ensure a long-term, sustainable future, but not at the expense of the environment.

As a country in a desert environment, we would be the first to be impacted by climate change. Our leadership sees this as an opportunity for us to set an example for other global leaders. We are a provider of one source of energy today and we consider it important to become a provider of future sources of energy tomorrow.

We are creating an ecosystem for new kinds of green jobs for young people. Our

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young people are doing research and development into these new technologies that will in turn generate future jobs from that sector.

### **How critical has it been to have forward-thinking, innovative leaders for the country?**

It's fundamental. Our leadership set a vision for the UAE to be one of the leading countries in the world. They set a vision for us to be a tourist destination when many people wondered who would want to come here. They set a vision to be an aviation hub, an environmental leader and to build a knowledge economy, all quite early in respect to our region. This has been a great part of our story and has driven the development of our country.

However, it's also been important to have citizens, as well as noncitizens, who get behind these projects and have the vision to make them happen. What makes us so successful is our leadership, the rule of law, and the opportunity for people to grow businesses and to perform. The country has focused on eradicating corruption. We have e-government systems backed by e-payments so we're eliminating paper money in government. We're trying to use modern technology as much as possible to create an advantage. We recognize that we're in a competitive world and we need to remain competitive.

We can't underplay simple things like the role of women in our society – they make up roughly 50 percent of the workforce and nearly one-third of cabinet-level ministers are women. We have laws that require that women be on government boards of every semi-public company. I believe this is a differentiator for us globally. Women also have equal pay.

### **Is the UAE truly a model of how to create and spur development.**

Yes, but in many ways, we're still a developing country. However, we also have been blessed with being a wealthy country, so we take it upon ourselves to be the world's largest donor of developmental aid relative to our Gross National Income.

We're in the unique situation of understanding the challenges of developing countries, while also being a provider of foreign aid, so we want that money to be spent in an effective manner.

When we were tackling the Sustainable Development Goals process, we were thinking about how to take our experience and share it with people through our development story. We hope that the examples we provide are useful to people. We have never been a country that suggests things need to be done our way, but have always been a country that feels we can all benefit through knowledge sharing.

In the UAE, we see ourselves as part of this globalized world and we want to work in a multilateral system with as many partners as possible to try and move things forward for the benefit of everyone.

### **Did the idea of working in the public sector interest you early on or are you surprised by how things turned out?**

I've realized in life that one can never say never. I'm a geologist by trade. I love science and technology and I worked in the oil industry for 15 years. I'm still a big champion of that industry.

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When I first transitioned to the public sector, I was interested in broadening my horizons and gaining new experiences that I felt would help my career. The opportunity to work on climate change issues seemed like an interesting puzzle for me.

I love trying to figure out how to find a solution to an issue, and that's exactly what we did with the climate change issue. We thought about how to be a constructive, positive player in the climate change negotiations given the challenges we face, and we were successful because of the direction our leadership set.

Now, as UAE Consul General in New York, I often feel like I'm promoting the best product in the world, so it's easy in a way.

We opened this Consulate officially in 2016 and we've been very successful in expanding our U.S.-UAE relationships and having an impact in New York. This is a busy town – and it's hard for us to cut through all the noise – so we try to think about ways in applying modern diplomacy techniques to promote our shared interests and common values with the U.S.

Our number one concern is how to look after our citizens to make sure that all people who are in the 17 states that we cover are safe and taken care of. Then we provide consular services, which is a revenue generator. The third part is the public diplomacy aspect of cultural exchange, business ties, and trade and commerce. We look for ways to encourage business and trade growth between our two countries. The U.S. is one of our top trading partners so this is extremely important to us.

I'm proud of the many partnerships we've been able to forge and I'm excited for the great things we have ahead in New York and the Eastern U.S. region. I am deeply honored to serve my country here in the U.S. and I look forward to continuing to build upon the strong ties between our two countries to help ensure a better future for everyone. ●