

# NATION

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**Dr Mohamed Nasser Al Ahabbi**, director-general, UAE Space Agency

## ‘Differences are on earth, not in space’

Sarwat Nasir

ABU DHABI — International cooperation continues to be a major component that will help the UAE achieve its national space objectives, the chief of the UAE Space Agency has said, as his team prepares to launch the first UAE-built satellite from Japan into space this year and its first Emirati astronaut from Russia to the International Space Station in 2019.

Speaking to *Khaleej Times* in an exclusive interview, Dr Mohamed Nasser Al Ahabbi, director-general of the UAE Space Agency, shed light on the agency's partnerships with various countries and how they've enabled the UAE space industry to move forward.

Recently, Dr Al Ahabbi flew to the UK to sign an agreement with Jim Bridenstine, the new Nasa administrator, to cooperate in manned space flights. He revealed that the agreement will allow the UAE to use US facilities that are available in the International Space Station (ISS) when the first Emirati heads there next April on-board the Russian spacecraft, Soyuz MS-12.

“We look to international space cooperation as an enabler,” he said. “It's going to be difficult for us to start from scratch. We are trying to learn, but, no one tells you how to learn. So, how do we do that? We have to partner with people, we have to engage with them. Space is a great model for partnerships. Countries can have some difference on Earth, but, they work together in space — an example is the US and Russia. They have some issues but they work together in space. The US still launches their astronauts from Russia and it'll take a few years until they can launch from their own country.

“When it comes to space, we are open. We cooperate with China, India and with Japan as well. We have a strategic partnership with Russia and we met them last week on a joint investment project in Kazakhstan.”

He said that the UAE Space Agency ensures experts from dif-



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### 11

Arab countries hosted by the UAE to talk about Arab space cooperation this year

ferent countries are part of the agency's advisory committee, in efforts for a more thorough exchange of knowledge and to inspire further international space cooperation.

There are Japanese as well as Russian astronauts, who are part of the committee, as well as scientists and 'space leaders', according to Dr Al Ahabbi, who added: “This is also to send a message that we are not limited to one country, we work with everyone.”

#### 20-year-old industry

He said that the UAE has come a long way from 'being a small nation' to becoming an active player



The UAE Space Agency is involved in a number of ambitious projects, including Mars Mission. The UAE Mars Mission aims to provide a global picture of the Martian atmosphere through a probe named Al Amal to be launched in July 2020 to reach Mars in 2021. — AFP File

in the international space community.

“Our space industry isn't new, it started 20 years ago. We started with two satellites — Thuraya and YahSat, now, we have three satellites. The Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC) has two satellites in orbit. Today, we have seven satellites in orbit, operated by the UAE government. We have the first space agency in the region and also the first Arab and Islamic space mission to Mars,” Dr Al Ahabbi said.

“We will launch our latest satellite (KhalifaSAT) that is built by UAE engineers at the MBRSC later

this year from Japan. This satellite is a good example of how mature the UAE is in terms of building space capabilities. It shows that the UAE isn't just using space area, but it's producing and developing as well. The future is so bright, we get a lot of support from the international space community.”

He said that the Hope spacecraft, which will orbit Mars, is also on schedule and will be launched in 2020 to coincide with the country's 50th anniversary.

#### Space is for everyone

Al Ahabbi added that the UAE is currently encouraging other Arab

nations to start developing their space industries. “The UAE is a great example that small nations can still be active players in the global space industry. The space community do encourage the small nations because they do believe that space is for everyone.

“The collective efforts are what will bring results to humanity. Now, the message and the trend is 'let's do it together'.

“This small nation, today, can sit side by side with Nasa, with Russia, to talk about the future of humanity. Why so? Because we do have the plans, infrastructure, processes and the regulations. So the people look

to our space programme with respect. “We are also trying to encourage the Arab countries to establish their space programmes. Two members of my team will fly to Bahrain to help them select their first batch of engineers. We are also working with Saudi Arabia to establish their space agencies and we are working with Egypt.

“This year, we managed to bring 11 Arab countries together to talk about Arab space cooperation. Last year, it was six countries and by next year, we'll bring more. We try to encourage countries and we tell them to start thinking about space.”

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## Regulations to focus on space economy

Sarwat Nasir

The UAE Space Agency is keen on developing appropriate laws and regulations to attract private sector investors in the country's space industry.

The chief of the UAE Space Agency, Dr Mohamed Nasser Al Ahabbi, said they have recently completed a Space Investment Strategy, which aims to encourage local companies to invest in space. He said that investors often consider space as “high risk” and want the proper laws and regulations that will protect them legally.

“We are working on space regulations as well. You have to think about the space economy. Investors want to make sure if they invest, they have the right environment. So we need space regulations and laws to protect the local operator and to encourage foreign investors,” Dr Al Ahabbi said.

“And this is our plan now — to focus on building capability but also to try to establish a space

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economy and encourage local SMEs and universities through funding in hope that they will be inspired. We try to encourage companies to establish space companies in the UAE. It will take some time but we are building the basis and enablers and I think it's coming.”

He said commercialising the space industry has “become a trend” and that governments are keen on having private sector investments.

The US Space Agency Nasa is working with private companies such as Boeing and SpaceX. Nasa

recently announced its crew of nine astronauts who will carry out the first test in commercial space flights.

“The governments want to push private sectors into investing in space and this is the right thing for sustainability. The governments will put some money, but they need the private sector to bring investment and ideas,” he said.

The UAE is also trying to make its mark in the commercial space industry through its partnership with Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic — a spacecraft that aims to promote space tourism, with each ticket costing about \$250,000.

Dr Al Ahabbi believes that Al Ain Airport would be best suited as a Virgin Galactic space port.

“We are in talks with Virgin Galactic to operate with the UAE. I think in the future, when that industry has matured, the UAE will be the best destination for them. It's not just Virgin, but also Blue Origin. We also did a study in Al Ain Airport and it's perfect for them because it's not busy.”

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The UAE is gearing up to send its first astronaut to the International Space Centre in 2019. The final screening is going on and nine shortlisted Emiratis are undergoing medical tests in Russia. — File Photo