# The Network the UAE Already Has

***Why rebuilding expat confidence requires activating a trust network, not launching a campaign.***

***By Reinout Schotman***

*Abu Dhabi skyline across the mangroves.*

Confidence among internationally mobile professionals does not travel through official communications. It travels through relationships. The most credible voice on whether the UAE is a place worth staying, worth joining, worth building a life in, is not a press office. It is the person on the other end of a phone call from Amsterdam, Mumbai, or Cape Town who already lives there.

That network exists. It has never been deliberately used.

During the conflict, the UAE's response to its residents was exactly right. Air defences activated. Emergency alerts delivered quickly. Leadership that described every resident, regardless of nationality, as part of the same community, part of the same family. Reassurance and connection at the moment people needed it most.

This essay is about what comes next.

The first essay in this series argued that expatriate confidence is the most consequential and most overlooked economic variable in the aftermath of the Gulf conflict. Not oil. Not shipping routes. Not supply chains.

Supply chains have no memory. Confidence does.

The UAE's economic model depends on a continuous inflow of internationally mobile professionals who choose to build their lives here. They are not interchangeable workers. They are the flywheel: managing financial institutions, running technology infrastructure, connecting local companies to global markets, and sustaining the domestic demand that fills apartments, schools, restaurants, and retail. When they leave, organisations lose institutional knowledge that cannot be quickly replaced. When fewer arrive, the compounding effect on domestic demand is immediate and persistent.

The coming summer will function as a natural experiment. Expatriate families temporarily leave every year. Most return. This year, the return rate will be the first measurable signal of whether confidence held.

The question is whether the UAE waits for that signal, or shapes it.

Here is what is structurally different about this moment.

For most of the UAE's modern economic history, confidence was structural. The country's advantages, safety, stability, opportunity, global connectivity, were reinforced by the lived experience of residents. Confidence spread naturally through the networks of people already here. No one managed it, because it did not need managing.

Geopolitical shocks change that equation. They can shift perception abroad faster than reality inside the country. When that happens, structural confidence is no longer sufficient. The question becomes not how to be stable, but how to ensure that stability is believed by people who cannot see it.

That is a different problem. And it requires a different instrument alongside institutional communication.

Consider what actually happens in networks when geopolitical uncertainty rises. Parents call their children. Old colleagues send messages. Friends forward news articles. Each of those conversations carries a weight that no government statement can match, because they are personal, specific, and trusted. In each of them, someone in the UAE either reassures their network or they do not. They either describe daily life accurately, or they let the headlines fill the silence.

The UAE has a professional expatriate base of roughly 600,000 households living in properties at AED 120,000 annual rent or above, with average household incomes in the region of AED 600,000. Each of those households is connected to networks across Europe, Asia, North America, and beyond. Collectively, that is a distributed trust infrastructure of several million relationships, already positioned in the cities and companies from which the next generation of UAE residents will be recruited.

This is not a labour pool. It is a control point.

Control points, as we define them, are not built by decree. They emerge from consistency, embeddedness, and trust. The UAE has been building this one for decades without naming it. The strategic question now is whether it gets activated.

The mechanism that follows from this logic is direct.

Resident expatriates should be enabled to bring their networks here. Not through tourism campaigns, which speak to strangers, but through personal invitation, which speaks to people who already trust someone inside the country. Mobility credits, redeemable through UAE carriers for inbound travel with a minimum stay requirement, would achieve exactly that.

The order of magnitude is manageable. Subsidising five percent of the total household income of the target group, at fifty percent take-up, implies a programme cost in the region of AED 9 billion. That number is large in absolute terms. In context, it is not. A significant share flows directly back through Emirates and Etihad ticket revenue, accommodation, and visitor spending, which for guests in this income segment runs conservatively at AED 1,000 to 2,000 per day. The direct fiscal return is likely to cover a substantial portion of the programme cost before the indirect effects are counted.

The indirect effects are where the real asymmetry lies. Every visitor who subsequently decides to relocate or invest in the UAE generates a multiple of the credit cost. Every existing expatriate who, because their family has now seen daily life here, decides to stay rather than leave, represents several more years of AED 600,000 household income circulating in the local economy. Retention and recruitment are the same problem viewed from different ends of the same pipeline. The cost of a subsidised ticket is a fraction of the cost of a senior professional lost, a vacant apartment, a withdrawn school registration, or an investment commitment that quietly disappears.

The programme is not a subsidy. It is a precision investment in the confidence infrastructure that the UAE's growth model depends on.

The UAE has spent decades building a form of trust infrastructure that most countries cannot replicate. It did so by offering a proposition that worked, and letting the people who experienced it carry that message outward through their own relationships.

That infrastructure has been disrupted. Not destroyed, but disrupted. The distinction matters. What served the country well during the conflict, connecting, reassuring, and holding the community together, addressed the immediate need. What comes next is a different challenge: rebuilding the confidence of networks that could not see what residents experienced, and reactivating the inflow that the UAE's growth model depends on. That is not a communication challenge. It is a network challenge.

Natural competition responds with campaigns. Strategic competition activates control points.

The network is already there. The only question is whether it gets used, or left to attrite quietly, one unanswered phone call at a time.

## From the author

This essay is the second in a series examining the economic and strategic consequences of the 2026 Gulf conflict for the UAE. The first essay, "The Overlooked Risk Behind the Gulf Conflict," argued that expatriate confidence is a more consequential variable than oil prices, supply chains, or shipping routes. The population and income figures used in this essay are based on rental market data and household income estimates for the UAE professional expatriate segment; they are intended as a conservative order-of-magnitude illustration, not a precise financial model.

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