

The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven principalities or “emirates.” Its population is 10 million, of which nearly 90% are expatriates from within and outside the region who work in its economy. The UAE is a U.S.-designated “major defense partner” that hosts U.S. military personnel at UAE military facilities and buys sophisticated U.S. military equipment, including missile defenses and combat aircraft. From 1950 to 2022, the United States implemented more than \$29 billion in Foreign Military Sales (FMS) for the UAE, making it the 10th largest U.S. FMS customer by value worldwide.

After over a decade (2011-2024) characterized by U.S.-Emirati policy differences on an array of regional issues (including the Arab spring, the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, and the overall U.S. commitment to Gulf security), the bilateral relationship appears to have improved. On September 23, 2024, in the first official state visit of a UAE president to Washington, DC since the UAE’s founding in 1971, UAE President Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed met with President Biden at the White House, where President Biden named the UAE a “major defense partner,” a designation created by Congress that had previously only been applied to India.

Improved relations have continued during the Trump Administration, culminating in the President’s recent visit to the UAE in May 2024 –the second time a U.S. President has visited the Emirates. After the visit, the White House announced that President Trump had secured over \$200 billion in commercial deals between the United States and the United Arab Emirates. Beyond traditional defense ties, U.S.-Emirati relations have broadened into other domains, including into new fields, such as artificial intelligence. In May 2025, the United States and the UAE announced Emirati plans to purchase 500,000 of the most advanced Nvidia Corporation chips annually from 2025 to 2027. In 2024, the UAE was the second-largest U.S. trading partner by value (\$34 billion) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (after Israel).

Since the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks against Israel and the ensuing war in Gaza, the UAE has maintained normal diplomatic relations with Israel, though Emirati officials have joined other nations in calling for an immediate cease-fire. The UAE is one of the world’s largest providers of humanitarian aid for the crisis in Gaza, and the UAE also has sought to play a role in post-war planning for Gaza.

As civil war in Sudan continues between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), press reports and UN sanctions monitors have implicated the UAE in backing the RSF. Several Members of Congress have formally expressed concerns over the UAE’s reported role in the Sudan conflict. In the 119th Congress, Representative Sara Jacobs and Senator Chris Van Hollen reintroduced legislation (H.R. 2059 and S. 935) to restrict arms exports licenses to the UAE until the Trump Administration can certify that the UAE is not supplying arms to the RSF.

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Overview

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven principalities, or “emirates.” Its population is 10 million, of which nearly 90% are expatriates from within and outside the Middle East region. The UAE annually accounts for 4% of the world’s annual oil production¹ and is the 7th largest holder of the proven oil reserves in the world.² Having benefitted from decades of oil revenue and having pursued a host of economic diversification and global investment initiatives, the UAE is a high income nation; the International Monetary Fund ranks it 15th globally in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita.³ The UAE’s national wealth gives the small country outsized global influence; its various sovereign wealth funds alone manage assets totaling over \$2.6 trillion, allowing the UAE to make investments globally, including in the United States.⁴

Figure I. UAE at a Glance



Population	10 million, of whom about 11% are Emirati citizens.
Religions	Of total population, 75% Muslim; 13% Christian; and 12% other (primarily Buddhist or Hindu).
Population Components	Emirati (citizenry) 11%; South Asian; 59% (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi); Egyptian 10%; Filipino 6%; other 13%.

Sources: Map created by CRS. Facts from CIA, *The World Factbook*; Economist Intelligence Unit; and Global SWF.

¹ The Energy Institute, “Statistical Review of World Energy (73rd Edition),” 2024.

² CIA.gov, *The World Fact Book* (2021 archive) at <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2021/field/crude-oil-proved-reserves/country-comparison>.

³ See, International Monetary Fund, “IMF Data Mapper: United Arab Emirates Datasets; World Economic Outlook, (March 2025); GDP per capita, current prices, purchasing power parity; international dollars per capita.”

⁴ Global SWF Data Platform, accessed March 2025, Rankings.

Historical Background

From the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, the emirates were under the sway of the United Kingdom and were known as the “Trucial States,” a term derived from a series of maritime truces among the several emirates negotiated under British auspices. For over a century and until independence in 1971, the Trucial States functioned as informal British protectorates, with Britain conducting foreign and defense relations on their behalf.⁵

During most of this period, the Trucial States’ mostly semi-nomadic population focused on pearl diving, merchandise trade, and date cultivation. Oil exploration in the Trucial States began in the 1930s; the discovery and eventual export of oil in Abu Dhabi in the late 1950s and early 1960s helped transform the emirates politically and economically from a relatively impoverished area dependent on British protection into an independent nation with the Arab world’s second largest GDP.

When the British government announced its intent to withdraw from bases “East of Suez” in 1968, the Trucial States and other Gulf sheikhdoms (Bahrain and Qatar) began deliberations over possible federation. Internally and prior to independence, the various ruling families of the Trucial States had cooperated with the British in delineating borders among themselves and forming a Trucial Council to discuss political matters. Externally, Britain, along with the United States, worked to ensure that larger Gulf powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, would not impede federation, despite their respective claims on territories within the emirates.⁶ After three years of negotiations, Qatar and Bahrain decided to become independent nations. The emirates acquired full independence from Britain on December 1, 1971. Six of them—Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Fujayrah, Ajman, and Umm al Qaywayn—immediately banded together to form the UAE. A seventh, Ra’s al Khaymah, joined the federation early in 1972.

In its half-century of independence, the UAE has had three presidents; their domestic and foreign policies have evolved from an early focus on state building, development, and close ties to the West to becoming a more emboldened, global actor that has retained close Western ties while expanding relationships further East. Under the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan (president from 1971-2004), Abu Dhabi used its oil wealth to invest heavily in infrastructure development, as well as federal institutions that could bond a society traditionally divided along various tribal, familial, and geographic lines. Nevertheless, strengthening Emirati national identity took time; the federal army was only truly united in 1997 when Dubai disbanded its armed forces.

During the reign of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan (president from 2004 to 2022), the UAE focused on diversifying its economy. In Dubai, which has far less oil than Abu Dhabi, UAE Vice President⁷ Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid al Maktoum transformed the city-state into a global commercial center centered on finance, real estate, shipping, and tourism. While Abu Dhabi and Dubai have long competed commercially and culturally, Abu Dhabi’s oil wealth has undergirded the UAE’s growth; during the 2008-2009 financial crisis, Dubai’s real estate market crashed, and Abu Dhabi lent it \$20 billion in bailout funds.

⁵ “Trucial States in 1914,” The National Archives, Government of the United Kingdom.

⁶ In 1971, the Shah-led government of Iran seized the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands from the emirate of Ra’s al Khaymah and compelled the emirate of Sharjah to share with Iran control of Abu Musa island. In April 1992, the Islamic Republic of Iran took complete control of Abu Musa and placed some military equipment there. When the UAE achieved its independence in 1971, Saudi Arabia continued its unresolved border dispute with Abu Dhabi over the Al Buraymi Oasis, which was ultimately resolved by the 1974 Treaty of Jeddah.

⁷ The emir of Dubai has traditionally served as vice president and prime minister.

UAE President Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed (MBZ) and Other Key Leaders

The current leader of the UAE is President Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed al Nahyan (born 1961, commonly referred to as “MBZ”), who formally assumed the role of president after the 2022 death of his older half-brother Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan. Since the late Sheikh Khalifa’s stroke in 2014, MBZ had exercised de facto executive authority.

President Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed al Nahyan is the third son of Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, the first president of the UAE. As a young man, MBZ served in several different Emirati military positions before being appointed deputy crown prince of Abu Dhabi in 2003 and crown prince in 2004. Even before becoming de facto ruler of the UAE, MBZ

worked to reform the UAE’s military, hiring foreign officers to lead the armed forces, instituting a year of compulsory service for male UAE citizens (which has since been extended to 16 months), and acquiring advanced and customized fighter aircraft from the United States, such as the F-16 Desert Falcon.

As the UAE has become one of the most influential states in the Middle East, MBZ and his predecessors have used Abu Dhabi’s vast oil wealth to diversify the UAE economy, invest globally, and modernize the military with mostly U.S. equipment and training. According to one report, the ruling Al Nahyan family may be the world’s richest, with a reported net worth estimated at \$300 billion.⁸

Since 2014, under MBZ’s long de facto and now de jure leadership, the UAE has used a combination of soft and hard power to assert itself in several parts of the Middle East and Africa—with key goals of keeping secular authoritarian Arab leaders in power, working against Muslim Brotherhood-linked organizations, countering terrorism, and deterring Iran. At times, the UAE’s more aggressive regional posture, foreign military interventions, and behind-the-scenes sponsorship of autocratic leaders have drawn criticism, with some international observers claiming MBZ’s unilateral moves have been destabilizing.⁹ Others have focused on MBZ’s role as a modernizer and a peacemaker, as the UAE’s historic 2020 normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel has brought him widespread praise.¹⁰

In general, while MBZ is the primary UAE decisionmaker and may be grooming his eldest son (Sheikh Khaled bin Mohammad bin Zayed al Nahyan (born 1982), appointed crown prince in 2023) to succeed him, he also has distributed power to five other full brothers, collectively referred to as the “Bani Fatima” (children of Fatima, the third and favored wife of UAE founder Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan). Among the Bani Fatima, National Security Advisor Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed al Nahyan (TBZ) serves as a deputy ruler of Abu Dhabi. TBZ oversees over a trillion dollars in UAE assets, such as the mega-conglomerate International Holding Company (IHC) and the sovereign wealth fund Abu Dhabi Developmental Holding Company (ADQ).¹¹ Sheikh Hazza bin Zayed al Nahyan also is a deputy ruler of Abu Dhabi. Another brother, Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan, is UAE vice president and owner of the Manchester City Football Club in the United Kingdom.



Domestic Politics and Society

The UAE’s political system is notably stable. The dynastic rulers of each of the seven emirates exercise power within their respective principalities over “all authorities that are not assigned by the Constitution to the Federation.”¹² Per the constitution, the Federal Supreme Council, which comprises the hereditary leaders of all the emirates, has the power to elect a new president upon death or resignation of the sitting ruler.¹³ The Council is the highest federal executive and legislative authority in the UAE. Since the founding of the state, the ruler of Abu Dhabi has served as the federation’s president, and the presidential transition in 2022 (like the previous one

⁸ Devon Pendleton, Ben Bartenstein, Farah Elbahrawy, and Nicolas Parasie, “Secretive Gulf Family’s \$300 Billion Fortune Is About More than Oil,” *Bloomberg*, December 6, 2022.

⁹ David Kirkpatrick, “The Most Powerful Arab Ruler Isn’t M.B.S. It’s M.B.Z.,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2019.

¹⁰ “Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Receives Prestigious US Award for the Abraham Accords,” *The National* (UAE), November 19, 2021.

¹¹ Ben Bartenstein, Abeer Abu Omar, Adveith Nair and Farah Elbahrawy, “Gulf Royal’s \$1.5 Trillion Empire Draws Bankers and Billionaires,” *Bloomberg*, September 5, 2023.

¹² United Arab Emirates, “The Cabinet (Federal System),” available at <https://uaecabinet.ae/en/federal-system>.

¹³ An English language translation of the UAE’s 1996 constitution is available at <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/48eca8132.pdf>.

in 2004) followed constitutional procedures.¹⁴ The UAE president has the legal authority to sign laws and issue decrees (in areas assigned to the federation under the constitution), appoint/dismiss cabinet ministers, and conduct the nation's foreign affairs.

The UAE does not have an independent legislative body, though it has provided for some formal popular representation of citizens through a 40-seat advisory Federal National Council (FNC)—a body that can debate laws and review government policies, but not legislate independently. The FNC can summon ministers for questioning, but it is not empowered to remove them. Half of the FNC's seats are appointed; the other half are directly elected by limited suffrage among selected UAE citizens.¹⁵ According to a 2018 presidential decree, Emirati women must hold 50% of the council's seats.

The UAE has a dual judicial system with a mix of federal courts and state courts within some individual emirates. Sharia (Islamic law) is the principal source of legislation, though courts may apply civil or sharia law depending on circumstances. According to the constitution, federal law supersedes local law, though each emirate can enact laws not expressly reserved for the federal government, or in areas in which the federal government has not legislated. A Federal Supreme Court, appointed by the UAE leadership, adjudicates disputes between emirates or between an emirate and the UAE federal government. Abu Dhabi and Dubai also have special economic zones with respective separate court systems to settle commercial and civil disputes.

According to the U.S. Department of State report on human rights practices in the UAE during 2023, while the constitution provides for an independent judiciary, “court decisions remained subject to review by the political leadership.... The judiciary consisted largely of contracted foreign nationals subject to potential deportation, further compromising its independence from the government.”¹⁶ Each individual emirate maintains its own police forces, which enforce both local and federal law and are officially subsumed within the Federal Ministry of the Interior.

The Emirati federal government and each individual emirate maintain generous social welfare systems for Emirati citizens. In the UAE, Emirati citizens pay no personal income tax. Education is compulsory and free. Emirati citizens are entitled to universal health care. The state also maintains a vast subsidy system, particularly for low-income citizens. The UAE's Social Welfare Program provides its citizens with subsidies for housing, unemployment support, food, fuel, water, and electricity. Many citizens who have worked in both the public and private sectors are entitled to pensions upon reaching retirement eligibility.

The UAE's population consists mostly of expatriates, who make up a higher share of the UAE's population than any other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state (see **Figure 2**). The federal government has sought to attract and retain skilled foreign labor to help make the economy globally competitive, and has reformed and liberalized some laws in apparent efforts to do so. The UAE faces competition from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf neighbors that similarly seek to be a hub for global commerce. In 2021, the federal government decriminalized premarital sex and cohabitation (“homosexual activities are illegal,” per the State Department). The Dubai government also removed the requirement for a license to purchase or consume alcohol. A federal law on the personal status of non-Muslims allows for civil law to govern marriage, divorce,

¹⁴ George Sadek, “United Arab Emirates: Supreme Council Elects New President of the Union,” *Global Legal Monitor*, Law Library of Congress, June 9, 2022.

¹⁵ For information on the regulations pertaining to FNC elections, see <https://www.mfnca.gov.ae/en/areas-of-focus/elections/2019/>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: United Arab Emirates*.

inheritance, and child custody for non-Muslims.¹⁷ In 2021, the UAE amended its citizenship law, allowing a pathway to citizenship for certain categories of foreigners from select career fields.¹⁸ In the emirate of Ras al Khaimah, the Wynn Casino company is building a resort and gaming complex, in what would become the first casino to operate in any of the GCC states; to date, the UAE has yet to legalize gambling, which is prohibited in Islam.¹⁹

The UAE, like other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, has attempted to encourage more of its own citizens to be active participants in the private sector labor force. According to the country's "Emiratisation" laws, private sector companies with over 50 employees must have at least 3% of their payroll consist of Emirati citizens; noncompliance results in steep fines, though the government has offered to subsidize a portion of its citizens' salaries from private employers.²⁰ Despite these efforts, studies indicate that Emirati students lag internationally on key educational performance benchmarks; some contend that "the promise of a public-sector job, regardless of ability, offered little motivation to work hard in school."²¹ In 2024, the ruler of Dubai claimed that, for the first time, the number of Emirati citizens working in the private sector had exceeded 100,000, due, in part, to government programs designed to incentivize local hiring.²²

Figure 2. Migrant Population by Percentage in the GCC



Sources: *The Economist* and United Nations.
Note: m = millions.

Human Rights, Women's Rights, Foreign Labor, and Trafficking in Persons

According to the U.S. Department of State, significant human rights issues in the UAE include, among other things, arbitrary or unlawful killing; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary detention; political prisoners or detainees; and transnational repression against individuals in another country.²³ The nongovernmental organization Freedom House classifies the UAE as "not free."²⁴

¹⁷ "UAE Issues Personal Status Federal Decree- Law for Non-Muslims in the Country," Emirates News Agency (WAM) (UAE), December 9, 2022.

¹⁸ "UAE Adopts Amendments to Grant Citizenship to Investors and Other Professionals," Reuters, January 30, 2021.

¹⁹ Zainab Fattah, "The First Casino Near Dubai Sparks a Region's Newest Gold Rush," *Bloomberg*, June 13, 2024.

²⁰ Rory Reynolds, "Emiratisation Explained: What Are the New Rules and Fines?" *The National* (UAE), July 12, 2023.

²¹ "Reinventing the Gulf: A New Dawn, a New Day," *The Economist*, February 11, 2023.

²² "Number of Emiratis Working in Private Sector Tops 100,000 for First Time," *The National* (UAE), May 26, 2024.

²³ Op. cit., *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: United Arab Emirates*.

²⁴ See <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates>.

According to the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap report, the UAE ranks 74th overall in the report's global gender gap index and first overall in the Middle East and North Africa, ahead of Israel and Tunisia.²⁵ This score may reflect UAE government attempts to take some steps toward improving gender equality. In the workplace, the UAE has sought to increase women's labor force participation (55% as of 2023) by introducing paid parental leave for employees in the private sector.²⁶ The UAE also reformed other legal provisions to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex and gender, while enacting a domestic violence law permitting women to obtain restraining orders against abusers. Several cabinet shuffles have greatly increased the number of female ministers, and one woman has been speaker of the FNC. The UAE Air Force has several female fighter pilots, and, in 2021, Nora al Matrooshi was named the UAE's first female astronaut.²⁷

Despite some progress on women's rights, some human rights groups assert that many forms of discrimination against women remain legal. According to Human Rights Watch, "laws still provide male guardian authority over women and loopholes allow reduced sentences for men for killing a female relative."²⁸ In 2022, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) expressed concern about the unequal legal status of Emirati women in marriage, family relations, and divorce.²⁹

Overall, UAE law governing certain personal matters differs for Muslim Emirati citizens and non-Muslim expatriates. For the former, the Personal Status Law, which is based on sharia law, governs policies on marriage, divorce, and child custody. In Abu Dhabi, a federal law³⁰ on the personal status of non-Muslims allows for civil law (secular legal regime) to govern marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody for non-Muslims.³¹

The UAE is a "destination country" for women trafficked from Asia, Africa, and the countries of the former Soviet Union and forced into prostitution. The Department of State's Trafficking in Persons report for 2024, for the 13th year in a row, rated the UAE as "Tier 2," based on the assessment that the UAE "does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so."³² In a 2023 investigative exposé published by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and Reuters, journalists concluded that "the UAE is a major destination for sex trafficking, where African women are forced into prostitution by illicit networks operating within the country.... Emirati authorities do little to protect these women, according to anti-trafficking activists, Nigerian authorities and interviews with trafficked women."³³ In order to better combat human trafficking, in 2007 the UAE

²⁵ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2024," June 2024.

²⁶ Iva Hamel and Gharam Alkastalani Dexter, "UAE: The Sky Is the Limit for Gender Reform," World Bank Blogs, March 10, 2021.

²⁷ "The United Arab Emirates Has Announced Its First Female Astronaut," CNN, April 10, 2021.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Greater Progress Needed on Women's Rights," March 4, 2021.

²⁹ United Nations, "UN Women's Rights Committee Publishes Findings on Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Mongolia, Morocco, Namibia, Portugal, Türkiye and United Arab Emirates," July 4, 2022.

³⁰ George Sadek, "United Arab Emirates: Emirate of Abu Dhabi Ratifies Executive Regulation for New Family Law Permitting Civil Marriage," *Global Legal Monitor*, The Law Library, Library of Congress, March 28, 2022.

³¹ "UAE Issues Personal Status Federal Decree—Law for Non-Muslims in the Country," WAM, December 9, 2022.

³² U.S. Department of State, "2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: United Arab Emirates," June 25, 2024.

³³ Maggie Michael, "How Torture, Deception and Inaction Underpin UAE's Thriving Sex Trafficking Industry," Reuters, June 12, 2023.

established “The National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking”; Dubai also has a police unit tasked solely with assisting victims of trafficking.³⁴

A significant percentage (89%) of the UAE’s expatriate workforce comprises low-paid, unskilled and semi-skilled laborers and domestic workers, predominantly from South Asia. UAE law prohibits all forms of compulsory labor, but enforcement is inconsistent. Foreign laborers have sometimes conducted strikes to protest poor working conditions, nonpayment of wages, and cramped housing conditions. Workers still reportedly sometimes have their passports withheld, are denied wages or paid late, and are deported for lodging complaints. The federal government has put in place an electronic salary payment system that applies to companies with more than 100 workers, facilitating timely payment of agreed wages. In 2022, the UAE government issued a federal decree aimed at creating better work conditions for domestic workers.³⁵

Recent Developments in U.S.-Emirati Relations

After over a decade (2011-2024) characterized by U.S.-Emirati policy differences on an array of regional issues (including the Arab spring, the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, and the overall U.S. commitment to Gulf security),³⁶ the bilateral relationship appears to have improved. On September 23, 2024, in the first official state visit of a UAE president to Washington, DC since the UAE’s founding in 1971, MBZ met with President Biden at the White House, where President Biden named the UAE a “major defense partner,” a designation created by Congress that had previously only been applied to India.³⁷

Improved relations have continued during the Trump Administration, culminating in the President’s recent visit to the UAE in May 2024 –the second time a U.S. President has visited the Emirates. After the visit (see below), the White House announced that President Trump had secured over \$200 billion in commercial deals between the United States and the United Arab Emirates.³⁸ One report noted that some of these commercial deals preceded the President’s visit.³⁹

³⁴ “Minister of Justice Sets Out UAE’s Fight Against ‘Heinous’ Human Trafficking,” *The National* (UAE), July 30, 2023.

³⁵ “United Arab Emirates: New Law Regulating Work of Foreign Domestic Workers Adopted,” *Global Legal Monitor*, The Law Library, Library of Congress, January 5, 2023.

³⁶ Lt. Col. Christopher Michele and Prof. Joshua Goodman, “Three Broken Teacups: The Crisis of U.S.-UAE relations,” *Wild Blue Yonder*, June 27, 2022.

³⁷ Congress designated India a Major Defense Partner of the United States and directed the executive branch to take a range of actions to promote and enhance defense cooperation. Congress terminated related reporting requirements in 2021. See P.L. 114-328, div. A, title XII, §1292, December 23, 2016, as amended by P.L. 115-91, div. A, title XII, §1258(a), (c)(2), December 12, 2017; and, P.L. 115-232, div. A, title XII, §1266, August 13, 2018.

³⁸ The White House, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures \$200 Billion in New U.S.-UAE Deals and Accelerates Previously Committed \$1.4 Trillion UAE Investment,” May 15, 2024.

³⁹ Cat Zakrzewski, Abigail Hauslohner and Susannah George, “Trump is taking credit for Middle East deals that predate his presidency,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 2025.

The UAE as a Major U.S. Defense Partner

On May 16, 2025, at a signing ceremony in Abu Dhabi, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and his Emirati counterpart signed a Letter of Intent (LOI) to establish a comprehensive U.S.-UAE Major Defense Partnership.⁴⁰ As part of this partnership, Secretary Hegseth announced a new initiative between the U.S. Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) and the UAE's Tawazun Council, as well as the acceptance of the UAE into the U.S. National Guard State Partnership Program (SPP) through a partnership with the Texas National Guard.

Prior to the visit, the Administration notified Congress of several Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) and two Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to the UAE: (1) a \$1.32 billion possible sale of CH-47F Chinook Helicopters and related equipment; and (2) \$130 million in F-16 sustainment and related equipment.⁴¹ The UAE became the first foreign operator of the latest Chinook variant (CH-47F) in 2010; it already possesses 32 Chinook variants in its inventory.⁴² On May 15, 2025, Senators Van Hollen, Murphy, Schatz, Kaine, and Sanders filed joint resolutions of disapproval (JRD) against the sale of the Chinooks, the F-16 sustainment, and a DCS sale of helicopter spare parts valued at \$150 million due to concerns over the President's personal business dealings in the UAE.⁴³

Beyond traditional defense ties, U.S.-Emirati relations have broadened into other domains, including into new fields, such as artificial intelligence (AI; **see below**). In 2024, after UAE officials promised to work more closely with U.S. companies on data security and divest from Chinese companies/technology, Microsoft and Open AI both launched partnerships with G42, which is the UAE's leading AI company run by MBZ's brother, UAE National Security Advisor Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed al Nahyan (TBZ).

The UAE and Iran have a complex relationship characterized by quiet ongoing diplomacy and commercial ties amidst a volatile regional security environment; in the event of war, the UAE would be acutely vulnerable to Iranian missile and drone strikes.⁴⁴ Therefore, the UAE has pursued a policy of maintaining defense ties to the United States while pursuing a diplomatic rapprochement with Iran and supporting Oman-mediated U.S.-Iranian nuclear talks.⁴⁵ Emirati officials are firmly opposed to an Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons; they

Figure 3. UAE CH-47F Chinook



Source: Jane's Defence.

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, "Joint Press Statement on U.S.-UAE Major Defense Partnership," May 16, 2025.

⁴¹ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, available at <https://www.dsca.mil/Press-Media/Major-Arms-Sales>.

⁴² "US approved additional extended-range Chinooks for UAE," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 13, 2025.

⁴³ Van Hollen, Murphy, Sanders, Kaine, Schatz File Joint Resolutions of Disapproval on \$1.6b in Arms Sales to United Arab Emirates, May 15, 2025.

⁴⁴ The Iran-backed, Yemen-based Ansar Allah/Houthi movement's ("the Houthis") missile and drone attacks in 2022 against targets in the UAE illustrated these threats.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Cafiero, "Economic Ambitions Drive the Gulf's Support for Diplomacy with Iran," Gulf International Forum, April 30, 2025.

are less clear about what specific types of restrictions they would like to see placed on Iran's nuclear program.⁴⁶

Leaders of the UAE and other Gulf Cooperation Council members expressed alarm about Iran's April and October 2024 synchronized drone and missile attacks against Israel. Their proximity to Iranian territory makes them vulnerable to strikes against critical water and energy infrastructure.⁴⁷ In October 2024, an Iranian official warned the Arab Gulf monarchies that "Tehran would respond accordingly" to any Israeli use of their airspace in a strike against Iran.⁴⁸ In March 2025, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced that it had deployed missile systems to three disputed Gulf islands claimed by the UAE that sit in or near the main shipping lanes in the lower Persian Gulf.⁴⁹

Artificial Intelligence (AI): The UAE, China, and U.S. Policy

As the UAE looks to diversify its economy away from hydrocarbon production and position itself as among the world's leaders in digital technology, it has pursued a national strategy to invest heavily in supporting start-up companies focused on developing artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLMs).⁵⁰ Emirati-based companies have partnered with multiple foreign firms, including companies based in China, drawing the scrutiny of U.S. intelligence agencies, regulators, and Congress.⁵¹ G42 used Huawei hardware (new Huawei hardware is banned in the United States) for its data centers, leading U.S. officials to warn the UAE government that in the field of AI, it must choose between partnering with U.S. and other Western-based firms or with Chinese companies.⁵² Though UAE foreign policy writ large seems focused on fostering relationships with all global powers, in the realm of AI, dependency on chips made by U.S. manufacturer Nvidia may have limited Emirati options.⁵³ After ensuing U.S.-Emirati negotiations, UAE officials promised in 2024 to work more closely with U.S. companies on data security, divest from Chinese companies, and, in the case of G42, sever its ties to Huawei and other firms.⁵⁴ Soon thereafter, Microsoft and Open AI both launched partnerships with G42.

The Microsoft-G42 deal is governed by an "Intergovernmental Assurance Agreement" that was, according to Microsoft, "developed in close consultation with both the UAE and U.S. governments."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, some lawmakers have called for a further U.S. assessment of the risks of U.S. corporate partnerships with G42.⁵⁶ Unnamed U.S. officials have said that U.S.

⁴⁶ "Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed and Iran's Foreign Minister review regional stability in Abu Dhabi talks," *The National* (UAE), May 13, 2025.

⁴⁷ Abdullah Baabood, "How Gulf States Are Reinterpreting National Security Beyond Their Land Borders," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 1, 2024 and "Iran Pressures the Gulf States to Help Deter Israel," The Soufan Center, October 14, 2024.

⁴⁸ "Gulf states must not let airspace be used against Iran, Iranian official says," Reuters, October 8, 2024.

⁴⁹ "Iran unveils missile systems on strategic Gulf islands," Agence France Presse, March 22, 2025.

⁵⁰ June Park, "AI Competition Amid Expansion of U.S. AI Chip Export Controls into the Gulf," Middle East Council on Global Affairs, June 30, 2024.

⁵¹ Mark Mazzetti and Edward Wong, "Inside U.S. Efforts to Untangle an A.I. Giant's Ties to China," *New York Times*, November 27, 2023.

⁵² Mazzetti and Wong, "Inside U.S. Efforts to Untangle an A.I. Giant's Ties to China."

⁵³ Michael Peerl and Simeon Kerr, "UAE's Top AI Group Vows to Phase Out Chinese Hardware to Appease US," *Financial Times*, December 7, 2023.

⁵⁴ Chloe Cornish, "UAE Seeks 'Marriage' with US over Artificial Intelligence Deals," *Financial Times*, June 4, 2024.

⁵⁵ Microsoft Corporation, "Microsoft and G42 Partner to Accelerate AI Innovation in UAE and Beyond," April 15, 2024.

⁵⁶ Kimberley Kao, "Microsoft's Deal with Abu Dhabi Firm Is Scrutinized," *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2024.

efforts to end Emirati-Chinese hi-tech investment is a “trust but verify scenario, where we’re going to stay vigilant and we know there are risks.”⁵⁷ While the UAE has pledged to develop AI systems ethically,⁵⁸ human rights organizations have repeatedly raised concerns over the existing use of software in the digital surveillance of the UAE populace.⁵⁹ In January 2024, the U.S. House of Representative’s Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Commerce asking the Department to closely examine G42 and its subsidiaries for inclusion on the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) Entity List.⁶⁰ In July 2024, Reuters reported that the UAE Embassy in Washington, DC cancelled meetings between U.S. Congressional staffers and G42 executives “after U.S. lawmakers raised concerns the Emirati AI firm could transfer powerful U.S. AI technology to China.”⁶¹

On January 13, 2025, the Department of Commerce issued export restrictions on computer chips used to power AI and large language models, providing certain exceptions for low-risk destinations.⁶² The UAE (and some other countries) sought to be added to this list of trusted partners. In March 2025, TBZ visited Washington, DC, for discussions on artificial intelligence cooperation, aluminum tariffs, and Emirati investment in the U.S. technology and energy sectors. TBZ also hosted meetings with Tesla Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and presidential adviser Elon Musk, Amazon executive chairman Jeff Bezos, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Oracle chief executive Larry Ellison, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, BlackRock CEO Larry Fink, and Palantir CEO Alex Karp.⁶³

In May 2025, prior to President Trump’s departure for the Middle East, the Department of Commerce announced its rescission of the January 2025 regulations restricting AI chips.⁶⁴ Subsequently, days later, *Bloomberg* reported that the Administration was weighing whether to permit the UAE to purchase 500,000 of the most advanced Nvidia Corporation chips annually from 2025 to 2027; a fifth of the chips would be allocated for G42 while “the remainder would go to U.S. companies building data centers in the Gulf nation.”⁶⁵ Another report claimed that some of the proposed chip exports to the UAE would be set aside for the G42 partnership with OpenAI.⁶⁶ The chips deal was reportedly finalized during President Trump’s visit and includes UAE pledges to “keep the computing power in the country and only allow remote access to approved customers, and to set up audit trails.”⁶⁷

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Dwoskin, Ellen Nakashima, Nitasha Tiku, and Cat Zakrzewski, “How the Authoritarian Middle East Became the Capital of Silicon Valley,” *Washington Post*, May 14, 2024.

⁵⁸ “Artificial Intelligence: UAE One of 193 Countries to Adopt Global Agreement on Ethics,” *The National* (UAE), November 6, 2021.

⁵⁹ Amnesty International, “UAE: Concerns Around Authorities’ Use of Digital Surveillance During COP28,” November 15, 2023.

⁶⁰ The Select Committee on the CCP, “Gallagher Calls on USG to Investigate AI Firm, G42, Ties to PRC Military, Intelligence-Linked Companies,” January 9, 2024.

⁶¹ “UAE Blocks Meetings Between AI Firm G42 and US Congressional Staffers, Spokesperson Says,” Reuters, July 30, 2024.

⁶² U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, 15 C.F.R. Parts 732, 734, 740, 742, 744, 748, 750, 762, 772, and 774, [Docket No. 250107-0007], RIN 0694-AJ90, “Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion.”

⁶³ Jack Dutton, “AI, aluminum and chips: Decoding UAE’s Sheikh Tahnoon’s visit to Trump,” *Al Monitor*, March 22, 2025.

⁶⁴ “Trump administration to rescind and replace Biden-era global AI chip export curbs,” Reuters, May 7, 2025.

⁶⁵ “US Mulls Letting UAE Buy Over a Million Leading Nvidia Chips,” *Bloomberg*, May 13, 2025.

⁶⁶ “Trump Administration Considers Large Chip Sale to Emirati A.I. Firm G42,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2025.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Dwoskin and Gerrit De Vynck, “With Trump’s trip, Persian Gulf states take center stage in AI boom,” *Washington Post*, May 15, 2025.

Bilateral Trade and UAE Investment in the United States

In 2024, the UAE was the second-largest U.S. trading partner by value (\$34 billion, see **Figure 4**) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (after Israel).⁶⁸ The UAE has remained the top U.S. export destination for the entire MENA region for the 16th year in row, and the United States has a trade surplus of \$19.5 billion with the UAE. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, the UAE is a “global hub for over 1,500 American companies.”⁶⁹ In May 2025, The Walt Disney Company announced plans to build its seventh Disney theme park resort in Abu Dhabi.

In 2025, President Trump has sought greater Gulf Arab investment in the United States.⁷⁰ During TBZ’s March 2025 visit to the United States, several initiatives were unveiled, including

- A \$1.4 trillion, 10-year “investment framework,” in which the UAE commits to making new investments and expanding existing investments in “the U.S. economy in AI infrastructure, semiconductors, energy, and American manufacturing;”
- A \$25 billion investment in energy infrastructure and data centers by UAE investment fund ADQ (chaired by TBZ) in partnership with US partner Energy Capital Partners;
- A planned investment in U.S. natural gas production at the Next Decade LNG export facility in Texas by XRG and UAE-state owned oil company Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC); and
- A planned investment in the first new aluminum smelter to be built in the United States in 35 years by Emirates Global Aluminum. The UAE, after Canada, is the second largest exporter of aluminum to the United States.⁷¹

⁶⁸ International Trade Administration, <https://www.trade.gov/data-visualization/tradestats-express-us-trade-partners>.

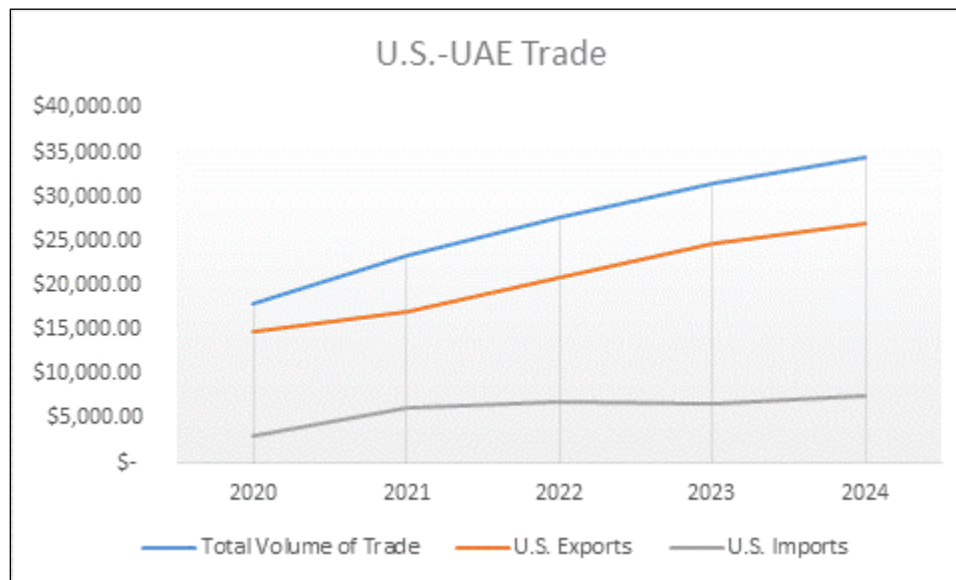
⁶⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, “Country Commercial Guide, United Arab Emirates.”

⁷⁰ “Trump’s trillion-dollar trip,” *Axios.com*, May 12, 2025.

⁷¹ U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the United Arab Emirates, “Thanks to President Trump, UAE Announces Significant Investments in U.S. Economy,” March 21, 2025.

Figure 4. U.S.-UAE Bilateral Trade

Nominal U.S. dollars in millions



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5200.html>.

President Trump's Visit to the UAE

Building on the \$1.4 trillion, 10-year UAE commitment to invest in the United States, several other multi-billion-dollar initiatives⁷² were announced during President Trump's two-day visit to the Emirates, including, among other things

- Etihad Airways announced their intention to purchase 28 Boeing Co. 787 and 777X aircraft powered by GE Aerospace engines for an estimated \$14.5 billion;
- ADNOC, ExxonMobil Corp., Occidental Petroleum Corp., and EOG Resources Inc. announced plans to expand oil and natural gas production valued at \$60 billion;
- Emirates Global Aluminum announced plans to develop a \$4 billion smelter project in Oklahoma; and
- G42 announced plans to build a massive AI "campus" inside the UAE, where U.S. companies would operate data centers and offer cloud computing services.⁷³

⁷² Jennifer A. Dlouhy and Kate Sullivan, "Trump Touts \$200 Billion in UAE Deals in Wrapping Mideast Trip," *Bloomberg*, May 15, 2025.

⁷³ U.S. Department of Commerce, "Fact Sheet: UAE and US Presidents attend the unveiling of Phase 1 of new 5GW AI campus in Abu Dhabi," May 15, 2025.

Figure 5. President Trump's Meeting with MBZ

May 15, 2025



Source: UAE Embassy in Washington, DC.

Israel, Gaza, and the Abraham Accords

Since the resumption of Israel-Hamas hostilities following the expiration of the six-week January 2025 cease-fire, the UAE has urged restraint to prevent further escalation, rejected “Israeli practices that constitute blatant violations of international law and the UN Charter,” and denounced “all attempts to forcibly displace Palestinians from their lands.”⁷⁴ Emirati officials reportedly have criticized Egypt and the Arab League’s early 2025 plan for Gaza’s post-war governance and reconstruction in private conversations with U.S. counterparts, according to press accounts.⁷⁵ The UAE position favors disarming Hamas and removing it from Gaza, while Egypt’s plan did not explicitly address the future of Hamas’ role there.⁷⁶

The UAE has long favored returning Mohammed Dahlan, the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) former Gaza security chief who hails from the Palestinian national movement’s leading faction, Fatah (a secular rival to Hamas), to govern Gaza and perhaps eventually succeed the 89-year-old Mahmoud Abbas as PA president.⁷⁷ Since Abbas expelled him from Fatah in 2011, Dahlan has lived in exile in Abu Dhabi, serving as a government advisor. In March 2025, President Abbas granted amnesty to Dahlan, despite a longtime rivalry between them, perhaps in an effort to secure UAE financial support.

Beyond backing their preferred Palestinian leader, the UAE also may be hesitant to commit to reconstruction funding without “political clarity” and “political stability.”⁷⁸ In a March 25 phone call with President Trump, UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed stressed the importance of ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza and reaffirmed the UAE’s support for the two-

⁷⁴ “UAE reaffirms policy principles on Palestinian cause at Extraordinary Arab Summit,” WAM (Emirates News Agency), March 6, 2025.

⁷⁵ Jean-Pierre Filiu, “The United Arab Emirates’ triple game in Gaza,” *Le Monde*, March 24, 2025.

⁷⁶ Sean Matthews, “UAE lobbying Trump administration to reject Arab League Gaza plan, officials say,” *Middle East Eye*, March 17, 2025.

⁷⁷ Adam Rasgon and Patrick Kingsley, “A Palestinian Exile Champions an Arab Vision for Gaza,” *New York Times*, February 14, 2024.

⁷⁸ “Gaza reconstruction needs political clarity, stability, UAE’s Gargash says,” Reuters, February 26, 2025.

state solution as “the foundation for a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in the region,” according to the Emirates News Agency.⁷⁹ After Israel ceased allowing most food and aid shipments into Gaza in March 2025 and formulated a new plan for distributing humanitarian aid in May 2025, the UAE at first reportedly told Israel that it would not cooperate with Israel’s revised distribution plans;⁸⁰ however, on May 20, Israeli and UAE officials reached an agreement to permit humanitarian assistance from the UAE to enter Gaza.⁸¹

To date, the UAE has taken multiple humanitarian initiatives to aid the civilian population in Gaza, including

- Opening a field hospital in Gaza (150 beds) and a maritime hospital at Al Arish port in Egypt;
- Participating in the delivery of aid via a “maritime corridor” launched from Larnaca Port in Cyprus to Gaza in collaboration with the United Nations and other donors;
- Conducting, along with Egypt, aerial drops of aid into Gaza (with Israeli permission);
- Housing more than 2,200 Palestinian evacuees in Abu Dhabi, including sick and injured children; and
- Establishing five bakeries and six desalination plants.

In sum, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) Financial Tracking Service, in 2024, the UAE was second in the world in donations (over \$396 million) for the UN OCHA’s Palestinian response plan.⁸² According to one report, as of February 2025, the UAE had dispatched humanitarian aid to Gaza using over 2,500 trucks, 500 flights, and a hundred airdrops.⁸³

Israeli-Emirati Ties Amidst the Gaza War

Nearly a year-and-a-half after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks against Israel and the start of the ensuing war in Gaza, the UAE maintains normal diplomatic relations with Israel; both sides have apparently calculated that they have more to lose than gain by reversing the Abraham Accords.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, widespread popular anger in the UAE over Palestinian civilian casualties has apparently strained people-to-people ties.⁸⁵ In November 2024, Rabbi Zvi Kogan, an Israeli-Moldovan rabbi who was the assistant to the head of the Jewish community in the UAE, was abducted and killed; three suspects have been convicted. Though air carriers such as Emirates, Etihad, and flydubai run direct flights between Tel Aviv and Dubai, the flow of Israeli tourists to the UAE has significantly decreased since October 2023.⁸⁶ Israeli-Emirati trade has continued, albeit more discreetly than before, totaling \$3.3 billion in 2024, an increase of over 8% from 2023.

⁷⁹ “UAE, US Presidents discuss strategic bilateral relations in phone call,” WAM, March 26, 2025.

⁸⁰ “Scoop: UAE tells Israel it won’t work with new Gaza aid mechanism ‘as it stands,’” *Axios.com*, May 9, 2025.

⁸¹ “UAE agrees with Israel to allow delivery of urgent aid to Gaza, WAM reports,” Reuters, May 20, 2025.

⁸² See, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/171/summary/2024>.

⁸³ “UAE sends largest aid shipment to Gaza for Ramadan,” *The National* (UAE), February 28, 2025.

⁸⁴ Vivian Nereim, “As Israel’s Ties to Arab Countries Fray, a Strained Lifeline Remains,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2024.

⁸⁵ “Money talks: Trade keeps Israel-UAE relations afloat despite Oct. 7 and Gaza war,” *Times of Israel*, February 21, 2025.

⁸⁶ Jennifer Gnana, “Israel-UAE trade to hit \$3.3B in 2024 as wars in Lebanon, Gaza continue,” *Al Monitor*, October 5, 2024.

Sudan

As civil war in Sudan continues between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), press reports and UN sanctions monitors have implicated the UAE in backing the RSF, which previously received UAE support for its role in the Saudi-led coalition operations in Yemen.⁸⁷ The RSF's financial networks are tied to the UAE, and the Department of the Treasury has sanctioned multiple UAE-based companies linked to the RSF.⁸⁸ Sudan's military government filed a case at the International Court of Justice in early 2025 accusing the UAE of fueling genocide in Darfur by supplying weapons to the RSF; the court determined it lacked jurisdiction to rule on it.⁸⁹

Several Members of Congress have formally expressed concerns over the UAE's reported role in the Sudan conflict.⁹⁰ In the 119th Congress, Representative Sara Jacobs and Senator Chris Van Hollen reintroduced legislation (H.R. 2059 and S. 935) to restrict arms exports licenses to the UAE until the Trump Administration can certify that the UAE is not supplying arms to the RSF. After the May 2025 arms sales notifications to Congress mentioned above, House Foreign Affairs ranking member Gregory Meeks issued a statement criticizing the Trump Administration's decision to "bypass the Congressional committee review process" and notify major arms sales to the UAE despite the country's "continued support of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militia in Sudan;" ranking member Meeks had publicly pledged to hold major U.S. arms sales to any country sustaining the conflict in Sudan.⁹¹

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⁸⁷ Declan Walsh, "Talking Peace in Sudan, the U.A.E. Secretly Fuels the Fight," *New York Times*, September 29, 2023; Oscar Rickett, "How the UAE Kept the Sudan War Raging," *African Arguments*, February 21, 2024; "Sudanese General Accuses UAE of Supplying Paramilitary RSF," Reuters, November 28, 2023; "Will RSF Drones Tip the Balance of Sudan's War," *The New Arab*, June 26, 2023.

⁸⁸ Global Witness, "Exposing the RSF's secret financial network," December 9, 2019; C4ADS, *Breaking the Bank*, 2022; Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Military-Affiliated Companies Fueling Both Sides of the Conflict in Sudan," June 1, 2023 and "Treasury Sanctions Sudanese Paramilitary Leader, Weapons Supplier, and Related Companies," January 7, 2025.

⁸⁹ Reuters, "World court says lacks jurisdiction to rule on Sudan's genocide case against UAE," May 6, 2025.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Member remarks in SFRC, "Conflict and Humanitarian Emergency in Sudan," hearing, May 1, 2024; and House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, hearing entitled, "The Sahel in Crisis: Examining U.S. Policy Options," December 5, 2023.

⁹¹ House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Meeks Blasts Trump Administration for Bypassing Congress on UAE Arms Sale, Announces Joint Resolutions of Disapproval," May 13, 2025.

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