



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

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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 2023, the United States implemented more than \$33.8 billion in Foreign Military Sales for the UAE, making it the 11<sup>th</sup> largest U.S. defense 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 visit to the UAE in May 2025—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 2025 ceasefire and prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas, the United States has sought UAE support as Israel and Hamas have advanced to “phase two,” a reference to the implementation of additional elements of President Trump’s 20-point plan for post-conflict transition in Gaza. As part of President Trump’s “phase two” plan, President Trump announced in January 2026 the formation of a Gaza Executive Board, which, along with a Board of Peace and its separate executive board, will be responsible for overseeing and supporting the Palestinian technocratic committee tasked with transitional governance in Gaza. Reem al Hashimy, the UAE’s Minister of State for International Cooperation, was named to the Gaza Executive Board. As of December 2025, the UAE remained the single largest country donor of humanitarian aid to 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 119<sup>th</sup> 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. Other Members, such as Senator Joni Ernst, have spoken in favor of the continued U.S.-UAE defense partnership.

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## Overview

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven principalities, or “emirates” (see **Figure 1**). Its population is 10 million, of whom nearly 90% are expatriates from within and outside the Middle East region. The UAE annually accounts for 4% of the world’s annual oil production<sup>1</sup> and is the world’s 8<sup>th</sup> largest oil producer.<sup>2</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> globally in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita.<sup>3</sup> The UAE’s national wealth gives the small country outsized global influence; its various sovereign wealth funds alone manage assets totaling over \$2.8 trillion, allowing the UAE to make investments globally, including in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1. UAE at a Glance**



<b>Population</b>	10 million, of whom about 11% are Emirati citizens.
<b>Religions</b>	Of total population, 75% Muslim; 13% Christian; and 12% other (primarily Buddhist or Hindu).
<b>Population Components</b>	Emirati (citizenship) 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), “What countries are the top producers and consumers of oil?,” April 11, 2024.

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

<sup>4</sup> Global SWF (Sovereign Wealth Funds) Data Platform, accessed December 2025, Rankings.

## Historical Background

From the mid-18<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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 President<sup>7</sup> 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.

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 Tahnoon 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).<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>11</sup> 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.

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

<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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. Additionally, the Federal Supreme Court adjudicates over state security cases, wherein its verdicts are final and cannot be appealed. Abu Dhabi and Dubai also have special economic zones with respective separate court systems to settle commercial and civil disputes. 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 Abu Dhabi Dubai governments 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, inheritance, and child custody for non-Muslims.<sup>16</sup> In 2021, the UAE amended its citizenship law, allowing a pathway to citizenship for certain categories of foreigners from select

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<sup>14</sup> George Sadek, "United Arab Emirates: Supreme Council Elects New President of the Union," *Global Legal Monitor*, Law Library of Congress, June 9, 2022.

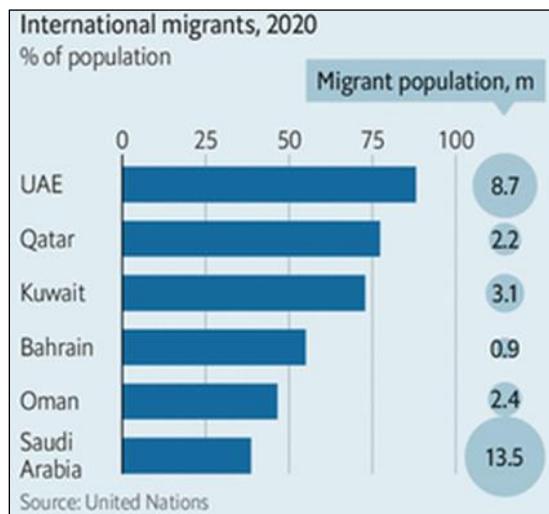
<sup>15</sup> For information on the regulations pertaining to FNC elections, see <https://www.mfnca.gov.ae/en/areas-of-focus/elections/2019/>.

<sup>16</sup> "UAE Issues Personal Status Federal Decree- Law for Non-Muslims in the Country," Emirates News Agency (WAM) (UAE), December 9, 2022.

career fields.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> The UAE also runs a Golden Residency program, which offers foreigners long-term residency (five to ten years with possible renewal) based on income and investment qualifications.

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.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 2. Migrant Population by Percentage in the GCC**



**Sources:** *The Economist* and United Nations.

**Notes:** m = millions. Each bubble depicts the number of migrants in each country, while each bar shows what percentage of the country's total population that number represents.

## 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, credible reports of: "disappearances; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including censorship; and prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association."<sup>22</sup> The nongovernmental organization Freedom House classifies the UAE as "not free."<sup>23</sup>

According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap report, the UAE ranks 69<sup>th</sup> overall in the report's global gender gap index and first overall in the Middle East and North

<sup>17</sup> "UAE Adopts Amendments to Grant Citizenship to Investors and Other Professionals," *Reuters*, January 30, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Zainab Fattah, "The First Casino Near Dubai Sparks a Region's Newest Gold Rush," *Bloomberg*, June 13, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Rory Reynolds, "Emiratisation Explained: What Are the New Rules and Fines?" *The National* (UAE), July 12, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> "Reinventing the Gulf: A New Dawn, a New Day," *The Economist*, February 11, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> "Number of Emiratis Working in Private Sector Tops 100,000 for First Time," *The National* (UAE), May 26, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2024: United Arab Emirates*.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates>.

Africa, ahead of Israel and Bahrain.<sup>24</sup> This score may reflect the high educational attainment of Emirati women and government attempts to encourage their political participation. The UAE has reformed 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.<sup>25</sup> Since 2025, the UAE has required private joint-stock companies to allocate at least one seat on the board of directors to a woman.

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 law<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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 2025, for the 14<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> 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.”<sup>29</sup> In order to better combat human trafficking, in 2007 the UAE established “The National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking”; Dubai also has a police unit tasked solely with assisting victims of trafficking.<sup>30</sup>

A significant percentage 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.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> World Economic Forum, “Global Gender Gap Report 2025,” June 2025.

<sup>25</sup> “The United Arab Emirates Has Announced Its First Female Astronaut,” CNN, April 10, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> “UAE Issues Personal Status Federal Decree—Law for Non-Muslims in the Country,” WAM, December 9, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of State, “2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: United Arab Emirates.”

<sup>29</sup> Maggie Michael, “How Torture, Deception and Inaction Underpin UAE’s Thriving Sex Trafficking Industry,” Reuters, June 12, 2023.

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

<sup>31</sup> “United Arab Emirates: New Law Regulating Work of Foreign Domestic Workers Adopted,” *Global Legal Monitor*, The Law Library, Library of Congress, January 5, 2023.

## UAE Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations

As previously mentioned, under the Al Nahyan family's rule, the UAE has pursued ambitious domestic and foreign policies aimed at achieving self-sufficiency in various sectors<sup>32</sup> (most notably defense and advanced technology) and extending UAE influence globally. While the UAE remains physically vulnerable to its larger neighbors and relies on the United States as its unofficial security guarantor (the UAE and the United States do not have a mutual defense treaty), the UAE has sought to position itself as a global trading and transit hub, a strategy which has made it both an international destination (in 2025, Dubai was the 6<sup>th</sup> most visited city globally<sup>33</sup>), but also periodically a center for illicit finance.<sup>34</sup> The UAE's regional interventions in Sudan, Yemen, and Libya have reflected its rulers' antipathy to Islamist actors, but have attracted scrutiny and criticism from some international observers (see **below**). The UAE has maintained its recognition of and engagement with Israel under the 2020 Abraham Accords, despite pressures resulting from the 2023-2025 Israel-Hamas war.

As discussed below, U.S.-Emirati relations remain close, but the UAE also "hedges" its relationship to the West by maintaining close ties to China, Russia, and other U.S. rivals. Ultimately, while Emirati domestic and international policies have arguably increased its external "soft power," the UAE may face internal limitations in the available pool of Emirati human capital,<sup>35</sup> and therefore may remain dependent on imported labor and foreign partnerships to drive innovation.<sup>36</sup> While Emirati leaders have diversified the UAE's global partnerships, so long as the United States continues to act as the security guarantor of the Persian Gulf, some commentators assess that the UAE will remain deferential to U.S. foreign and defense policy priorities.<sup>37</sup>

### Improved U.S.-Emirati Bilateral 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 perceived U.S. commitment to Gulf security),<sup>38</sup> 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 Joseph 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.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "United Arab Emirates," *Jane's Country Intelligence Reports*, December 16, 2025.

<sup>33</sup> See Euromonitor International, Top 10 Cities in International Arrivals 2025, at <https://www.euromonitor.com/article/top-100-city-destinations-index-2025-driving-growth-and-innovation>.

<sup>34</sup> For example, see Dov Lieber, Omar Abdel-Baqi and Summer Said, "Iranian Funds for Hezbollah Are Flowing Through Dubai," *Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2025.

<sup>35</sup> Jacob Wirtschafter, "Gulf States chase 'sovereign AI' while still plugged into American hardware," *Jerusalem Post*, November 25, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> To compensate for its small population of Emirati citizens, the UAE has plans to create an automation/robotics sector within its borders. See, "Dubai Robotics and Automation Program" at <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/industry-science-and-technology/dubai-robotics-and-automation-program>; and Samuel Wendel, "AI robots take on UAE construction," *Al Monitor*, December 16, 2025.

<sup>37</sup> James Jeffrey and Elizabeth Dent, "No Real Alternative: Why the Gulf Will Rely on the U.S.," *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, October 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Lt Col Christopher Michele and Prof. Joshua Goodman, "Three Broken Teacups: The Crisis of U.S.-UAE relations," *Wild Blue Yonder*, June 27, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Congress designated India a Major Defense Partner of the United States and directed the executive branch to take a (continued...)

Improved relations have continued during the Trump Administration, culminating in the President's visit to the UAE in May 2025, the second time a U.S. President has visited the Emirates. After the visit (see below), the White House announced commercial deals between the United States and the UAE that it valued at over \$200 billion.<sup>40</sup> One media report noted that some of these commercial deals preceded the President's visit.<sup>41</sup>

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

## **The UAE and Iran**

Though the UAE and Iran have normal diplomatic relations and extensive economic ties, Iran is a perennial policy concern for the Emirati government. Since Emirati independence in 1971, the UAE and Iran have been engaged in an ongoing territorial dispute over several Iranian-occupied Gulf islands. The UAE has called for direct negotiations or referral to the International Court of Justice to try to resolve the issue; the United States has taken no position on the sovereignty of the islands. In August 2023, Iran conducted military exercises near the islands.<sup>42</sup> In 2025, Iran's Foreign Ministry criticized the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for recognizing UAE sovereignty over the islands, stating that "unfounded claims ... would not change the geographical, historical, and legal realities."<sup>43</sup>

The UAE, like other GCC states, seeks to avoid direct military confrontation in the Gulf between the United States/Israel and Iran, likely fearing that fighting would have significant "blowback" for the UAE's security and economy.<sup>44</sup> In June 2025, the UAE condemned Israel's June 2025 strikes on Iran, warning of "uncalculated and reckless steps" that could lead fighting to spill over into the Gulf.<sup>45</sup> When the United States began striking Iranian nuclear targets, the UAE did not criticize the Trump Administration directly; rather, it called for diplomacy and dialogue to resolve disputes in ways that "promote stability, prosperity and justice."<sup>46</sup>

Since Iran's 2019 attack against oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and the Yemen-based Houthis' 2022 attack against the UAE, Emirati policy toward Iran had shifted toward pursuing a diplomatic

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range of actions to promote and enhance defense cooperation. Congress directed the executive branch to develop a common interagency definition of India's status as a major defense partner; it is unclear if this definition is in use relative to UAE. 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.

<sup>40</sup> 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, 2025.

<sup>41</sup> Cat Zakrzewski, Abigail Hauslohner, and Susannah George, "Trump is taking credit for Middle East deals that predate his presidency," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2025.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Sykes, "Iran Holds Naval Drills Around Gulf Islands Claimed by UAE," *Bloomberg*, August 2, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> "Iran-GCC clash over islands, nuclear talks underscores Tehran's growing isolation," *Al Monitor*, September 2, 2025.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Martin, Fiona MacDonald, and Abeer Abu Omar, "Gulf States Fear Escalation as US Iran Strikes Rattle Region," *Bloomberg*, June 22, 2025.

<sup>45</sup> "UAE warns of 'uncalculated, reckless steps' amid Israel-Iran air war," *Reuters*, June 17, 2025.

<sup>46</sup> "UAE President holds talks with Gulf and world leaders on Israel-Iran conflict," *The National* (UAE), June 22, 2025.

rapprochement with Iran and supporting Oman-mediated U.S.-Iranian nuclear talks.<sup>47</sup> Emirati officials are firmly opposed to an Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons; they are less clear about what specific types of restrictions they would like to see placed on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>48</sup> While the UAE may fear a potential nuclear-armed Iran and considers Iran's role in the Middle East region writ large as destabilizing, it also appears to fear that Israeli decision-making since October 2023 could upend the UAE's strategy of engaging Iran diplomatically and promoting region-wide economic development.<sup>49</sup>

During the most recent round of unrest in Iran in January 2026, as President Trump considered military intervention on behalf of the protestors, the UAE and other Gulf and Arab states advocated against the U.S. use of force, fearing Iranian retaliatory strikes against them.<sup>50</sup> President Trump announced on social media that he would enact a 25% additional tariff on countries doing business with Iran. As one of Iran's largest trading partners, should the President officially issue an Executive Order enacting the tariff, it is likely that Emirati-Iranian trade would be severely curtailed.<sup>51</sup>

### Israel, Gaza, and the Abraham Accords

Since the October 2025 ceasefire and prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas, the United States has sought UAE support as Israel and Hamas have advanced to "phase two," a reference to the implementation of additional elements of President Trump's 20-point plan for post-conflict transition in Gaza.<sup>52</sup> As part of that plan, the United States, along with Arab and international partners, would create an International Stabilization Force (ISF) for Gaza aimed at training and supporting "vetted Palestinian police" who would have long-term responsibility for security. To date, the UAE, like most countries, has remained non-committal regarding direct participation in the ISF.

According to UAE presidential advisor

Dr. Anwar Mohammed Gargash, "The UAE has not yet seen a clear framework for the stabilization force, and under such circumstances, it is unlikely to participate."<sup>53</sup>

**Figure 3. UAE Aid Convoy Carrying Humanitarian Aid into Gaza**



Source: Gulf News, December 7, 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Economic Ambitions Drive the Gulf's Support for Diplomacy with Iran," Gulf International Forum, April 30, 2025

<sup>48</sup> "Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed and Iran's Foreign Minister review regional stability in Abu Dhabi talks," *The National* (UAE), May 13, 2025.

<sup>49</sup> Vivian Nereim, "In Attacking Iran, Israel Further Alienates Would-Be Arab Allies," *New York Times*, June 18, 2025.

<sup>50</sup> "Allies' pleas, limits of U.S. power held off Iran strike," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2026.

<sup>51</sup> "Iran's protests: the regional and international responses," IISS, January 16, 2026.

<sup>52</sup> Text of the 20-point plan available at The American Presidency Project (UC Santa Barbara), "White House Press Release - President Donald J. Trump's Comprehensive Plan to End the Gaza Conflict," September 29, 2025.

<sup>53</sup> "UAE rules out joining Gaza stabilization force for now," Reuters, November 10, 2025.

As part of President Trump's "phase two" plan, President Trump announced in January 2026 the formation of a Gaza Executive Board, which, along with a Board of Peace and its separate executive board, will be responsible for overseeing and supporting the Palestinian technocratic committee tasked with transitional governance in Gaza. Reem al Hashimy, the UAE's Minister of State for International Cooperation, was named to the Gaza Executive Board.

As of December 2025, the UAE remained the single largest country donor of humanitarian aid to Gaza (see **Figure 3**).<sup>54</sup> UAE Aid, the Emirates' foreign aid governmental arm, has funded the construction of a water pipeline from Egypt to Gaza, evacuated over 3,000 patients for treatment in the UAE, and operated field hospitals inside Gaza and in Egypt.<sup>55</sup> The UAE has been one of the leading countries in assisting to evacuate wounded or sick children and their families from Gaza,<sup>56</sup> in conjunction with the World Health Organization.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the two-year war in Gaza, the UAE and Israel retained their diplomatic relationship, which was forged after the signing of the 2020 Abraham Accords. However, in the months preceding the October 2025 ceasefire, that relationship had become strained. When some ultra-nationalist members of Israel's governing coalition had suggested that Israel annex part of the West Bank, the UAE said that such a step would trigger downgraded ties with Israel.<sup>58</sup> Israel's September 2025 strike against Hamas negotiators in Qatar elicited a particularly sharp response from Emirati officials. MBZ himself condemned the attack,<sup>59</sup> and soon thereafter, the organizers of the Dubai Air Show banned Israeli defense companies from participating in the annual defense industry exposition.<sup>60</sup>

Despite tensions, Israeli-Emirati trade, investment, and defense ties are ongoing. In one prominent example over the last year, an investment fund owned by Sheikh Tahnoon provided funding to Remilk Ltd, an Israeli lab-grown milk startup.<sup>61</sup> In January 2025, the UAE's main defense company EDGE bought a minority stake in Israel's Thirdeye Systems, a developer of drone-detection systems. Reportedly, the UAE may also have entered into a significant defense export agreement with the Israeli defense firm Elbit Systems, worth \$2.3 billion over eight years; this deal could be for Israel's Hermes 900 unmanned aerial vehicles.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> UN OCHA, Financial Tracking Service, Occupied Palestinian Territory 2025, at <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/171/summary/2025>.

<sup>55</sup> "UAE cements global humanitarian leadership, expands relief reach in 2025," Emirates News Agency (WAM), December 24, 2025.

<sup>56</sup> Ismaael Naar, "Relief, Grief and Pain as Gaza's Wounded Are Flown to Safety," *New York Times*, September 24, 2025.

<sup>57</sup> United Nations, "Gaza: Which countries are hosting patients evacuated by the WHO?" October 30, 2025.

<sup>58</sup> "Exclusive: UAE could downgrade diplomatic ties if Israel annexes West Bank, sources say," Reuters, September 18, 2025.

<sup>59</sup> "UAE joins regional condemnation of 'treacherous' Israeli Attack on Qatar," *The National* (UAE), September 9, 2025.

<sup>60</sup> "Dubai Airshow bars Israeli defense firms after 'technical review,'" *Times of Israel*, October 7, 2025.

<sup>61</sup> Marissa Newman, "Israeli Startup Gets Rare UAE Investment Since Start of Gaza War," *Bloomberg*, November 10, 2025.

<sup>62</sup> Dean Shmuel Elmas, "United Arab Emirates named as Elbit's mystery \$2.3 billion customer – report," *Jerusalem Post*, December 18, 2025.

## Russia and the UAE

The UAE, like other GCC states, has appeared to pursue a foreign policy strategy of hedging against its close U.S. relationship by expanding ties to Russia, China, and other countries.<sup>63</sup> According to presidential advisor Anwar Gargash, “The UAE has no interest in choosing sides between great powers.... Trade relations increasingly look to the East while our primary security and investment relations (are) in the West.”<sup>64</sup>

Since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the UAE has officially called for “hostilities to end,” stating that international efforts should be focused on achieving a “sustainable peace in Ukraine, in line with the UN Charter, and that respects Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity.”<sup>65</sup> Unofficially, various UAE entities have reportedly benefitted from increased oil and non-oil trade with Russia and inflows of Russian capital into Dubai-based banks and real estate.<sup>66</sup> The UAE has helped broker multiple prisoner exchange deals between Russia and Ukraine. According to the UAE’s Foreign Ministry, as of August 2025, the UAE had helped mediate the exchange of 4,641 prisoners between Ukraine and Russia since 2022.<sup>67</sup>

## China and the UAE

**China-UAE:** Amidst U.S. competition with the People’s Republic of China (PRC, China), U.S. policymakers have taken heightened interest in Emirati-PRC relations. Overall, energy and high volumes of non-oil trade are the foundation of Emirati-PRC relations. According to PRC government estimates, China is the UAE’s largest trading partner (volume of trade in 2024 was over \$100 billion).<sup>68</sup>

As Emirati commercial ties to China continue to accelerate, Emirati-PRC defense ties at times may grow stronger. In November 2021, the Biden Administration reportedly warned the UAE government that PRC construction of a possible military facility at Khalifa port could damage U.S.-UAE ties.<sup>69</sup> In February 2022, the UAE purchased 12 light-attack training aircraft (L-15 or JL-10) from a PRC-owned defense company, with the option for 36 additional aircraft. In August 2023, the UAE and China announced that they would, for the first time ever, conduct joint aerial combat exercises in China, dubbed the “China-UAE Falcon Shield-2023.” In December 2025, PRC state media announced the third annual Falcon Shield exercise with the UAE held inside the Emirates; the UAE media did not make any reciprocal announcement.<sup>70</sup> Some of the UAE trainer aircraft previously purchased from the PRC may have been used in the Falcon Shield exercise.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Danielle Pletka, “The Qatarization of the Middle East,” *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> “UAE Won’t Take Sides in ‘Great Power’ Standoff: Senior Official,” Agence France Presse, November 14, 2022.

<sup>65</sup> “UAE Statement at the UN Security Council Meeting on Threats to International Peace and Security,” Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations, July 31, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> “U.S., allies press UAE over Russia trade, sanctions,” Reuters, May 1, 2024.

<sup>67</sup> United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “UAE Mediation Efforts Succeed with New Exchange of 292 Captives Between Russia and Ukraine,” August 24, 2025.

<sup>68</sup> Adam Lucente, “UAE’s AD Ports Group opens first China office: What to know,” *Al Monitor*, July 24, 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Gordon Lubold and Warren P. Strobel, “China Move in U.A.E. Thwarted—U.S. Rang Alarm about Building of Suspected Military Facility at Port on Mideast Ally’s Turf,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Ministry of National Defense, People’s Republic of China, “‘Falcon Shield 2025’ joint air force training promotes practical cooperation between China and UAE: Defense Spokesperson,” December 25, 2025.

<sup>71</sup> “Ministry of Defence Intends to Buy 12 L15 Chinese Aircraft,” WAM, February 23, 2022.

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

As the UAE looks to diversify its economy, reduce reliance on hydrocarbon exports, and position itself as a world leader in digital technology, it has pursued a national strategy to invest heavily in supporting start-up companies focused on developing artificial intelligence (AI). As a result, the UAE has sought to import computer chips used to power AI and large language models from suppliers, such as the Nvidia Corporation. During initial efforts to develop the Emirates' AI sector, Emirati-based companies partnered with multiple foreign firms, including companies based in China, drawing the scrutiny of U.S. intelligence agencies, regulators, and Congress.<sup>72</sup> The Biden Administration attempted to discourage UAE-China technological cooperation and incentivize cooperation with the United States, and enacted additional regulations on chip exports that limited exports to the UAE, among other countries.<sup>73</sup> 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 OpenAI both launched partnerships with G42.

During President Trump's May 2025 visit to the UAE, the White House announced that the United States and UAE had signed agreements committing the UAE to invest in data centers and to prevent the diversion of U.S.-origin technology.<sup>74</sup> Both before and after the President's visit to the UAE, the Trump Administration deliberated over advanced chip export policy to the UAE.<sup>75</sup> One report indicated 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 those chips would be allocated to the UAE company G42 (which had previously done business with China) while "the remainder would go to U.S. companies building data centers in the Gulf nation."<sup>76</sup> Another report claimed that some of the proposed chip exports to the UAE would be set aside for the G42 partnership with OpenAI.<sup>77</sup>

In early November 2025, Microsoft announced its intention to invest over \$15 billion in the UAE by 2029 on AI-related projects, including a \$1.5 billion equity investment in G42 and capital expenses in cloud datacenters in the UAE.<sup>78</sup> As part of that announcement, Microsoft also announced that in September 2025, the U.S. Department of Commerce approved export licenses for Microsoft, allowing it to ship to the UAE the equivalent of over 80,000 Nvidia advanced GPUs.<sup>79</sup> Several weeks later, the U.S. Department of Commerce approved an export license of up to 35,000 of Nvidia's chips and GB300 servers or their equivalents to G42 (and another 35,000 to a Saudi-owned AI company). According to one report, the license agreement includes "guardrails

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<sup>72</sup> 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.

<sup>73</sup> Chloe Cornish, "UAE Seeks 'Marriage' with US over Artificial Intelligence Deals," *Financial Times*, June 4, 2024; Chloe Cornish and Andrew England, "UAE president meets Joe Biden in push for more US AI technology," *Financial Times*, September 23, 2024; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, 15 CFR Parts 732, 734, 740, 742, 744, 748, 750, 762, 772, and 774, [Docket No. 250107-0007], RIN 0694-AJ90, "Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion."

<sup>74</sup> 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, 2025.

<sup>75</sup> Eric Lipton, David Yaffe-Bellany, Bradley Hope, Tripp Mickle, and Paul Mozur, "Anatomy of Two Giant Deals: The U.A.E. Got Chips. The Trump Team Got Crypto Riches," *New York Times*, September 15, 2025.

<sup>76</sup> "US Mulls Letting UAE Buy Over a Million Leading Nvidia Chips," *Bloomberg*, May 13, 2025.

<sup>77</sup> "Trump Administration Considers Large Chip Sale to Emirati A.I. Firm G42," *New York Times*, May 12, 2025.

<sup>78</sup> Brad Smith, Vice Chair & President of Microsoft, "Microsoft's \$15.2 billion USD investment in the UAE," November 3, 2025.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, "Microsoft's \$15.2 billion USD investment."

and cybersecurity provisions to make sure the chips don't end up benefiting China and the tech company Huawei.”<sup>80</sup>

In early 2026, the UAE became the 9<sup>th</sup> signatory of the Pax Silica Declaration, a U.S.-led initiative to secure the supply chain of critical minerals used in the manufacturing of advanced computer technology, such as AI.<sup>81</sup>

## **UAE Involvement in the Middle East and North Africa**

For over a decade, the UAE has exerted its influence and pursued national interests in war-torn, politically unstable countries, such as Yemen, Libya, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan (see **below**). The reasons for Emirati foreign intervention are complex. Beyond the basic goal of growing state power, MBZ and his brothers may seek to counter political Islamist movements in parts of the Middle East and Africa.<sup>82</sup> Sometimes, this anti-Islamist agenda also coincides with a deliberate Emirati strategy to acquire strategic land and mineral resources.<sup>83</sup> The UAE also seeks foreign markets for its government-backed companies, particularly in the logistics sector (e.g., Dubai-based port operator DP World).<sup>84</sup> Overall, the UAE most likely sees itself as an opportunistic and key player in a global competition for political, economic, and military influence in parts of world where more powerful nations have remained less engaged.<sup>85</sup>

### ***Yemen***

In 2014, the northern Yemen-based Ansarallah/Houthi movement launched a military offensive that seized large swaths of northern Yemen, culminating in their capture of the capital Sana'a in September 2014. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled a coalition of Arab partners, including the UAE, and launched a military offensive aimed at dislodging the Houthis from the capital and major cities. That offensive was eventually halted, and the UAE formally withdrew most of its forces from Yemen in 2019. However, the end of direct Emirati military participation did not signal the end of UAE attempts to play an internal role in Yemeni affairs.

The UAE is the main backer of the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The STC advocates for an independent southern Yemen. The rationale for UAE support of the STC is multi-faceted.<sup>86</sup> Southern Yemen is adjacent to major global shipping routes in the increasingly contested Red Sea arena, where the UAE seeks to play a major role. Through the STC, the UAE also may be seeking an internal Yemeni counterweight to the Saudi Arabian-backed internationally recognized government and the Yemeni Islah party. The UAE views Islah as linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, which UAE leaders consider to be a significant domestic and transnational threat.<sup>87</sup> Finally, through the STC and other armed Yemeni movements, the UAE may be building ground

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<sup>80</sup> Robbie Whelan and Amrit Ramkumar, “U.S. Approves Deal to Sell AI Chips to Middle East,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2025.

<sup>81</sup> U.S. Department of State, “United States Welcomes United Arab Emirates’ Signing of Pax Silica Declaration,” January 14, 2026.

<sup>82</sup> Robert Worth, “Mohammed bin Zayed’s Dark Vision of the Middle East’s Future,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Declan Walsh and Tariq Panja, “The Sheikh Who Conquered Soccer and Coddles Warlords,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2025.

<sup>84</sup> “Syria signs \$800m Tartous port deal with UAE firm DP World,” *Al Jazeera*, July 13, 2025.

<sup>85</sup> “The UAE in Africa: Power, Influence and Conflict,” *Bloomberg*, July 8, 2025.

<sup>86</sup> Dr Burcu Ozcelik, Baraa Shiban and Alaa Zoubi, “Southern Yemen’s Power Shift: the Houthis and the UAE-Saudi Rivalry,” The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, December 15, 2025.

<sup>87</sup> “A Moment of Truth for Yemen’s Truce,” International Crisis Group, September 30, 2022.

forces inside Yemen capable of countering the Houthis, who, in 2022, conducted ballistic missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks against UAE territory.

**Recent Fighting in Yemen:** In December 2025, the STC rapidly seized control of the Yemeni governorates of Hadramout and Mahra, eliciting warnings from Saudi Arabia that such moves are in violation of Saudi attempts to bring about a political settlement in Yemen. Saudi Arabia also released a public statement directly accusing the UAE of being behind the STC offensive.<sup>88</sup> After several Saudi air strikes against the STC and an alleged Emirati shipment of armored vehicles headed to STC forces in the southern port of Mukalla, the UAE said it would withdraw its remaining forces from Yemen.<sup>89</sup> Yemeni government/Saudi-backed forces in Yemen (known as the “Homeland Shield” forces) then began a counter-attack against the recently-seized STC positions in Hadramout governorate. As of January 2026, the Saudi-backed forces had retaken both governorates after Saudi air strikes hit several STC military camps. More broadly, these incidents are the latest in a series of escalating disputes between MBZ and Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.<sup>90</sup>

### *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; the UAE continues to reject the allegations.<sup>91</sup> Several Members of Congress have sought to block U.S. arms transfers to the UAE over its reported support to the RSF.<sup>92</sup> The chair and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee have called for the United States to consider designating the RSF as a Foreign Terrorist Organization or Specially Designated Global Terrorist organization.<sup>93</sup>

U.S. officials have avoided publicly accusing the UAE of arming the RSF—which per the State Department has committed genocide in Sudan’s Darfur region—but stated that such support should stop.<sup>94</sup> According to press reports and some Members of Congress, however, U.S. officials

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<sup>88</sup> See <https://x.com/KSAmofaEN/status/2005890829668307416>.

<sup>89</sup> BBC News, “UAE says it will withdraw from Yemen after Saudi strike on separatist-held port,” December 31, 2025.

<sup>90</sup> Yousef Saba, “From brothers to rivals: Key moments in Saudi-UAE relations,” Reuters, December 30, 2025; and, Vivian Nereim, “How Two Powerful U.S. Allies Came to Blows in Yemen,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2026.

<sup>91</sup> See, e.g., AI, “Sudan: Advanced Chinese Weaponry Provided by UAE Identified in Breach of Arms Embargo,” May 7, 2025; Reuters, “UN panel investigates Emirati links to seized weapons in Darfur,” April 29, 2025 and “Dozens of UAE flights head to airstrip UN says supplies arms to Sudan rebels,” December 12, 2024; *The Guardian*, “Leaked UN experts report raises fresh concerns over UAE’s role in Sudan war,” April 14, 2025; *France 24*, “European weapons in Sudan: A €50 million Emirati contract,” April 18, 2025; *New York Times*, “How a U.S. ally uses aid as a cover in war,” September 21, 2024; and Human Rights Watch, *Fanning the Flames: Sudanese Warring Parties’ Access to New Foreign-Made Weapons and Equipment*, September 9, 2024.

<sup>92</sup> See, e.g., House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Meeks Blasts Trump Administration for Bypassing Congress on UAE Arms Sale, Announces Joint Resolutions of Disapproval,” May 13, 2025; Representative Sara Jacobs, “Rep. Sara Jacobs, Sen. Chris Van Hollen Reintroduce Bill to Prohibit U.S. Arms Sales to UAE Until They Cease Support of RSF in Sudan,” March 11, 2025. Other Members, have objected to conditioning arms sales to the UAE. See, Congressional Quarterly, Senate Floor Debate, November 20, 2025, 11:12 a.m. - 1:14 p.m. remarks of Senator Joni Ernst.

<sup>93</sup> Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Risch, Colleagues on Violence in Sudan,” October 30, 2025.

<sup>94</sup> See, e.g., State Department, Secretary of State Marco Rubio Remarks to the Press, November 12, 2025; State Department, “Genocide Determination in Sudan and Imposing Accountability Measures,” January 7, 2025; and U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN), Remarks at UN Security Council Briefing on July 10, 2025 and October 30, 2025.

have confirmed the UAE's role in weapons transfers.<sup>95</sup> The Treasury Department has designated multiple UAE-based companies linked to the RSF for sanctions, including one that has provided Colombian mercenaries to the Sudanese paramilitary group.<sup>96</sup>

UAE officials have cited “the re-emergence of Muslim Brotherhood influence” in Sudan as a major concern,<sup>97</sup> while some analysts characterize the UAE’s reported role in the conflict as part a larger effort to expand the Emirates’ strategic influence and commercial interests in the Red Sea region and Africa more broadly.<sup>98</sup> Among East African countries, the largest Emirati engagements are in Sudan, where the UAE is the single largest investor among regional actors, with a reported \$22 billion in non-security initiatives.<sup>99</sup>

While the UAE has drawn international criticism for its clandestine support of the RSF, officially, the UAE government is a member of the “Quad,” a U.S.-led diplomatic initiative to end the conflict consisting of the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE. The UAE has expressed its commitment to the Quad, which issued its first statement in September, committing to a shared set of principles with regard to ending the conflict in Sudan, including the premise that “Sudan’s sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity are essential for peace and stability.”<sup>100</sup> Though the UAE government’s position on Sudan at times matches Quad principles, in its public statements on Sudan, the Emirati government states that “Sudan’s future cannot be dictated by violent extremist groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.”<sup>101</sup> The government, which routinely cites its humanitarian assistance for Sudan, claims that “there is no substantiated evidence that the UAE has provided any support to the RSF or any warring parties.”<sup>102</sup>

### **U.S.-Emirati Defense Cooperation, Bilateral Trade, and Investment**

Ongoing U.S.-Emirati bilateral defense cooperation is robust. In 2025, the United States and UAE conducted their 9<sup>th</sup> U.S.-UAE Joint Military Dialogue to discuss, among other things, integrated air and missile defense. U.S. military personnel are deployed at several UAE facilities, including Al Dhafra Air Base, where approximately 3,500 U.S. personnel are based.<sup>103</sup> U.S. forces in the

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<sup>95</sup> See, e.g., Declan Walsh and Christoph Koettl, “How a U.S. Ally Uses Aid as a Cover in War,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2024; Senator Chris Van Hollen, “Van Hollen, Jacobs confirm UAE providing weapons to RSF in Sudan, in contradiction to its assurances to US,” January 24, 2025; and *Wall Street Journal*, “How U.A.E. arms bolstered a Sudanese militia accused of genocide.”

<sup>96</sup> Treasury Department, “Treasury Sanctions Transnational Network Recruiting Colombians to Fight in Sudan’s Civil War,” December 9, 2025 and “Treasury Sanctions Sudanese Paramilitary Leader, Weapons Supplier, and Related Companies,” January 7, 2025.

<sup>97</sup> *Emirates News Agency*, “Gargash: Sudan’s tragic civil war must come to an immediate end,” November 22, 2025; *The Guardian*, “As criticism grow, is UAE ready to walk away from Sudan’s RSF militia?” Nov 4, 2025.

<sup>98</sup> William Keenan, “The UAE and the Sudan Civil War: Strategy and Regional Consequences,” January 5, 2025; AFP, “What is the UAE’s involvement in war-torn Sudan?” March 8, 2025; Joseph Siegle, “Resetting the political calculus of the Sudan conflict,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS), February 11, 2025; *The Economist*, “The UAE preaches unity at home but pursues division abroad,” April 15, 2025; Federico Donelli, “Middle Eastern monarchies in Sudan’s war: what’s driving their interests,” The Conversation, March 16, 2025.

<sup>99</sup> ACSS, “Mapping Gulf State Actors’ Expanding Engagements in East Africa.”

<sup>100</sup> State Department, “Joint Statement on Restoring Peace and Security in Sudan,” September 12, 2025.

<sup>101</sup> Embassy of the United Arab Emirates Washington, DC, “Statement by the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates Regarding Sudan,” December 11, 2025.

<sup>102</sup> “Statement by the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates Regarding Sudan.” See also Walsh and Koettl, “How a U.S. Ally Uses Aid as a Cover in War.”

<sup>103</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation with the United Arab Emirates,” fact sheet, January 20, 2025.

UAE support U.S. operations in the region, including deterring Iran, countering terrorist groups, and intercepting illicit shipments of weaponry or technology.

From 1950 to 2023, the United States implemented more than \$33.8 billion in Foreign Military Sales for the UAE, making it the 11<sup>th</sup> largest U.S. defense customer by value worldwide.<sup>104</sup> From 2016 to 2025, the United States had also authorized the permanent export of over \$11.3 billion in defense articles to the UAE via the Direct Commercial Sales (DCS) process, primarily launch vehicles, aircraft, munitions, and military electronics.<sup>105</sup>

In 2025, the Administration notified Congress of several possible DCS and two Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to the UAE: (1) \$1.32 billion in CH-47F Chinook Helicopters and related equipment; and (2) \$130 million in F-16 sustainment and related equipment.<sup>106</sup> On May 15, 2025, Senators Van Hollen, Murphy, Schatz, Kaine, and Sanders filed joint resolutions of disapproval (S.J.Res. 54) against the sale of the Chinooks, the F-16 sustainment, and a DCS sale of helicopter spare parts valued at \$150 million, citing concerns over the President's personal business dealings in the UAE.<sup>107</sup> On June 11, 2025, the Senate rejected a motion to discharge the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations from its consideration of S.J.Res. 54 by a yea-nay vote of 39 - 56.<sup>108</sup>

The United States and the UAE have established a “Defense Cooperation Framework” to develop joint approaches to regional conflicts and to promote U.S.-UAE interoperability. On May 15, 2017, the United States and the UAE confirmed that they had concluded negotiations on a new Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with a 15-year duration, which came into force as of May 30, 2019.<sup>109</sup>

The DCA is not a mutual defense treaty. Throughout 2022, particularly after Houthi attacks targeted UAE soil in January, multiple reports suggested that the UAE was advocating for a congressionally-endorsed mutual defense treaty with the United States.<sup>110</sup> After President Trump provided security assurances via executive order to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it is possible that the UAE may seek similar formal U.S. pledges from the President.

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).<sup>111</sup> The UAE has remained the top U.S. export destination for the entire MENA region for the 16<sup>th</sup> year in row, and the United States has a trade surplus of \$19.5 billion with the UAE (see **Figure 4**). According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, the UAE is a “global hub for over 1,500 American companies.”<sup>112</sup> Under the Trump

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<sup>104</sup> U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), *Historical Sales Book Fiscal Years 1950 to 2023*, FY2023 Edition.

<sup>105</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation with the United Arab Emirates,” fact sheet, January 20, 2025.

<sup>106</sup> Defense Security Cooperation Agency, available at <https://www.dsca.mil/Press-Media/Major-Arms-Sales>.

<sup>107</sup> Van Hollen, Murphy, Sanders, Kaine, Schatz File Joint Resolutions of Disapproval on \$1.6b in Arms Sales to United Arab Emirates, May 15, 2025. There have also been criticisms because of Sudan. See <https://x.com/SenSanders/status/2005022994951999627>.

<sup>108</sup> See <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/54/all-actions>.

<sup>109</sup> DOD, “SecDef Meets with UAE’s Crown Prince,” May 15, 2017, and “UAE-US Defence Agreement Kicks in as John Bolton Visits Abu Dhabi,” *The National* (UAE), May 30, 2019.

<sup>110</sup> See Sylvia Westall and Ben Bartenstein, “Gulf Oil Powers Seek U.S. Security Treaty After Yemen Strikes,” *Bloomberg*, March 30, 2022.

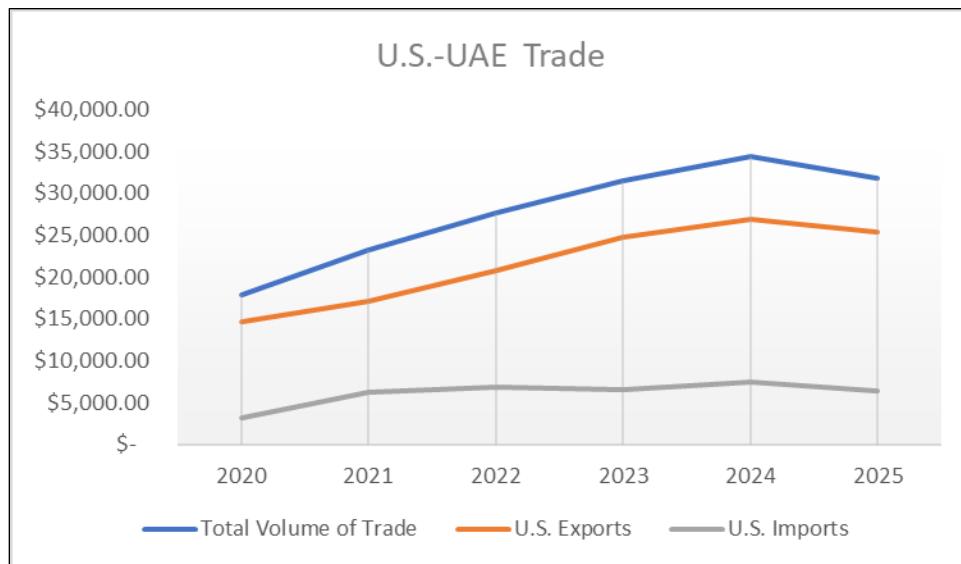
<sup>111</sup> International Trade Administration, <https://www.trade.gov/data-visualization/tradestats-express-us-trade-partners>.

<sup>112</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, “Country Commercial Guide, United Arab Emirates.”

Administration's tariff policy, the UAE is currently subject to 50% tariffs on steel and aluminum exports; all other goods are subject to a baseline 10% tariff rate.<sup>113</sup>

**Figure 4. U.S.-UAE Bilateral Trade: 2020-2025**

Nominal U.S. dollars in millions



**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5200.html#2025>

U.S. foreign direct investments in the UAE and Emirati investments in the United States in 2025, included

- The Walt Disney Company announcement that it would build its first theme park in the Middle East in Abu Dhabi;<sup>114</sup>
- The UAE company MGX taking a 15% ownership stake in TikTok;
- Emirates Global Aluminum announcement of a \$4 billion investment to develop a production plant in Oklahoma;
- The UAE company G42, in partnership with, OpenAI, Oracle, NVIDIA, SoftBank Group and Cisco, announcement of the construction of Stargate UAE, which, when complete, has the potential to be one of the world's largest data centers; and
- Emirates airlines order for 65 Boeing 777-9 aircraft with GE engines for an estimated \$38 billion. FlyDubai also ordered 75 Boeing 737 MAX aircraft in a \$13 billion deal.

<sup>113</sup> "UAE seeks U.S. trade deal to roll back Trump's steel and aluminum tariffs," Reuters, June 5, 2025.

<sup>114</sup> Chloe Cornish, James Fontanella-Khan, Daniel Thomas, and Andrew England, "Paramount's Warner Bros bid draws Gulf investors into rare alliance," *Financial Times*, December 10, 2025.

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