

Research Briefing
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United Arab Emirates (UAE): Introductory country profile

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Summary

Unless stated,
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The UK has strong diplomatic and economic ties with the UAE. It has recently invested in military facilities and launched a strategic dialogue with the UAE. However, recent strains include a failed attempt to purchase the Telegraph media group by a UAE-backed consortium in 2023/24. Concerns have also been raised for some imprisoned British nationals. The UK is negotiating a trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, which includes the UAE.

This briefing introduces the UAE's politics, human rights, trade, and international relations. It also signposts further reading. Please visit the Library's [Middle East pages](#) for further analysis on the region's politics.

The UAE's Gulf neighbours



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Headline statistics on the UAE in 2023

- **Population:** 9.5 million (UK: 68.4 million). 80-90% are foreign nationals.
- **Religion:** 75% are Muslim (85% are Sunni, most of the remainder Shia), 9% are Christian, and 15% from other faith and belief groups.
- **Gross domestic product (GDP):** US\$504 billion (UK: US\$3.3 trillion).
- **GDP per person:** US\$53,000 (UK: US\$48,900).
- **2023 GDP growth:** 3.4% (UK: 0.1%). **2024 projection:** 3.5% (UK: 0.5%).¹

¹ Data from [World Bank](#) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), [World economic outlook](#), April 2024, pp10, 38 and US State Department, [2023 report on international religious freedom](#), June 2024

1

Economy

The UAE is a high-income economy, heavily reliant on migrant labour. Oil is significant, constituting 30% of GDP and 41% of public revenues. The UAE is the third largest producer of oil in the [Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries](#) (OPEC), behind Saudi Arabia and Iraq.²

Changes in oil prices have a significant impact on the government's programmes and revenues. It has resultingly sought to prioritise diversifying the country's economy and introduced a value added tax in 2018.

The UAE is constituted of seven emirates. Abu Dhabi and Dubai (respectively the capital of the UAE and its largest city) account for 85% of the country's GDP. 50% of the GDP of the Abu Dhabi emirate is from hydrocarbons, and services represented 75% of Dubai's GDP. The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority is one of the largest sovereign wealth funds in the world.

In addition to oil, other significant sectors are wholesale and retail trade (12% of GDP), manufacturing (9%) and financial services (8%). Oil and gas saw the highest level of contraction during the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting lower oil prices due to reduced global demand (all data for 2020).

In 2024 the World Bank expects an acceleration in UAE economic growth due to rising oil output (5.8% growth in 2024) and growth in the tourism, real estate, construction, transportation, and manufacture sectors (3.5%).

As a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (formed of Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE), the UAE applies low external tariffs with its neighbours and is working towards a common market. The GCC has also entered negotiations for free trade agreements with the EU, India, Japan, and the UK (see page 9, below, for the UK).

UAE Centennial 2071 strategy

In 2017 the UAE Government launched the [UAE Centennial 2071 strategy](#).

This has four pillars: Diversifying government revenue, improving education, creating a knowledge economy (one based on science, research, and development) and supporting tolerance, coherence and loyalty. This includes empowering women.³ In 2023, the UAE launched a plan to double its economy by 2033 through investing in finance, manufacturing, and logistics.⁴

² This section sourced from WTO, [Trade policy review: UAE](#), 2022, paras 1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.10 (GDP), 2.36 and 2.48 (GCC), 1.14 (taxation); IMF, [Regional economic outlook Middle East](#), April 2023, p2 (2022 outlook); World Bank, [GCC update](#), 29 May 2024; OPEC, [Monthly oil market report](#), August 2024, p51

³ UAE Cabinet, [UAE centennial plan 2071a](#)

⁴ [Dubai sets \\$8.7 trillion economic plan for next decade](#), Al Arabiya, 4 January 2023

2

Leadership and politics

The UAE is constituted of seven emirates including Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Federal Supreme Council of Rulers

The highest authority is the [Supreme Council](#). This is constituted of the seven hereditary Emirs of the UAE. From their seven members, the council elects a President and Vice-President. Each emirate has a single vote.

The President then appoints a Prime Minister and cabinet, who are accountable to the council.⁵

New President, 2022

UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan died aged 73 in May 2022. He served as President since 2004. He had played a limited role in government since 2014, when he suffered a stroke.⁶

His half-brother, Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (sometimes known as MBZ), was seen as de-facto leader during this period. He was formally elected President following the death of his half-brother.⁷

A change of direction under MBZ?

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan has held a strong position of influence since 2014. It's therefore unlikely the UAE will see any major changes in policy.

The succession process was smooth, with MBZ elected unanimously, and his son was named as Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi in March 2023. Other family members also hold prominent positions.⁸

As detailed in section 6 on the UAE's foreign relations, under MBZ's influence the UAE became involved in Yemen's civil war, improved its relations with Israel, and questioned the level of American commitment to the region.

The UAE continues to balance its relations with the US, China, and Russia. This partly reflects its concerns for the degree of US security commitment to the region and an aim to challenge Iran's ties with Russia and Syria.⁹

⁵ Europa World Plus, [UAE: constitution and government](#), accessible via a Commons Library login

⁶ [UAE President Sheikh bin Zayed Al Nahyan dies aged 73](#), Al-Jazeera, 13 May 2022

⁷ [Who is Mohamed bin Zayed, the UAE's new president?](#), Al-Jazeera, 14 May 2022

⁸ Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [The son also rises: the one-year anniversary of MBZ's presidency](#), 3 May 2023

⁹ [Analysis: With MBZ as president, is it time for a US-UAE reset?](#), Al-Jazeera, 25 May 2022

Federal National Council

The [Federal National Council](#) (FNC) is a consultative assembly, constituted of 40 members. It met for the first time in 1972. Until 2006, the FNC was entirely appointed by the leaders of each emirate—it is now half elected.

The FNC sits for four-year terms. It reviews all federal legislation and can vote to approve, amend, or reject draft legislation. However, the Federal Supreme Council can approve a bill over the objections of the FNC.

Elections for half the FNC take place through an electoral college. The size of the electoral college has increased from 6,600 people in 2006 to 398,900 in 2023. The electoral colleges [comprise UAE nationals](#) selected by the National Electoral Committee. In 2023, 51% of members were women.

Online voting was introduced for the 2023 elections. Turnout was 44%, the second highest since the first elections in 2006, when it was 74%. Of the 309 candidates, 128 were women and 7 of the 20 elected candidates were female. Political parties are banned and only three members of the previous FNC retained their seats. A gender quota requires 50% of FNC members to be women, with appointees in 2023 increasing their total to the required 20.¹⁰

3 Political rights

The US State Department's 2023 [report on human rights in the UAE](#) cited ongoing restrictions on political participation:¹¹

- **Free expression:** constitutional protections for freedom of speech exist, but do not include the freedom to criticise government ministers, UAE rulers, or to make statements which may create or encourage social unrest. The law punishes “spreading rumours or false news”. The State Department report says restrictive laws were employed against those calling for democratic reforms, making criticisms of the government, and voicing support for Islamist activities.
- **Free media:** The government owns and controls most newspapers, except in Abu Dhabi's free trade zones and regional outlets based in Dubai. The National Media Office, appointed by the President, licences and censors all publications, including for material that may “threaten social stability”. This includes foreign and online material. US-based rights group Freedom House reports local authorities blocked the

¹⁰ Europa World Plus, [UAE: recent developments: the Presidency of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed](#); Gulf States Newsletter [Turnout rises in the UAE's latest FNC election](#), 25 October 2023

¹¹ This section from US State Department, [2023 country reports on human rights practices: UAE](#), 2024

websites of regional human rights groups and groups raising concerns with prison conditions.

- **Freedom of assembly/association:** the law allows for limited freedom of assembly, but the US State Department says UAE authorities impose “significant restrictions” on this while “generally permitting” gatherings in support of the government. Government permits must be issued for gatherings. Political organisations, trade unions and political parties are illegal. All civil society groups must first register with the government.
- **Prisoners and political dissidents:** in 2012 several groups of political activists were arrested. They are known as the “UAE-94,” and many remain in detention, following a trial Amnesty International judged as “grossly unfair”. Some of the detainees were involved in a petition for a parliament, while others were members of a group affiliated with the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). The UAE accuses them of crimes against national security. The Brotherhood has been listed as a terrorist organisation in the UAE since 2014 and its [local affiliate, the al-Islah party, banned](#).¹²

Human rights groups report that counter-terrorism laws are used to extend the detention of political prisoners beyond the end of their sentences. Many of the “UAE 94” were also in the 2023/24 “UAE 84” trial, in which the defendants were accused of “establishing and managing a clandestine terrorist organization”. Authorities said [most were members of the Brotherhood](#). In July 2024 a UAE court delivered 43 life sentences for involvement with a terrorist organisation. A further ten were given other prison sentences, 24 cases ruled inadmissible, and one was acquitted. Human Rights Watch said this was an “unfair mass trial”.¹³

The US State Department also reports authorities tracked and targeted activists, journalists, politicians in “systematic hacking campaigns”.

4 Human rights

In 2021, the UAE Government launched a [new National Human Rights Authority to promote human rights](#). It says it operates independently of government, and that citizens, residents, and others can submit complaints and proposals.¹⁴ International rights groups have expressed scepticism as to whether the body will drive reform, given the limitations on civil society.¹⁵

¹² Amnesty International, [UAE: Dissidents arbitrarily detained beyond their sentence must be immediately released](#), 30 May 2022

¹³ [More than 40 activities jailed for life in UAE for “terror” offences](#), BBC News, 10 July 2024; Human Rights Watch, [UAE: unfair trial of rights defenders](#), 29 April 2024

¹⁴ National Human Rights Institution, [Homepage](#)

¹⁵ [UAE’s new human rights watch institute: Real change or ‘image washing’?](#), DW, September 2021.

Other concerns include the below.

- **Death sentences continue to be imposed.** At least four were issued in 2023, lower than the recent peak of nine in 2021. The last executions were carried out in 2017 and 2021, according to Amnesty International.¹⁶
- **Women and girls:** The UAE is judged by the World Economic Forum as making significant progress on gender equality, ranking it first in the Middle East region (though 74 of 146 globally in 2023).¹⁷ UAE laws allow for equal pay, and the right for women to stand and vote in elections. New protections have been introduced against domestic violence.

While women may legally work without the permission of a male guardian, wives can be deemed by a judge to be in breach of spousal obligations if they leave the house or go to work in a job considered against custom, necessity, or family interest.¹⁸

Family laws continue to discriminate against women transmitting Emirati nationality to their children on an equal basis to men (children take citizenship from their fathers). Men are allowed to unilaterally terminate a marriage without recourse to court (unlike women).¹⁹ In 2023, new family laws for non-Muslim expatriates were introduced, to allow for civil marriages and giving women equal rights to apply for divorce.²⁰

- **Religious freedom:** Islam is the country's official religion and Sharia the principal source of legislation. The constitution provides for freedom of worship provided it "does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals". Laws prohibit preaching against Islam or proselytizing to Muslims. Each of the seven emirates is responsible for licencing non-Islamic houses of worship, and in 2023 representatives of non-Islamic faiths reported that registration processes were unclear in all seven.

Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities have established places of worship and practice without interference within designated buildings or in private facilities. Some websites that are critical of Islam or have information on other faiths have been blocked. In 2023 Abu Dhabi opened a government-sponsored "Abrahamic family house" with a Sunni Mosque, Catholic church, and the UAE's first synagogue. In the 2023/24 school year, the UAE became the first Middle Eastern state outside Israel

¹⁶ Amnesty International, [Death sentences and executions 2021](#), May 2022, pp40, 50 and reports for [2022](#), May 2023, p26 and [2023](#), May 2024, p28

¹⁷ World Economic Forum, [Global gender gap report 2024](#), June 2024, p12

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, [How male guardianship policies restrict women \[...\]](#), 18 July 2023

¹⁹ Borgen Magazine, [Women's rights in the UAE](#), 19 August 2021 and Human Rights Watch, [UAE: greater progress needed on women's rights](#), 4 March 2021

²⁰ [UAE announces new family law for non-Muslim expatriates](#), The National News, 9 December 2022

to teach the Holocaust in its curriculum. A rise in antisemitic incidents were reported following the 7 October 2023 Hamas assault on Israel.²¹

- **Worker rights:** migrant workers constitute around 80% of the UAE’s resident population. Like other Gulf states, the UAE operates the [kafala \(“sponsorship”\) system](#). This means workers enter the country only after gaining sponsorship by an employer. Human rights organisations remain critical of conditions for these workers (see section 7 for commentary).

The UAE has introduced reforms to protect these workers, including the right to retain their own passports and entitlement to sick pay. Migrant workers have the right to change employer without their permission if they give notice and a “legitimate reason” (this is undefined in law). Domestic workers can change if a judicial decision demonstrates the employer has breached their obligations. There is no minimum wage.²²

In 2018 and 2024 the UAE granted amnesties for foreign workers who have arrived in the UAE without correct documentation.²³

- **Same-sex relationships are illegal** and can carry the death penalty. Films and media have been censored or banned for LGBT+ content.²⁴

What’s the UK Government assessment?

During the 2023 UN periodic review of human rights in the UAE (these reviews are carried out on all states) the UK raised concerns about the lack of guarantees on freedom of opinion, expression, and assembly. The UK welcomed UAE commitments on the independence of the National Human Rights Institute and to ensure that the rights of detainees are upheld, and complaints investigated impartially.²⁵

In response to a parliamentary question on the “UAE 84” trial, in December 2023 the UK Government said it had not raised the case directly and said it was “disappointed” that the UAE had not accepted UK recommendations at the UN to guarantee the rights of freedom of expression and assembly.²⁶

In 2018 British academic Matthew Hedges was arrested when visiting the UAE and sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of spying for the UK. He was pardoned a few days later. Mr Hedges says he was kept in solitary confinement and tortured. The UAE Government says his trial was “fair and transparent”, that he “admitted the charges”, and Mr Hedges was never subjected to, or threatened with, torture or other cruel treatment. The UK

²¹ US Department of State, [2023 report on international religious freedom: UAE](#), May 2024

²² International Labour Organization, [UAE: regulatory framework for migrant workers](#), 2023

²³ [What’s behind the UAE amnesty scheme?](#), Al Monitor, 9 September 2024

²⁴ Human Dignity Trust, [UAE](#); International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, [Laws on us](#), 2024, p138

²⁵ FCDO, [UN HRC54: universal periodic review adoption—UAE](#), 3 October 2023

²⁶ PQ6500 [[UAE: human rights and political prisoners](#)], 20 December 2023

Government has apologised to Mr Hedges for not “fully follow[ing] [UK Government] guidance on torture and mistreatment and that this failure [...] left [Mr Hedges] uncertain as to whether more could have been done”.²⁷

The UK Government has also raised the cases of some British nationals detained in the UAE. These include Ryan Cornelius.²⁸ Mr Cornelius was first arrested in 2008 for alleged fraud. In 2022 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that his arrest and trial were “arbitrary”. The UAE did not contribute to the working group report, but its UK embassy has defended the UAE court system as “independent and equitable.”²⁹

5 UK-UAE relations

The UAE gained its independence from the UK in 1971.

Plans for a trade agreement

UK-UAE trade in 2023

- **Trade with the UK:** was the UK’s 19th largest trading partner.
- **Total UK-UAE trade (exports and imports):** £24.2 billion in 2023, the highest since at least 2014 and up from a low of £12.5 billion in 2020.
- **Top five UK goods exported to UAE:** power generators, cars, “unspecified goods”, telecoms, medicinal and pharmaceutical goods.
- **Top five UK goods imported from UAE:** Refined oil, power generators, jewellery, telecoms and sound equipment, and miscellaneous metal manufactures.³⁰

Data on the top five services traded is not available.

While having an active trade and investment relationship, the UK and the UAE do not have a free trade agreement. Their trade takes place on the [World Trade Organisation \(WTO\) terms](#), meaning that the countries must treat each

²⁷ [Matthew Hedges: Foreign office apology to UAE torture academic](#), BBC News, 4 September 2023; [Foreign office apologies over handling of \[...\] torture case](#), Guardian, 4 September 2023

²⁸ HC Deb, [30 April 2024](#), cc146-7

²⁹ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, [Opinion No. 19/2022 concerning Ryan Cornelius \(United Arab Emirates\)](#) (PDF), May 2022, paras 7-11; [UN rules that British businessman is being unlawfully imprisoned in Dubai](#), The Telegraph, 19 June 2022

³⁰ DIT, [Trade and investment factsheets: UAE, June 2024 edition](#) (updated monthly)

other's goods and services the same as those from other WTO members.³¹ A preferential trade agreement would allow for more favourable terms.

Following a consultation, in June 2022 the government [launched free trade negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\)](#), which includes the UAE. Total trade in goods and services between the GCC and the UK reached £41.4 billion in 2019. This would make the bloc, as a whole, the UK's tenth largest trading partner. However, trade fell to £30.4 billion in 2020.³²

The Commons International Trade Committee has called for the UK Government to publish the likely impact of any agreement on human rights within the GCC.³³ Talks are ongoing.³⁴

Gulf Strategy Fund (GSF)

The UK's GSF works in several Gulf countries, including the UAE. Through it, the UK supports UAE reforms to VAT and corporate taxation, explores trade partnership opportunities with the UK, and pursues collaborative action on climate change and the transition to net zero.³⁵

In 2021, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Democracy and Human Rights in the Gulf argued the fund should be suspended as it failed to contribute to progress on human rights in the region. The government disagreed, arguing all funding is subject to checks to ensure it does not impact negatively on human rights and said it will continue to raise human rights concerns with Gulf countries.³⁶

UK-UAE engagement

- **High level meetings:** in July and September 2024 Prime Minister Keir Starmer spoke to the UAE President and discussed increasing UK-UAE cooperation on defence, cyber security, and trade and investment.³⁷

In September 2024, the Foreign Secretaries of the UK and UAE met to discuss strengthening bilateral and investment ties, climate and clean energy, and de-escalation in the 2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict.³⁸

In 2022, then Prime Minister Boris Johnson visited the UAE. Mr Johnson set out the UK's concerns about Russia's actions in Ukraine, the need for

³¹ Department for International Development (DIT), [Trading under WTO terms](#), 31 December 2020

³² DIT, [Information note \[...\] relating to future trade negotiations between the UK and GCC](#), October 2021, p9 and [UK approach to negotiating a free trade agreement with the GCC](#), 22 June 2022

³³ International Trade Committee, [FTA negotiations with the GCC](#), HC 79, April 2023, para 86

³⁴ DIT, [Trade update: UK-GCC FTA](#), 22 March 2023

³⁵ FCDO, [GSF \[for 2022 to 2023\]](#), 30 March 2023

³⁶ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), section 2

³⁷ PMO, [PM call with UAE President](#), 7 July 2024 and [PM call with UAE President](#), 3 September 2023

³⁸ FCDO, [Joint statement following meeting \[of foreign ministers\]](#), 7 September 2024

stability in world energy markets, and the UK's willingness to bolster security and defence cooperation.³⁹

- **UK military forces** are based in the Gulf to protect shipping and conduct operations against groups such as Islamic State/Daesh. The UK has used al Minhad airbase to facilitate RAF missions. In 2024 the UK opened a permanent military facility, Donnelly Lines, at the airbase.⁴⁰
- **Investment:** in 2021 the UAE-UK Sovereign Investment Partnership (UAE-UK SIP) was launched. This is intended to support long-term investments. Announcements include a £10 billion agreement across technology, infrastructure, life sciences and energy transition.⁴¹
- **The Telegraph and Spectator media group:** in December 2023 the consortium RedBird IMI, which is backed by [Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan](#), the UAE's vice-president, effectively took control of the Telegraph media group when it repaid the owner's debts. The UAE Government had no direct involvement in the deal.

The move was criticised by some MPs for being a threat to media freedom, and in May 2024 the UK Government said it would legislate to stop foreign states owning newspapers.⁴² RedBird IMI, which had proposed an editorial trust board to preserve journalistic independence, then withdrew and the media group was put up for sale.⁴³ There are concerns that the debate has harmed UK-UAE relations. In May 2024 then Business and Trade Secretary, Kemi Badenoch, said there were "lessons to be learnt".⁴⁴

- **UK-UAE partnership to tackle illicit finance**, agreed in September 2021. This will involve increased intelligence sharing and joint operations against serious and organised crime networks.⁴⁵
- **Eight UK universities** have a branch campus in the UAE, including Heriot Watt and Birmingham University.⁴⁶ In academic year 2021/22 there were 8,085 UAE students studying at UK higher education institutions. Highest numbers were studying at the universities of Central Lancashire, Leeds, Anglia Ruskin, King's College London, and Manchester.⁴⁷

³⁹ PMO, [Prime Minister to visit UAE \[...\]](#), 14 May 2022 and [PM meeting with Crown Prince](#), 16 March 2022

⁴⁰ RAF, [The Princess Royal opens UK facility \[...\]](#) 6 March 2024; HC Deb, [25 March 2013](#), c939

⁴¹ DIT, [UAE to invest £10 billion in priority UK industries](#), 16 September 2021

⁴² HC Deb, [30 January 2024](#), cc723-31; HC Deb, [30 April 2024](#), cc162-9

⁴³ [Telegraph up for sale again \[...\]](#), The Telegraph, 30 April 2024

⁴⁴ [UK minister made secret trip to UAE after relations soured](#), FT, 22 May 2024

⁴⁵ Home Office, [New landmark partnership with UAE to tackle illicit finance](#), 17 September 2021

⁴⁶ Study UK, [Studying for a UK degree in the UAE](#)

⁴⁷ HESA, [Table 28- non-UK domiciled HE students by HE provider and country of domicile](#).

- **Strategic UK-UAE dialogue.** The first strategic dialogue was held in May 2023 and follows the 2021 [Partnership for the Future roadmap](#). The dialogue discussed renewable energy, trade, and security cooperation.⁴⁸
- **Sanctions:** The UAE has adopted a more neutral approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict (see next section). In 2023 the UK announced sanctions against some UAE-based entities for facilitating trade in sanctioned Russia oil. These included Dubai-based Paramount Energy & Commodities DMCC.⁴⁹ The UK, together with the US and European Union, says it has “stepped up” engagement with the UAE on ensuring Russia does not procure technologies and goods from third countries.⁵⁰

6 Foreign relations

Under the influence of Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE has become involved in several regional conflicts alongside Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states. It established ties with Israel in 2020.

United States

The United States has significant military ties with the UAE. Since 1994 the US and UAE have had a defence cooperation agreement (renewed in 2019) and the UAE is a member of the [Global Coalition to Defeat Islamic State/Daesh](#).⁵¹

There are several US bases in the country, including Jebel Ali port and Al Dhafra Air Base, with around 3,500 personnel stationed there (as of 2022). In 2024 the United States conducted a joint military exercise with the Royal Saudi Armed Forces and the UAE Armed Forces.⁵²

In 2021 the Biden Administration introduced a temporary pause on arms sales to the UAE, including the sale of 50 F-35 fighter jets. This sale remains unfulfilled. The US remains a significant arms supplier to the UAE, however. From 2019 to 2023 it provided 57% of UAE arms imports, followed by Turkey (10%) and France (9%).⁵³

While the UAE has intervened militarily in [Yemen’s civil war](#) against the Iran-backed Houthis, who control most of Yemen’s population areas, it is not participating in the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian mobilised in response to [Houthi attacks against civilian shipping in the Red Sea](#) in 2023/24.

⁴⁸ FCDO, [UK-UAE inaugural strategic dialogue 2023: Joint communiqué](#), 17 May 2023

⁴⁹ FCDO, [UK hits military suppliers propping up Russia’s war machine](#), 6 December 2023 and [UK cracks down on gold and oil networks propping up Russia’s war economy](#), 8 November 2023

⁵⁰ PQ 24234 [[Russia: sanctions](#)], 7 May 2024

⁵¹ Unless where stated, this section sourced from Congressional Research Service, [The UAE: Issues for US policy, RS21852](#), editions for 8 August 2024 and 17 August 2022

⁵² US Department of Defense, [US conducts large scale logistics exercise](#), 23 May 2024

⁵³ SIPRI, [Trends in international arms transfers, 2023](#), March 2024, p6

The only Arab state to be participating is Bahrain. The UAE has previously been targeted by drone and projectile strikes from the Houthis.⁵⁴

In 2024 the UAE reportedly restricted US military aircraft from targeting Iran-backed groups in the region from its UAE bases, in the context of the 2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict. The United States has instead sent aircraft to Qatar, which observers note may be less concerned about retaliatory attack from Iran-backed groups like the Houthis.⁵⁵

Russia

In 2022, an advisor to the UAE President said that the UAE would have “multilayered” foreign policy, with “our trade relations increasingly look[ing] to the east, while our primary security and investment relations [look to] the West”. He said that the country had “no interest” in choosing sides.⁵⁶

Like other Arab Gulf states, the UAE has adopted a more neutral position on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and has not applied sanctions against Russia. However, in 2022 and 2023 the UAE voted in favour of three non-binding UN General Assembly resolutions that condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine and called for an end to the conflict.⁵⁷ It has also played a mediatory role in the conflict, securing the exchange of prisoners.⁵⁸

Russia-UAE ties have been strengthening. In 2018, the two signed a strategic partnership, which included commitments to further security, energy, and economic cooperation.⁵⁹ In 2024, Russia said it was “hopeful” that the UAE and the Eurasian Economic Union (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan) would soon conclude a free trade agreement.⁶⁰

UAE Government statistics report that the value of non-oil UAE-Russia trade reached a record high of US\$11.2 billion in 2023, more than double the US\$5.2 billion achieved in 2021 and ten times higher than the US\$1 billion in 2010. However, in 2023 this was behind the UAE’s non-oil trade with China (US\$80.6 billion), India (US\$53.4 billion), the United States (US\$39.5 billion) and Saudi Arabia (US\$36.8 billion).⁶¹

⁵⁴ Commons Library, [UK and international response to the Houthis in the Red Sea](#)

⁵⁵ Arab Center Washington DC, [UAE restricts US military strikes from its territory](#), 22 May 2024

⁵⁶ [UAE has no interest in choosing sides between great powers](#), The National, 14 November 2022

⁵⁷ Washington Institute, [The UN resolution on Ukraine: how did the Middle east vote?](#), 2 March 2022; UN, [Territorial integrity of Ukraine: UNGA vote](#), October 2022, UN, [UNGA calls for immediate end to war in Ukraine](#), February 2023

⁵⁸ UAE Foreign Affairs Ministry, [230 captives released following seventh UAE mediation](#), 24 August 2024

⁵⁹ [UAE, Russia leaders affirm common ground in Moscow meeting](#), Al-Monitor, 4 June 2018

⁶⁰ [Russia expects free trade agreement between EAEU, UAE to be concluded shortly](#), 8 July 2024

⁶¹ UAE Ministry of the Economy, [International trade relations dashboard](#)

Since 2016, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and others have coordinated their oil production through [OPEC+](#) to maintain high global oil prices.⁶²

Since 2022, a rising number of Russians have purchased property in the UAE, and businesses and banks have also transferred their funds to the country.⁶³ In 2023 the US Administration described the UAE as a “country of focus,” where it is concerned about the continuing level of economic activity with Russia.⁶⁴ Western officials, including from the US and UK, are encouraging the UAE Government to halt the export of certain goods to Russia that can be used for military purposes, such as electronics.⁶⁵ In November 2023 the EU said that the UAE had agreed to restrict the re-export of sensitive goods used for military purposes in Ukraine.⁶⁶

The UAE and the BRICS

In 2006, Brazil, Russia, India, and China created the [BRIC group](#), and were joined by South Africa in 2010 (forming the “BRICS”). Russia views the group as a means to address the sanctions imposed against it in response to its actions in Ukraine and challenge the global influence of the United States. In January 2024 the UAE formally joined the group. Other members joining in 2024 included Iran and Egypt. Saudi Arabia has not formally confirmed it is a member but was invited to join in 2023. The expanded group represents around 28% of the global economy.⁶⁷

China

The UAE established diplomatic relations with China in 1984. In 2018, the two signed a comprehensive partnership, seen as the highest possible level of agreement with China in 2018 (all GCC states now have a “strategic” or “comprehensive” agreement with China). China is a larger trade partner of the UAE (measured in goods traded) than the US, India, or the European Union (see above on Russia for trade statistics). Most of China’s imports are accounted for by petroleum and petroleum products.⁶⁸

The UAE is participating in China’s [belt and road initiative](#), with a joint US\$10 billion UAE-China Joint Investment Fund established. Chinese investment projects include the Khalifa port in Abu Dhabi.⁶⁹ While in 2021 the Biden

⁶² Carnegie Endowment, [What’s driving Russia’s opportunities inroads?](#), 5 October 2022

⁶³ IPSI, [UAE investments in Russia: a testament to growing bilateral ties](#), 18 June 2024

⁶⁴ US Department of the Treasury, [Remarks by Assistant Secretary Elizabeth Rosenberg](#), 2 March 2023

⁶⁵ [US, allies press UAE over Russia trade, sanctions](#), Reuters, 1 May 2024

⁶⁶ [EU says UAE to curb key exports to Russia used in war in Ukraine](#), Bloomberg, 9 November 2024

⁶⁷ Carnegie Endowment, [BRICS+ and the Arab Gulf: the perks of membership](#), 4 January 2024

⁶⁸ Commons Library, [China and the US in the Middle East](#), pp17-18, 22

⁶⁹ J Fulton, [China-UAE relations in the Belt and Road era](#), *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol 9, 2019, pp253-68, at pp260-1

Administration reportedly warned that China may seek to construct a military facility at the port (to complement [its military base in Djibouti](#) in the Horn of Africa), no further or confirmatory statements have been issued.⁷⁰

China and the UAE have strengthened security ties. In August 2023, the two countries held the first joint air exercises in China, and this was followed by a second in 2024.⁷¹ The UAE has also stepped-up exercises with India.⁷²

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

In 2020, the UAE signed the [Abraham Accords](#), normalising its relations with Israel. It did so alongside Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Egypt and Jordan are the only other two Arab states to have established relations with Israel.

Speaking in 2021, the UAE ambassador to the US said that the accords were about regional stability, “preventing [Israeli] annexation” and “saving the two-state solution”. Ties deepened under the Accords. In 2022 the UAE and Israel signed a free trade agreement. The value of the UAE-Israel non-oil trade also increased from US\$160 million in 2020 to US\$2.3 billion in 2023.⁷³

During the 2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict, the UAE and Israel have retained diplomatic relations. Their leaders spoke in October 2023.⁷⁴ The UAE described the Hamas assault on 7 October against Israel as a “serious and grave escalation” and has called for an “immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza” to help address the humanitarian situation and form the basis for a “binding roadmap” for a Palestinian state.⁷⁵

The UAE has reportedly signalled that it is willing to form part of a multinational coalition to maintain security in Gaza after the conflict if invited to do so by a reformed Palestinian Authority. No formal statements or agreements have been made. The Israeli Government opposes a role for the Palestinian Authority but has called for Arab states to provide a security force.⁷⁶ The UAE considers Hamas to be a terrorist organisation.⁷⁷

Iran and Iran-backed groups

There has been tension between Iran and the UAE. This reflects the long-standing monarchy-republic divide in the Middle East, [politicisation of the Sunni and Shia rivalry](#) (Sunni Muslims are the majority in the UAE and Shia

⁷⁰ [Secret Chinese port project in Persian Gulf](#), Wall Street Journal, 19 November 2021

⁷¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, [UAE combat aircraft in China](#), 22 July 2024

⁷² [UAE troops in India for first joint drill with ground forces](#), Arab News, 2 January 2024

⁷³ UAE Ministry of the Economy, [International trade relations dashboard](#); Chatham House, [The Abraham Accords and Israel-UAE normalisation](#), March 2023

⁷⁴ Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, [PM Netanyahu speaks with UAE President](#), 16 October 2023

⁷⁵ [UAE says permanent ceasefire in Gaza is ‘utmost priority’](#), The National, 11 June 2024

⁷⁶ [The UAE tries to pull off an “Abraham redux” in Gaza](#), The Washington Post, 23 July 2024; [US, Israel and the UAE held a secret meeting on Gaza war “day after” plan](#), Axios, 23 July 2024

⁷⁷ Atlantic Council, [Do the Israelis know about the Basus war?](#), 18 October 2023

Muslims are in Iran), and [Iranian support for armed groups across the region](#), including Hezbollah in Lebanon, and its nuclear programme.⁷⁸ The UAE also claims sovereignty over three islands in the Arab/Persian Gulf which are administered by Iran.⁷⁹

However, the UAE has long been the Arab Gulf state with the greatest economic ties with Iran (despite American sanctions against Iran). In 2023/24 Iranian trade data reports the UAE was its second largest trade partner (after China), with total trade standing at US\$24 billion, up from US\$11 billion in 2020/21 and higher than the US\$22 billion in 2012.⁸⁰

In 2016, the UAE had downgraded its diplomatic ties with Iran after Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations. This followed an attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran and Saudi Arabia's execution of a Shia religious leader convicted of terrorism charges. The UAE began re-engaging with Iran in 2019 on both security and economic topics (Saudi Arabia restored ties in 2023).⁸¹

In 2015 the UAE participated in a Saudi-led military coalition to intervene against the Houthis in Yemen, who have Iranian backing. The Houthis have used missiles and drones to attack several sites in the UAE. The conflict has largely stalemated, with a ceasefire in 2022 and continuing negotiations.⁸²

In 2022 the UAE also restored relations with Syria's Bashar Al-Assad, despite American opposition. Assad has been backed militarily by Russia and Iran in the Syrian civil war. The UAE had cut off ties in 2011. Assad has visited the UAE twice since 2022.⁸³

Other Arab Gulf States

The UAE is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), whose members include Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain. The GCC aims to build political and economic ties between its members.

The largest economies and populous countries in the GCC are the UAE and [Saudi Arabia](#). Both are significant oil producers, have close security ties with the United States, oppose Iran's support for armed groups and intervened in Yemen in 2015 against the Houthis, and boycotted Qatar in 2017 (see below).

However, with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE seeking to diversify their economies they are competing for foreign investment and for influence in other countries, including Sudan and Yemen. In Yemen, the UAE backs the

⁷⁸ Louise Fawcett, *International relations of the Middle East*, 2016, pp225-233

⁷⁹ Arab Center Washington DC, [Russia, Iran and the territorial dispute with the UAE](#), 16 August 2023

⁸⁰ [UAE boosts trade with Iran after eased restrictions](#), FT, 9 September 2023

⁸¹ Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), July 2024, section 3; [Iran's top security official in UAE](#), Reuters, 16 March 2023; Gulf International Forum, [The UAE-Iran rapprochement](#), July 2022

⁸² Commons Library, [Yemen in 2023: conflict and status of peace talks](#), November 2023, section 1

⁸³ Commons Library, [Syria's civil war: A future under Assad?](#), section 3

separatist Southern Transitional Council, which is seeking a new southern Yemen state, while Saudi Arabia backs a unified Yemen.⁸⁴

In Sudan, despite a shared aim for greater stability [since the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in 2019](#) (Sudanese ruler from 1989), the UAE is reported to be backing the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) (the UAE Government denies this) while Saudi Arabia has adopted a more mediatory role as a means to retain influence.⁸⁵ The RSF have been fighting the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Sovereign Council of Sudan, which replaced al-Bashir, and is backed by Turkey, Egypt, and Iran.⁸⁶

The UAE is politically close to Bahrain, in 2011 sending forces alongside Saudi Arabia to suppress protests against Bahrain's monarchy during the [Arab Spring](#).⁸⁷

In 2017, Saudi Arabia led the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt to cut ties with Qatar and introduce a blockade, accusing it of supporting terrorism. Qatar rejected the accusation and refused to meet demands to curtail its engagement with Iran and to close down the news-channel Al Jazeera. An agreement ending the dispute was signed in 2021. It detailed no actions for Qatar to take.⁸⁸

The Taliban in Afghanistan

In August 2024 the UAE accepted the Taliban ambassador from Afghanistan, becoming the second country after China to do so. When the Taliban controlled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, the UAE, alongside Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, were the only states to extend formal diplomatic recognition.

The Taliban regime is largely isolated internationally, and the United States, UK and others apply sanctions against it. The UAE said that the Taliban ambassador was accepted to help with “building bridges to help the people of Afghanistan” and promoting regional stability.⁸⁹

Since 2022, a UAE company has managed regular flights in Afghanistan and between Afghanistan and the UAE. The UAE has also provided humanitarian aid and hosts former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Arab Center Washington, [Divergent Saudi-Emirates agendas](#), 15 May 2024

⁸⁵ [Sudan accuses UAE of arming rivalries and prolonging war](#), AP, 12 September 2024

⁸⁶ Foreign Policy, [How Sudan became a Saudi-UAE proxy war](#), 12 July 2023

⁸⁷ Foreign Policy Council, [Bahrain: The epicentre of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry](#)², 2018

⁸⁸ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, section 5.1

⁸⁹ [UAE accepts Taliban government ambassador](#), France 24, 23 August 2024

⁹⁰ Gulf International forum, [The UAE's complicated Taliban outreach](#), 4 June 2024; [Why did the Taliban's Sirajuddin Haqqani visit the UAE?](#), The Diplomat, 7 June 2024

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