

Research Briefing

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United Arab Emirates (UAE): Introductory country profile

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Summary

Unless stated,
sources were
accessed June 2022

The UK has strong diplomatic, military, and economic ties with UAE. In 2022, it plans to negotiate a trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose six members include the country. The UK Government has also raised concerns for human rights in the UAE, including freedom of religion and belief.

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

- **2020 Population:** 9.9 million (UK: 67.2 million)
- **2020 Gross domestic product (GDP):** US\$359 million (UK: US\$2,760 billion).
- **2020 GDP per capita (GDP divided by population):** US\$36,300 (UK: US\$41,000).
- **2021 GDP growth:** 2.3% (UK: 7.4%). **2022 GDP growth:** 4.2% (UK: 3.7%).¹

¹ Data from [World Bank](#) and International Monetary Fund, [World economic outlook](#), April 2022, pp138, 142. All sources accessed 16 and 17 June 2022 unless stated.

1

Economy

The UAE is a high-income economy, heavily reliant on migrant labour.

Oil is important to the UAE's economy, constituting 30% of its GDP and 41% of its public revenues.

This means changes in oil prices have a significant impact on the Government's programmes and revenues, which has resultingly sought to prioritise diversifying the country's economy. The UAE introduced a Value-Added Tax (VAT) as an alternative revenue source 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.

In addition to oil, other significant sectors in the UAE 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).

The IMF expects a recovery for oil economies in 2022, though there are signs of higher global food prices due to the war in Ukraine starting to emerge.

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. This is still in progress. It will provide for freedom of movement, residence and access to social services for GCC citizens.

The GCC has also entered negotiations for free trade agreements with the EU, India, Japan, and the UK (see page 7, below, for the UK).²

UAE Centennial 2071

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

² World Trade Organization, [Trade policy review: UAE](#), February 2022, paras 1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.10 (GDP), 2.36 and 2.48 (GCC), 1.14 (taxation); International Monetary Fund, [Regional economic outlook Middle East Central Asia](#), April 2022, p2 (2022 outlook)

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

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. From their seven members, the Council elect a President and Vice-President.

The President then appoints a Prime Minister and Cabinet, who are accountable to the Council.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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.

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

Initial statements have stressed continuity, with an attempt to balance engagement with the US, China, and Russia. This in order to continue to diversify the UAE's allies, which includes strengthening ties with Israel as security against Iran.⁷

⁴ Europa World Plus, [UAE: Constitution and government](#), accessible via a Commons Library login

⁵ Al-Jazeera, [UAE President Sheikh bin Zayed Al Nahyan dies aged 73](#), 13 May 2022

⁶ Al-Jazeera, [Who is Mohamed bin Zayed, the UAE's new president?](#), 14 May 2022

⁷ Al-Jazeera, [Analysis: With MBZ as president, is it time for a US-UAE reset?](#), 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 leadership of each Emirate—it is now half elected.

The FNC views 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 Council take place through an electoral college. The size of the electoral college has increased from 6,600 people in 2006 to 337,000 in 2019. The electoral colleges comprise UAE nationals selected by the National Electoral Committees. Half are women.

At the 2019 elections, 7 of the 20 elected seats were won by women. An additional 13 women were appointed to meet the Government's aim for 50% representation. Political parties are banned.⁸

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Political rights

The US State Department's 2021 [report on human rights in the UAE](#) cited ongoing restrictions on political participation:

- **Free expression:** Constitutional protections for freedom of speech exist, but do not include the freedom to criticise government ministers or to make statements which may create or encourage social unrest.
- **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 Council, appointed by the President, licences, and censors all publications. This includes foreign works and online material.
- **Freedom of assembly/association:** The law allows for limited freedom of assembly, but the US State Department says the Government imposes "significant restrictions" on this. 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.⁹
- **Imprisoned dissidents:** In 2012, several groups of political activists were arrested by the Government. 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

⁸ Europa World Plus, [UAE: Recent history and Constitution and Government](#)

⁹ US State Department, [2021 country reports on human rights practices: UAE](#), April 2022, sects A & B

UAE parliament, while others were members of a group affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (see page 11 on the Qatar crisis for more). The UAE has accused them of crimes against national security.¹⁰

4 Human rights

In 2021, the UAE Government launched a [new National Human Rights Authority to promote human rights](#). It states it operates independently of government, and that all citizens, residents, and visitors can submit complaints and proposals.¹¹ International rights groups have expressed scepticism of whether the body will drive reform, given the limitations on civil society.¹²

Other concerns include the below.

- **Death sentences continue to be imposed.** According to Amnesty International, there were at least nine recorded death sentences in 2021 and at least one recorded execution. This compared to at least four sentences in 2020. 2021 saw the first execution for three years.¹³
- The UAE is judged by the World Economic Forum as making significant progress on **gender equality**. Its laws allow for equal pay, the ability for women to stand and vote in elections, and new protections have been introduced against domestic violence.

However, 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) and men are allowed to unilaterally terminate a marriage without recourse to court (unlike women).¹⁴

- **Religious freedom:** The UAE's constitution says Islam is the country's official religion and allows for freedom of worship. Laws ban blasphemy and proselytizing by non-Muslims, and reportedly some foreigners have been deported or arrested for insulting Islam. Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities have been able to establish places of worship.¹⁵

¹⁰ Amnesty International, [UAE: Dissidents arbitrarily detained beyond their sentence must be immediately released](#), 30 May 2022

¹¹ National Human Rights Institution, [Homepage](#)

¹² DW, [UAE's new human rights watch institute: Real change or 'image washing'?](#), September 2021.

¹³ Amnesty International, [Death sentences and executions 2021](#), May 2022 (PDF), pp40, 50

¹⁴ 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

¹⁵ US Department of State, [2020 report on international religious freedom: UAE](#), May 2021

- **Worker rights:** There have been consistent complaints that migrants, who constitute around 90% of the population, are vulnerable to exploitation as workers.

Like other Gulf states, the UAE operates the kafala (“sponsorship”) system. This means workers enter the country only after gaining sponsorship by an employer. The country has introduced reforms, allowing workers to change jobs or leave the country without their employer’s permission. However, there are concerns that the risk of trafficking into forced labour remains high and that domestic workers remain particularly vulnerable.¹⁶

- **Same-sex relationships are illegal and can carry the death penalty in the case of men.** The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) state LGBT+ persons lack protections in law, and there are “numerous” cases of persecution of LGBT+ people.¹⁷

What’s the UK Government assessment?

In 2022, the Foreign Office Minister, Lord Ahmad, said he has had “very positive” discussions with the UAE on different aspects of human rights. These include issues of freedom of religion and belief. He has undertaken to raise concerns directly and privately with the UAE Government.¹⁸

In 2021, the UK Government had also raised the cases of detained human rights workers, including Dr Nasser bin Ghaith, Ahmed Mansoor, and Mohammed al-Roken with the UAE Government.¹⁹

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UK-UAE relations

The UAE gained its independence from the UK in 1971.

Plans for a trade agreement

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 other’s goods and services the same as those from other WTO members.²⁰ A preferential trade agreement would allow for more favourable terms.

¹⁶ Carnegie, [The UAE’s kafala system: Harmless or human trafficking?](#), 7 July 2020

¹⁷ ILGA, [State-sponsored homophobia, 2020](#), December 2020, p138

¹⁸ HL Deb, [27 April 2022](#), c263

¹⁹ PQ 71354 [on [UAE: Prisoners](#)], 19 November 2021

²⁰ Department for International Development (DIT), [Trading under WTO terms](#), updated 31 December 2020

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. The issue of human rights is likely to be an area of scrutiny.²¹

UK-UAE trade in 2021

- **Trade with the UK:** UAE was the UK's 24th largest trading partner in 2021.
- **Total UK-UAE trade (exports and imports):** £13.1 billion in 2021, up £474 million from 2020 (when it was £836 million).
- **Top five UK goods exported to UAE:** Power generators, jewellery, unspecified goods (eg defence equipment, low value trade, non-monetary metals), cars, telecoms and sound equipment.
- **Top five UK goods imported from UAE:** Refined oil, power generators, jewellery, telecoms and sound equipment, and miscellaneous metal manufactures.²²

Notes: Data on the top five services traded is not available. During this period, trade was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and related health measures.

Gulf Strategy Fund (GSF)

The UK's GSF works in several Gulf countries, including the UAE. Through it, the UK supports border protection, combatting illicit finance, and helping to combat violent extremism. UK regional programmes also support tax reform and environmental management with the aim of increasing investment opportunities for UK companies.²³

Through the GSF, the UK also provided funding to support Expo 2020 Dubai. This was held from October 2020 to March 2022. Businesses from 190 countries attended the event.²⁴

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

²¹ DIT, [Information note on consultation 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

²² DIT, [Trade and investment factsheets: UAE, June 2022 edition](#) (updated monthly)

²³ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [GSF programme summary](#) [for 2020-21], 24 June 2021

²⁴ PQ 27065 [on [World Expo: UAE](#)], 12 July 2021

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.²⁵

Government-to-Government visits in 2022

In May 2022, Prime Minister Boris Johnson visited the UAE. He reaffirmed the commitment of the UK to work with the new UAE President.²⁶

This followed a visit with Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan, then Crown Prince, in March 2022. In the meeting, the Prime Minister set out the UK's concerns for Russia's actions in Ukraine, the need for stability in world energy markets, and the UK's willingness to bolster security and defence cooperation.²⁷

Other UK-UAE engagement

- **UK military forces** are based in the Gulf to protect shipping and conduct operations against groups such as Islamic State/Daesh. The RAF has use of Al Minhad airbase in the UAE.²⁸
- **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. This was agreed in September 2021.²⁹
- **Partnership to tackle illicit finance**, agreed in September 2021. This will involve increased intelligence sharing and joint operations against serious and organised crime networks.³⁰
- **Eight UK universities** have a branch campus in the UAE, including Heriot Watt and the University of Birmingham.³¹

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 Gulf states and increased its engagement with Israel.

²⁵ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, section 2

²⁶ Number Ten, [Prime Minister to visit UAE \[...\]](#), 14 May 2022

²⁷ Number Ten, [PM meeting with Crown Prince of the UAE](#), 16 March 2022

²⁸ Commons Library, [UK forces in the Middle East region](#), CBP8794, p3

²⁹ DIT, [UAE to invest £10 billion in priority UK industries](#), 16 September 2021

³⁰ Home Office, [New landmark partnership with UAE to tackle illicit finance](#), 17 September 2021

³¹ Study UK, [Studying for a UK degree in the UAE](#)

United States

Like the UK, the US has significant military ties with the UAE and shared concerns over Iranian influence. Around 4,000 US military personnel are based in the country. The US also has a defence cooperation agreement with the UAE, which supports military cooperation and mutual planning.³²

There have been some tensions in the UAE-US relationship, however. These include a fear that the US is increasingly focused on the Pacific.³³ The Biden administration has said the Chinese-owned Huawei 5G telecommunications network, which the UAE uses, is a potential security risk and has called for the UAE to remove it from its networks by 2025.³⁴

Russia

Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE has taken a more neutral position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The UAE abstained on a Security Council vote condemning the invasion on 25 February 2022 but voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution in March (the latter is non-binding).³⁵

The UAE's decision to abstain may be linked to Russia's support for a resolution to impose an arms embargo on the Houthis in Yemen, who have conducted recent drone attacks against the UAE (see below, under Iran). Both Russia and the UAE deny the transaction.³⁶

The UAE has not imposed sanctions on Russia, leading to a rising number of Russians purchasing property in the county and establishing businesses.³⁷

Iran

Regional tensions with Iran are high, due to its nuclear programme and support for groups hostile to Gulf states such as the Houthis in Yemen and Shia Muslim militias in Iraq.

The UAE has supported the Saudi-led offensive in Yemen against the Houthis, who are aligned with Iran and likely to gain material support from them. The UAE started disengaging from 2019, however, as the conflict stalemated.³⁸ In January/February 2022 there were several attacks on the UAE from Yemen.³⁹

³² Congressional Research Service, [The UAE: Issues for US policy. RS21852](#), updated 10 May 2022

³³ Atlantic Council, [Russia's war in Ukraine is making Saudi Arabia and the UAE rethink how they deal with US pressure over China](#), 26 April 2022

³⁴ Bloomberg, [Biden prods UAE to dump Huawei, sowing doubts on key F-35 sale](#), 11 June 2021

³⁵ Atlantic Council, [Russia's war in Ukraine is making Saudi Arabia and the UAE rethink how they deal with US pressure over China](#), 26 April 2022

³⁶ Reuters, [UN arms embargo imposed on Yemen's Houthis amid vote questions](#), 28 February 2022

³⁷ BBC News, [Wealthy Russians flee to Dubai to avoid sanctions](#), 5 May 2022

³⁸ Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP9504, p16

³⁹ Commons Library, [Yemen in 2021/22: Conflict and peace](#), CBP9327, pp8, 12-13

Like other Gulf states, the UAE was critical of the 2015 agreement reached with Iran to limit its nuclear programme. The UAE has called for any new deal to be widened to also target Iran's wider regional activity.⁴⁰

Israel

In 2020, the UAE signed the Abraham Accords, normalising its relations with Israel. Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan are the only other Arab countries to have done this.

Both Israel and the UAE share concerns for Iran's nuclear programme, its support for non-state groups in the Middle East, and maritime attacks in the Gulf. Cooperation has since increased: A free trade agreement between the UAE and Israel was signed in May 2022.⁴¹

Other 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.⁴²

The UAE is close to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In 2011, it sent forces to Bahrain alongside the Saudis to suppress protests against Bahrain's monarchy.⁴³

It also backed the GCC's decision to isolate Qatar from 2017 to 2021 (see box).

What was the "Qatar crisis"?

In June 2017, some GCC states and others cut diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed limits on trade and movement. The countries alleged the country supported terrorism, including through being too close to Iran and supporting political Islam organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

In contrast to other Gulf states, for example, Qatar had supported the Egyptian Presidency of Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Brotherhood, while Gulf states backed his overthrow in 2013. The Brotherhood has ties with groups across the Middle East, but Saudi Arabia and the UAE have worked to suppress it, seeing it as a threat to their regimes.

An agreement ending the dispute was signed in January 2021. It detailed no actions for Qatar to take.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP9504, p22

⁴¹ US Institute for Peace, [Historic UAE-Israel trade deal proves Abraham Accords' resilience](#), June 2022

⁴² Al-Jazeera, [What is the GCC?](#), 4 December 2017

⁴³ Europa World Plus, Bahrain: Constitution and contemporary political history

⁴⁴ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, section 5.1

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Further resources

General background/profiles

- Europa World Plus, [UAE profile](#). Provides economic and political data and describes key events. Accessible via a Commons Library log-in.
- CIA, [Middle East: UAE](#). Headline statistical information on population, economy, and energy.
- BBC News, [UAE profile](#), May 2022. Events to 2020.
- Congressional Research Service, [The UAE: Issues for US policy](#), RS21852. 25-page briefing on politics, foreign policy, and economic issues from the perspective of US-UAE relations.

UK Parliament proceedings

- HC Deb, [Abraham Accords](#), 25 October 2021, cc113-18.

Human rights: General issues

- Amnesty International, [Human rights UAE 2021](#). Summary of nine key issues.
- Human Rights Watch, [UAE: Events of 2021](#). Overview of political opposition, prison conditions, migrants, LGBT+ people and women.
- US State Department, [2021 country reports on human rights practices: UAE](#), April 2022. Wide ranging report on political and other rights.
- UN Human Rights Council, [Universal periodic reviews: UAE](#). The Council conducts regular reviews of human rights in every country. The UAE's most recent was 2018. The next is due in 2023.
- [Emirates Detainees Advocacy Centre](#). Covers human rights activists detained in the country.
- The [Gulf Centre for Human Rights](#). Based in Lebanon, it promotes human rights in Gulf countries, including the UAE.

Human rights: Specific issues

- Reporters without Borders, [UAE](#). Work on media freedom.
- Borgen Magazine, [Women's rights in the UAE](#), August 2021. Summary focusing on progress and continuing discrimination.

- Human Rights Watch, [UAE: Greater progress needed on women's rights](#), March 2021. Assessment on reforms and continuing discrimination.
- International Labour Organization (ILO), [The ILO in the UAE](#). Summary of the ILO's work in the country and efforts on worker rights.
- US State Department, [2020 report on international religious freedom: UAE](#), May 2021. Describes legal and social practices on religion.

Trade and economic profiles

- Department for International Trade, [Trade and investment factsheet: UAE](#), updated monthly. Provides a 15-page overview of the UK's trade with UAE.
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Economic factsheet: UAE](#), December 2021. Two-page summary with key economic indicators.
- Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, [Submission to the International Trade Committee on UK trade negotiations: Agreement with Gulf Cooperation Council](#), January 2022. Describes human rights issues raised by the potential trade agreement with the UK.
- International Monetary Fund, [Economic prospects and policy challenges for the Gulf Cooperation Council](#), December 2021. Discusses the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in oil prices, and outlook for 2022.

Foreign relations

- Council on Foreign Relations, [United Arab Emirates](#). Publishes analysis of the UAE's foreign policy, including Gulf relations.
- Commons Library, [Yemen in 2021/22: Conflict and peace](#), CBP9327
- Commons Library, [Alternatives to Russian oil: Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and Venezuela?](#), CBP9518
- Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP9504

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