

UAE Public Opinion: Still Friendly to United States, Split on Israel, Hostile to Iran

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

A fresh opinion poll of UAE citizens, commissioned by The Washington Institute and conducted by a reliable independent regional firm in April 2023, reveals some of the most pro-American and anti-Iranian attitudes of any Arab country surveyed lately. On normalization with Israel, views are more mixed—yet surprisingly moderate, given this poll’s timing during Ramadan.

Most Say the United States Is the UAE’s Partner or Friend; Specific Priorities Vary

The large majority of Emirati citizens today say the United States is either a “friend” (17%), a “security partner” (30%), or an “economic partner” (35%) of their country. Asked more specifically about their top priority for American policy in the region, responses divide as follows: “Do more to help resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict” gets 31%, slightly more than in recent years. Next comes “do more to help counter the threats we face from Iran” (26%), followed closely by “do more to help promote democracy and human rights in Arab countries (21%) and then “provide more economic aid and investment in Arab countries” (19%).

China and Russia also Rate High; Three-Fourths even Prefer Russian Victory over Ukraine

At the same time, most Emiratis now see both China and Russia in an even more favorable light. China is perceived mainly as an economic partner (62%), more so than a security partner (just 10%) or a friend (18%). The comparable figures for Russia are divided somewhat more evenly: economic partner, 42%; security partner, 32%; friend, 21%.

Still more unexpected is that three-fourths (77%) of Emiratis agree at least “somewhat” with this purposely provocative proposition: “In the war going on now between Russia and Ukraine, the best outcome would be a Russian victory, including the annexation of significant Ukrainian territory to Russia.” It should be noted, however, that this

survey was conducted well before Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was invited, with great publicity, to address the latest Arab Summit meeting in neighboring Saudi Arabia.

Three-Fourths Oppose Fire Against Israel from Gaza; Nearly Half Accept Economic Ties

A striking finding from this poll is that the solid majority (76%) of UAE citizens say that “firing missiles or rockets against Israel from Gaza”—as in fact occurred a few weeks after the survey was taken—would have “negative effects on the region.” And on a different yet possibly related question, an almost equally large majority (65%) foresee positive effects from “the mass protests by some Israelis against the new Netanyahu government there.”

Attitudes toward economic relations with Israel are more mixed, but still relatively favorable. Almost half of Emiratis (45%), about the same as on similar questions in previous polls, agree that “if it would help our economy, it would be acceptable to have some business deals with Israeli companies.” Along the same lines, 41% predict some positive effects from “the agreement on a maritime boundary between Israel and Lebanon.”

But Most Remain Skeptical on Cooperation with Israel *Against Iran*

However, on some other, apparently more controversial or emotional normalization questions, Emirati public opinion is notably less positive. Contrary to common outside misconception about the Abraham Accords, only a small minority (21%) agree with this proposition: “Despite our differences with Israel on other issues, some Arab states should cooperate with Israel against the threats we face from Iran.” Three-fourths (74%) agree at least “somewhat” with this deliberately pointed assertion: “In case of an earthquake or other natural disaster, as we just saw in Syria and Turkey, Arab states should reject any humanitarian aid from Israel.” And most broadly, asked about the regional effects of the Abraham Accords, just one-quarter (27%) now view that as positive—about the same as in previous polls over the past two years.

Iran Seen as Adversary by Large Majority, Though Fewer Want War or Matching Nukes

In sharp contrast, Emiratis overwhelmingly view Iran as either a “competitor” (30%) or even an “enemy” (55%) of their own country. This is one of the few questions on which a statistically significant sectarian divergence appears. While a mere 9% of Sunni Emiratis say Iran is a friend or partner, the corresponding figure among the UAE small minority of Shia citizens is, at 34%, considerably higher.

Along similar lines, just one-third (35%) of Emiratis overall predict positive effects from “the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran.” By comparison, a somewhat larger proportion (46%), though still a minority, expect positive effects from “the moves by some Arab governments”—including the UAE—“to restore relations with Assad in Syria.”

Nevertheless, these heavily negative opinions of Iran do not mean a widespread popular desire to confront it militarily, either by outside powers or by Arab states themselves. On the contrary; Emiratis overwhelmingly agree—including nearly half who “strongly agree”—with this judgment: “A major American or Israeli military strike against Iran would be too dangerous, and so a bad idea for our country.” Conversely, only a minority (39%) of Emirati citizens, whether Sunni or Shiite, agree with the following assertion: “Since Iran is now getting so close to having a nuclear bomb, it’s time for an Arab country to get one too.”

Methodological Notes

This analysis is based on findings from a survey among a representative national sample of 1,000 adult citizens in the UAE, selected by standard probability procedures. Out of a total country population of around 10 million, only about 1 million are citizens. The rest are mostly guest workers (and sometimes their families) from other Arab, Asian or European countries, with temporary residence permits. Most other Arab polls, unlike this one, do not distinguish between citizens and expatriates.

Strict quality controls and assurances of confidentiality were provided throughout by the highly qualified, experienced, and entirely apolitical regional commercial company that conducted the fieldwork. As for demographics, it should be noted that two-thirds of UAE citizens reside in just two of the seven emirates: Abu Dhabi (approximately 40%) and Dubai (25%); sampling reflected those proportions. However, statistical analysis shows only very modest attitudinal differences by emirate, or even by age (under or over 30 years old).

The margin of error for a sample of this size and nature is approximately 3 percent. However, the proportional subsample of Shiite citizens is so small ($N = 88$) that those figures should be considered indicative, rather than statistically precise. Additional methodological details are readily available on The Washington Institute's [interactive polling data platform \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform). ♦

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