

Half of Emiratis Approve Domestic Policies, But Just 20% Want Israeli Ties

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#), [Shaina Katz \(/experts/shaina-katz\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.

[Shaina Katz \(/experts/shaina-katz\)](#)

Shaina Katz is a research assistant at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



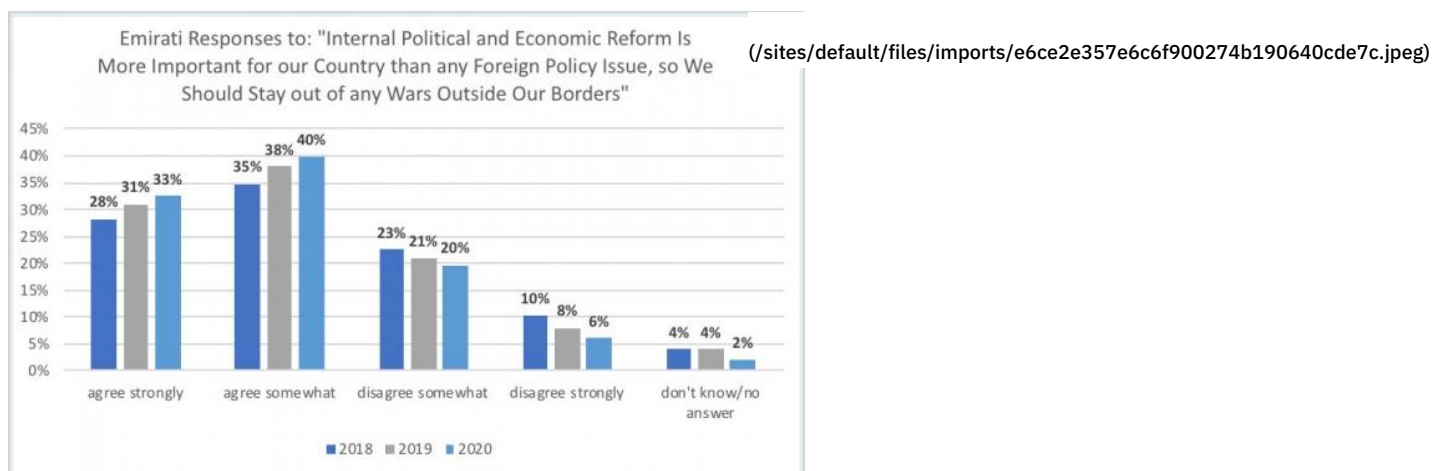
Brief Analysis

The Emirati public is split about how much the government should be doing about public health.

Fresh polling data from a June 2020 survey reveals that Emiratis are more concerned with domestic than foreign policy issues—though a plurality say their government is doing “too much” to ensure public health these days, presumably reflecting some resentment over Coronavirus lockdowns. Internationally, around half of Emiratis continue to view good ties with the United States as important, now about the same as those who see relations with China as important. The UAE’s involvement in the escalating Libyan conflict seems to be reflected in contrasting attitudes toward Russia and Turkey, the major intervening powers there.

For the most recent polling data on the UAE, [click here. \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uae-public-shifts-toward-peace-israel-and-qatar\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uae-public-shifts-toward-peace-israel-and-qatar)

The majority (73%) of Emiratis say that their government should focus more on internal reforms over any foreign policy issue, which is consistent with polling results from the past several years. In this context, the Emirati government generally receives relatively high marks for its performance on a number of domestic issues. Over half of the Emirati public is satisfied with the government’s ability to maintain law and order in public places and to prevent extremism. Nevertheless, approximately half voice some concern as to whether the government is paying enough attention to public opinion about its policies.



Overall, the Emirati public is about as inclined toward complacency as toward dissent. When asked about the anti-government protests in Iraq and Lebanon, around half say this will have negative consequences for the region. Around half also say “it’s a good thing we don’t have big street

demonstrations here, as in some other Arab countries.” And a solid majority of Emiratis (67%) also agree with the notion: “When I think about what’s happening in Yemen or Syria, I feel that our own situation is not so bad.”

Coronavirus Controversies: Lockdowns and Conspiracy Theories

On the Coronavirus crisis specifically, as the UAE starts to reopen and infections climb, the Emirati public is split about how much the government should be doing about public health. When asked to evaluate this, a plurality (40%) of Emiratis say their government is doing “too much” in this regard. At the same time, remarkably, this supposedly sophisticated public inclines toward conspiracy theories on the sudden pandemic: around 70% of Emiratis say that Coronavirus is “something our foreign enemies deliberately started.” Out of the publics surveyed (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, the UAE, and the Palestinians), Saudi Arabia was the only one that exceeded the UAE’s proportion.

Foreign Policy Partners: China and the United States Roughly Tied; Iran Unpopular Even with Shia Minority

On the foreign front, the Coronavirus crisis has arguably created additional opportunities for cooperation with China, but the Emirati public is divided on the importance of continuing to build ties there. Approximately half of Emiratis say that relations with China are not important. By comparison, 45% of the Emirati public still say it is important to maintain good relations with the United States. This latter figure has remained little changed over the past three years.

Regarding U.S. involvement in the region, there is only a slight sectarian divide between the majority Sunni and minority Shia communities. Among the Sunni majority—which make up 85% of the total Emirati population—28% believe the most useful thing the United States could do in the region is increase its “practical opposition to Iran’s influence and activities” (28%). Statistically equal, with only a one-point difference, is for the United States to push harder to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (27%).

Among the Shia minority, the top two choices are flipped in importance, yet not by a large margin. The Israeli-Palestinian issue ranked slightly higher (29%) but countering Iranian influence came in as a close second (24%). Yemen and Libya were nearly as salient, as evidenced by the 23% who maintain that the top American priority should be to “do more to find a diplomatic solution to the crises in Yemen and Libya.” Apparently, the heavy U.S. focus on “maximum pressure” against Iran is not shared by the majority of the Emirati public, whether Sunni or Shia.

On one dramatic related issue, however, a sectarian divide is clearly apparent. Around half of Emirati Sunnis responded that the U.S. killing of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 will have positive effects on the region. In contrast, the number among Shia respondents who felt the same was just 27%. Similarly, in a November 2019 survey, only 6% of Sunni Emiratis felt it important to maintain good ties with Tehran—compared with 47% among the UAE’s Shiite minority.

Pessimism on Palestinian-Israeli Issues, Despite Official Initiatives

In general, the Israeli-Palestinian issue has risen modestly in salience to Emiratis lately, probably because of the ongoing debate over normalization and possible Israeli annexation in the West Bank. In polling conducted in October 2018, a mere 14% ranked the Israeli-Palestinian conflict first on a list of possible priorities for U.S. regional policy. Today, that percentage has doubled: 28% pick “pushing for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict” as their top priority for U.S. attention in the region.

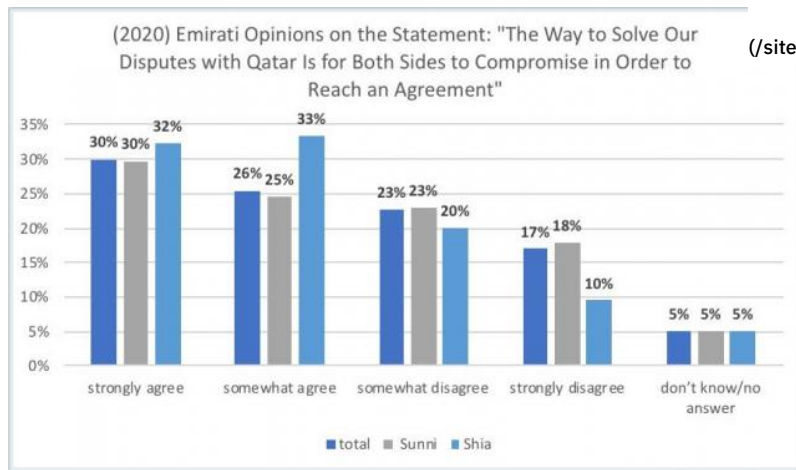
Yet when asked about the Trump administration’s recent peace plan, only 12% foresaw it as potentially having a positive impact on the region—a notable difference from the official cautious welcome for this American proposal. Emiratis also express little optimism about the new Israeli government elected last spring, with 66% saying that the election would have negative consequences for the region.

On relations with Israelis themselves, approximately 80% of Emiratis disagree with this statement: “people who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so.” Here, too, the popular majority differs from current official UAE policy. However, this majority is smaller than the comparable proportions in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, who also disapprove of contacts with Israelis. And 40 percent of Emiratis, more than in the other countries just polled, agree that “the Palestinians and Israelis are both to blame for their continuing conflict.”

Public Backs Policy on Turkey, But Not on Qatar or Syria

In response to the escalating violence in Libya, the people seem to reflect their government’s support of the Russian-aligned leader, Khalifa Haftar, in his ongoing conflict against the UN-installed Libyan government backed by Turkey. A significant majority of Emiratis (70%) do not see relations with Turkey as important while about 50% support maintaining good relations with Russia.

On two other noteworthy regional issues, however, most citizens of the UAE differ with their government’s approach. While June marked the three-year anniversary of the intra-GCC feud, with little hope for a resolution in the near future, a narrow majority (56%) of Emiratis continue to agree with the statement: “The way to solve our disputes with Qatar is for both sides to compromise in order to reach an agreement.”



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Popular attitudes about Syria, in sharp contrast, are sharply less conciliatory than current UAE government policy, which has moved to resume ties with the Assad regime. A mere 8% of Emiratis agree with the following proposition: "We should accept the reality that Bashar Al-Assad will stay in power in Syria, and restore full relations with his government." And 16% of Emiratis say that the highest priority for U.S. policy should be not Iran, Palestine, Yemen, or Libya, but "protecting the Syrian people" against attacks by the Assad regime and its allies.

Overall, based on these findings, the UAE government has considerable popular leeway on some major internal issues that appear to be the public's primary preoccupation. In foreign policy, however, several recent official initiatives—on the Trump peace plan, normalization with Israel, rapprochement with Syria, and intransigence toward Qatar—are broadly at odds with popular sentiment. While this discrepancy is unlikely, based on the same survey results, to spark much public protest, it may help explain why half of Emirati citizens now say their government is "paying too little attention to public opinion about its policies."

Methodological Note

These findings are from a highly credible, face-to-face survey among a representative national sample of 1,000 UAE citizens, conducted in June 2020 by a reputable, experienced regional commercial firm. The sampling methodology involved a standard geographic probability procedure, yielding a statistical margin of error of approximately 3%. The author is personally fully familiar with and confident about the technical proficiency, professional integrity, and strict assurances of confidentiality afforded by the survey managers and fieldwork team. Additional methodological details are readily available on request. ❖

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