

New UAE Poll: Public Aligned with Foreign Policy Balance, Domestic Conditions

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Brief Analysis

Polling indicates sectarian consensus on most issues, with some variation on Iran.

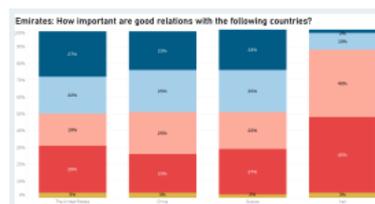
A rare political opinion poll of Emirati citizens, commissioned by The Washington Institute and conducted in November by a qualified independent regional firm, shows that the public views the United States and China as equally important to their country. In contrast, at the regional level, only a minority value ties with Israel, and even fewer say the same about Iran—but around one-third approve of ongoing contacts with those arch-rivals of each other.

In just the past couple of months, while the survey was in the field, top Emirati officials reiterated their desire for good relations with both Washington and Beijing and met with leaders from both Israel and Iran. As the UAE adjusts its foreign policies in these diverse directions, popular attitudes are roughly in sync with these moves—whether among younger or older citizens—among the Sunni majority or the country’s small Shia minority.

On internal questions, too, only around one-fourth fault the government for doing too little on a range of issues. This relatively low level of popular grievance, far less than in most other Arab countries polled, also helps afford UAE officials a large margin for maneuver.

U.S., China, Russia Still Tie As Perceived Partners

Amidst the current dispute over conditions on the UAE purchase of American F-35s, half the UAE public continues to view good ties with all three major outside powers as “important” to their own country. Roughly equivalent to outcomes of previous surveys, one-fourth call relations with each outside power “very important,” and an additional one-fourth call them “somewhat important.” Interestingly, the overall figure for the United States has risen marginally since 2017, from 43% to 51%, while popular sentiment in favor of good ties with either China or Russia has remained flat. To put those numbers in perspective, just 12% of Emiratis label good ties with Iran as even somewhat important to the UAE—notwithstanding the latest diplomatic overtures and substantial economic links between the two neighboring countries.



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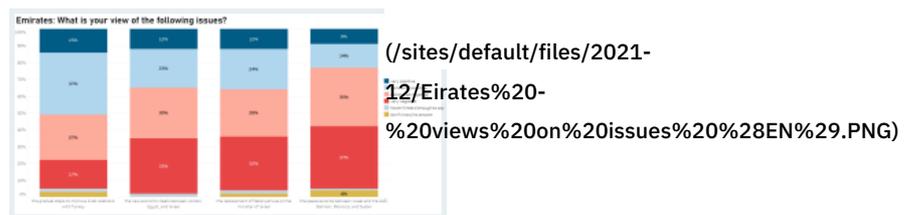
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Further, when asked an unprecedented, explicitly comparative question about the United States and its major rivals, Emiratis are also evenly split. The prompt asks for reactions to the following proposition: “Our country cannot count on the United States these days, so we should look more to China or Russia as partners.” Half of UAE citizens concur with this controversial assertion: 22% “strongly” so, plus 29% “somewhat” in agreement. The other half disagree; but only 15% do so strongly.

Perceived Value of Abraham Accords Drops, Though 37% Still Accept Ties with Israel

This latest poll reveals one clear downward shift in popular attitudes regarding the regional impact of “the recent peace agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.” As recently as last June, 44% of Emiratis said the agreements would have positive effects on the region; today, that figure stands at just 23%. The May 2021 Israel-Hamas armed conflict in Gaza did not produce a similar decline in the survey taken just a few weeks later; so this new shift most likely reflects some disappointment with the repercussions on Iran. Last June, to cite one pertinent data point, the majority of Emiratis saw hope in the nuclear negotiations with Tehran, only to find that the impasse persists today. This low level of popular expectations from the Abraham Accords, even in the midst of conspicuous public celebrations of its first anniversary, is additional evidence that many respondents are clearly willing to offer private opinions very much at variance with their government’s official position.

At the same time, Emirati popular acceptance of some ties with Israel is holding steady: 37% continue to agree that “those who want to have business or sports relations with Israelis should be allowed to do so, which is approximately the same percentage as in surveys from June 2021 and November 2020. The same proportion now expects some positive impact from “the replacement of Netanyahu as Israel’s prime minister.” And 23% of Emiratis, somewhat more than in the other Arab countries just polled, even foresee some positive effects from “the recent conference in Erbil, Iraq that called for peace with Israel.”



Small Shia Minority More Optimistic About Iran

On most issues polled, attitudes among the country’s Shia minority, comprising roughly 10% of all Emirati citizens, largely mirror those of the Sunni majority. Some significant differences do emerge, however, regarding Iran. For example, while 70% of Sunnis say that “wherever Iran intervenes, it hurts the local Arabs and doesn’t help the Palestinians,” just one-third of Emirati Shia agree. And while two-thirds of Sunnis think Iran’s new president Ebrahim Raisi will impact the region negatively, the majority (59%) of Emirati Shia say the opposite.

Nevertheless, on the overall question of relations with Iran, this sectarian divide narrows greatly. A mere 11% of Emirati Sunnis say that good ties with Iran are important for their country, while only 21% of Emirati Shia voice that favorable view of relations with Tehran.

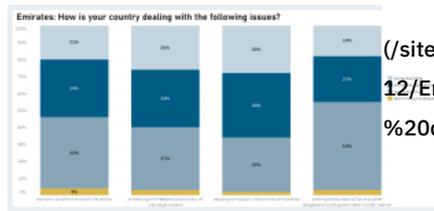
Generational Differences Few and Far Between

Surprisingly, the survey reveals a large degree of attitudinal conformity between Emiratis younger and older than the approximate median adult age of thirty. For instance, the younger generation is no more likely to support the Abraham Accords with Israel. This pattern is in line with previous surveys over the past decade, suggesting a relatively stable social consensus.

On one new question about regional rapprochement, a modest age differential does emerge. Asked about the recent “Saudi-Iran diplomatic talks to reach some understandings between them,” 42% of the younger Emirati cohort foresee some positive effects. Among their elders, that proportion is marginally lower, at 36%.

Few Feel Authorities Doing “Too Little” on Domestic Matters

In sharp contrast to most other Arab publics polled lately, no more than one-fifth of Emiratis say their government’s efforts are inadequate on the following salient issues: “dealing with economic problems”; “reducing the level of corruption in our economic and political life”; or “sharing the burden of taxes and other obligations to the government in a fair manner.” More surprisingly, only slightly more (26%) say the UAE does “too little” to “protect the freedoms and privacy of individual citizens.



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Moreover, the large majority (79%) of Emiratis citizens agree with this statement: “It’s a good thing we don’t have large street protests against corruption, as they do in some other Arab countries.” By comparison, just half of [Egyptians](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptians-value-united-states-and-china-equally-dislike-both-iran-and-israel) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptians-value-united-states-and-china-equally-dislike-both-iran-and-israel>), Jordanians (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/united-states-still-tops-list-great-powers-important-jordans-public>), or even Saudis (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-saudi-poll-united-states-china-and-russia-all-tie-important-partners>) concur, according to parallel polls conducted there in November. And in [Lebanon](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-lebanon-poll-sectarian-consensus-against-beirut-and-beijing) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-lebanon-poll-sectarian-consensus-against-beirut-and-beijing>), currently in the midst of a major economic meltdown, almost nobody now agrees with that complacent sentiment.

Methodological Note

This analysis is based on data from a November 2021 personal interview survey among a representative national sample of 1,000 citizens in all seven Emirates of UAE, in proportion to their percentage of the total population of just over one million. The sample was selected according to standard geographical probability procedures, yielding a theoretical margin of error of approximately three percentage points for the total sample, and approximately five percentage points for each of the two generational subsamples. The small minority Shia subsample, with just under 100 respondents, should be considered illustrative rather than statistically definitive.

The fieldwork contractor, a leading regional professional firm, provided strict assurances of confidentiality, quality controls, and COVID safety protocols throughout. Additional methodological details, including full English and applied Arabic questionnaire, demographic breakdowns, and other information, are readily available upon request. ❖

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