

New UAE Poll Shows Nuance on Domestic Issues; Growing Public Uncertainty over U.S. Relations; Split Views of Iran & Israel

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Brief Analysis

Although many results are consistent with past polling, the most recent Emirati survey reveals interesting perspectives on Iran, the economy, and other issues.

In rare public opinion polling from November 2022, commissioned by The Washington Institute and conducted by a regional commercial firm, Emirati citizens voice their opinions on both the UAE's key foreign policy issues and domestic concerns.

The views expressed by 1,000 Emirati citizens—out of a citizen population [estimated \(https://data.un.org/en/iso/ae.html\)](https://data.un.org/en/iso/ae.html) at just around a million total—align with many but not all of the Emirati government's approaches to regional policies and domestic governance.

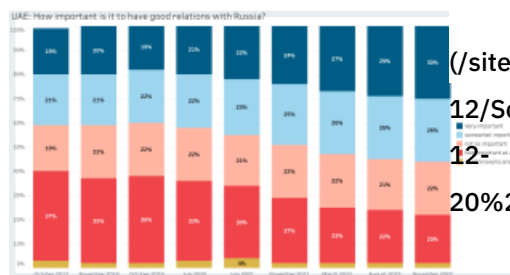
Notably, Emiratis increasingly see China and Russia as alternatives to relations with the United States. Emirati citizens hedge on questions regarding internal Iranian unrest and a regional response to Tehran's nuclear proliferation. And while there is almost universal rejection of the outcomes of the Israeli elections, neither views on the Abraham Accords nor informal relations with Israelis appear to have been impacted.

On domestic issues, a plurality of respondents state national efforts on corruption and maintaining acceptable standards of living are proving sufficient. And while such findings do not mean that every policy has universal approval, most Emiratis reject the idea of mass protests against the government—though this was by no means the prevailing attitude just two years before. Nevertheless, and despite harmony between public opinion and government policy on a number of issues, half of Emiratis are not convinced enough is being done to listen to their voices.

Shifting Attitudes Towards Global Powers

When it comes to bilateral relations, the UAE has engaged in a policy of hedging its bets on maintaining ties with global powers. Public opinion appears to line up with this strategy as more Emirati citizens report being unconvinced by the staying power of the United States' role in their region. Over the past year, agreement with the statement that “our country cannot count on the United States these days, so we should look towards Russia and China” has increased by ten percentage points, with 61% of Emiratis now concurring. In contrast, just 10% say they “strongly” disagree with this idea.

This shift is also visible in the public's valuation of Emirati ties with these powers. When asked about the importance of maintaining good bilateral relations, under half of Emiratis (44%) now think this is at least somewhat important when it comes to the United States. In contrast, 56% value good relations with Russia and China respectively. Attitudes towards relations with Russia in particular have improved over the past half-decade: the number of those who state these relations are important has increased by 16 percentage points since the question was first polled in October 2017.

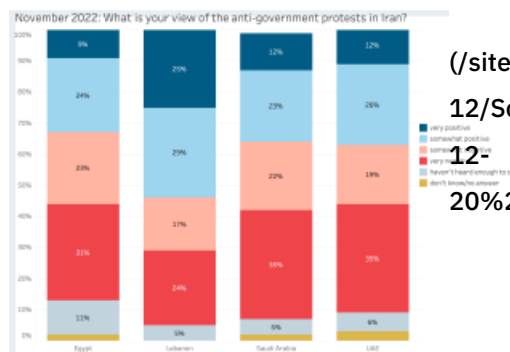


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Such views do not necessarily mean that there is broad-based support among Emiratis for Russia's policies—namely its military invasion of Ukraine. Just 19% see these military actions in a positive light, a number similar to when first asked in March 2022 in the direct aftermath of the invasion. Yet Russia's actions do not appear to have made a dent in Emiratis' valuation of relations with Russia. On the contrary, those who state these relations are important has gone up by seven percentage points since November 2021.

Caution Regarding Iran

In contrast to split views on global powers, most Emiratis (81%) do not say they see relations with Iran as important. Nevertheless, the strength of this disinterest has softened somewhat over time. The percentage of those who classify these relations as “not important at all” has gone from 59% in 2017 to 43% in this latest polling cycle. Moreover, Emirati citizens are by no means united in support of the anti-government protests in Iran that have unfolded over the past several months. While 38% express a positive view of the movement, the majority do not—including around a third who say their attitude is “very negative.”



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Emiratis are likewise split as to how to approach regional nuclear proliferation. Thirty-eight percent agree with the suggestion that “since Iran is now getting so close to having a nuclear bomb, it's time for an Arab country to get one

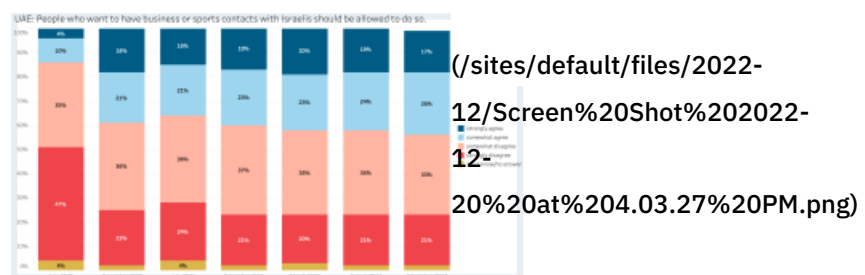
too.” Meanwhile, 60% disagree. Some of this rejection may be driven by the fact that the question does not specify which Arab country would pursue this course of action.

Pessimism towards Israel—But Support for Relations with Israelis Holds Steady

After an initial bout of positivity among about half of Emiratis (47%) regarding the Abraham Accords in November 2020, just a quarter now see the effects of the agreement on the region in an even somewhat positive light. These current views continue a trend of general pessimism that began in November 2021 and has held steady in subsequent polling. Even fewer express a sanguine view of the results of the most recent Israeli elections: 79% said they felt “very negative” about the outcome, alongside another 12% who saw it in a “somewhat negative” light.

On the other hand, the outcome of the Israeli elections—slated to return Benjamin Netanyahu and his new far-right coalition partners to the government—does not appear to have shifted Emiratis’ attitudes on the Abraham Accords, with percentages remaining effectively unchanged since the pre-election period.

Nor does the change in government appear to have altered attitudes regarding informal contacts with Israelis. 43% of Emiratis continue to say that business and sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed—a number that has held relatively steady since the signing of the Abraham Accords. In contrast, just 14% agreed with such a proposal in July 2020. A similar split appears on attitudes toward the recent maritime boundary agreement between Lebanon and Israel, with 41% expressing a positive view of the matter.



Domestic Views Depend on the Issue

Especially relative to other Arab countries, attitudes among Emirati citizens are notably more sanguine on economic opportunities and corruption—and negative towards protest. When first asked in 2018, the plurality of Emiratis (35%) thought their government was doing too little to reduce “corruption in economics and politics.” However, a larger plurality (41%) now believe that the country is doing the right amount to address this key challenge, a ten point increase from 2018. Likewise, when it comes to whether the country is “meeting people’s needs for an acceptable standard of living,” just 19% think the country is not doing enough. Most think what is being done is either the right amount (42%) or even too much (35%) for the country.

Such answers do not mean that there is majority support for all of the government’s economic policies. Perhaps in response to the Emirates’ role-out of tax reforms over the past several years.

([https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven#:~:text=The%20United%20Arab%20Emirates%20\(UAE,tax%20\(VAT\)%20in%202018.](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven#:~:text=The%20United%20Arab%20Emirates%20(UAE,tax%20(VAT)%20in%202018.)) the majority of Emiratis (57%) think that the government is doing too much when it comes to “sharing the burdens of tax and other obligations to the government in a fair manner.”

And despite a clear alignment between public opinion and government policy on some issues, a significant cohort of Emiratis do not believe their own views are taken into account in a sufficiently meaningful way. Half of Emiratis believe that the country is doing too little to “pay attention to the opinions of ordinary citizens like me.” This view contrasts with the third of respondents who think that there is the right amount of concern for public opinion.

Nevertheless, most Emiratis agree with the statement that it is “a good thing we are not having mass protests.”

Trend data demonstrates that significantly more citizens share this attitude than two years ago—42% in July 2020 versus 81% who now express agreement. That July, about half of Emiratis stated that the country was not doing enough to “pay attention to public opinion about its policies,” suggesting views on the relationship between public opinion and policy remain unchanged.

Instead, the violent repression and subsequent fizzling of the dramatic late-2019 and 2020 protests in nearby countries like Iraq and Lebanon—the backdrop of which the question was originally posed—along with better domestic economic outcomes have likely all played a role in souring Emirati respondents on the potential of protest. By way of contrast, half of Egyptians (and almost all Lebanese) remain convinced, highlighting just how widely views on this key question can vary throughout the Arab World.

Methodological Note

This analysis is based on findings from a personal-interview survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Emirati citizens, conducted in November 2022 by a highly experienced, independent regional commercial company. The sampling was done according to standard geographical probability procedures, yielding a statistical margin of error of approximately 3 percent. Strict quality controls and assurances of confidentiality were provided throughout. Full results can be viewed 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>). Additional methodological details, including demographic breaks and other relevant information, are readily available on request. ❖

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