

Opinion **Middle Eastern politics & society**

## Mistrust between the US and the Gulf underscores the need to reset relations

Arab regimes are disgruntled, Biden has been snubbed and Putin's war on Ukraine is causing friction

**DAVID GARDNER**



In the UN Security Council, the UAE abstained alongside China and India on the resolution denouncing the invasion that Russia vetoed © Timothy A Clary/AFP/Getty

**David Gardner** 10 HOURS AGO

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The US and its allies have been known to ruminate episodically about “resets” with their adversaries. Vladimir Putin’s Russia comes to mind, as do China and Iran. Rarely, however, have they been forced to consider a reset with longstanding but disgruntled allies, as they are now with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Joe Biden’s administration is dismayed that its repeated efforts to persuade Saudi Arabia and the UAE to start pumping their spare crude oil capacity have been rebuffed. The idea is to add supply to offset rocketing prices in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that threaten an oil and energy shock which could tip the world [into recession](#) — a replay of the 1970s when an Opec embargo did just that. As members of Saudi-led Opec, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are sticking to the output limits they agreed with Russia before this war, in the so-called Opec+ co-operation deal.

Washington and European capitals are also irritated at their Gulf allies’ non-committal reaction to Putin’s vicious attack on Ukraine. The Saudis and Emiratis are ignoring the wall of sanctions the US and its partners are building around Russia. Economists and real estate agents in the UAE say [Russian money has started flooding into Dubai. much of it in crvptocurrencv](#). Saudi Arabia is reportedly arranging a [state](#)

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[visit for President Xi Jinping of China](#), Putin's main global supporter.

In western eyes, the UAE keeps flip-flopping on the war. In the UN Security Council (which it currently chairs) it abstained, alongside China and India, on the resolution denouncing the invasion that Russia vetoed. Yet in the UN General Assembly it voted to condemn it. The UAE withdrew visa waivers for Ukrainian visitors, only to reinstate them as visas to be purchased on arrival.

Most notoriously, there was last week's handbrake turn on oil output. Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE's influential ambassador in Washington, who had earlier admitted his country's relations with the US were [undergoing a "stress test"](#), said Abu Dhabi, ["favoured production increases and will be encouraging Opec to consider" them](#). Within hours, the Emirati energy minister announced they were sticking with the Opec+ deal agreed with Moscow. Otaiba's remarks brought benchmark crude prices sharply down and Abu Dhabi's rebuttal sent them rocketing north again — a reminder to an America cocooned by the shale oil revolution of Gulf producers' market-moving ability.

Alongside this sit two personal snubs to Biden. The de facto rulers of Saudi Arabia and the UAE have refused to take the US president's phone calls.

Biden last year released a CIA report pinning responsibility on Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince and day-to-day ruler of the kingdom, for the grisly 2018 murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. He refuses to acknowledge Prince Mohammed and deals only with his father, the aged King Salman. Saudi sources say the crown prince [last month scrapped a trip to China's winter Olympics](#) so he could be with his father when the US president called — but refuses to speak to him until Biden publicly recognises his pivotal role.

Equally, Mohammed bin Zayed, crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto ruler of the UAE, ignored a Biden phone call, Emirati officials say. He was indignant that the president had waited three weeks after Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen peppered Emirati targets with missiles. The Emiratis and Saudis resent the US for failing to back their stalemated war in Yemen, and curtailing arms supplies. But mistrust set in during the wave of Arab uprisings over a decade ago.

Like many Arab regimes, the Emiratis and Saudis were deeply shocked at the way Barack Obama's administration abandoned Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak after a 30-year alliance. The UAE was particularly outraged when Mubarak was replaced briefly by the Muslim Brotherhood, and Abu Dhabi was quick to pour billions of

dollars into backing Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the army chief who brought down the Brotherhood and has run an authoritarian regime ever since.

Gulf rulers initially warmed to Biden's predecessor Donald Trump. But a turning point was the September 2019 missile and drone attack on a major Saudi Aramco plant at Abqaiq, which [Trump shrugged off](#). After this display of Gulf vulnerability, attributed directly to Iran, [Abu Dhabi gradually withdrew from the Yemen war and Riyadh opened communications with Tehran](#).

Lines between the US and the Gulf are clogged with distrust. With grievances on both sides, relations need a reset. But it is not clear that Washington entirely gets the extent to which countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE have [already diversified](#) their economic, political and strategic relations, particularly towards China and Russia. It is doubtful they can defend themselves without western help and goodwill. But they will not be taken for granted.

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