

Petropopulism: the UAE, Reform UK and the far-right

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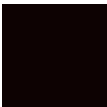
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Executive summary

A 2026 government review into foreign interference, triggered by the jailing of Reform UK's former leader in Wales for taking bribes in return for giving pro-Russia interviews and speeches, warned that "hostile states and non-state actors have a clear incentive to attempt to undermine UK democracy". In July, the UK government added democratic interference to the National Risk Register alongside pandemics and cyber attacks. This report highlights an issue that has attracted comparatively little coverage in the debate over foreign finance and influence in UK politics - the extensive and troubling links between the UK's Reform party and the autocratic government of the oil-rich United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Through a series of interconnected relationships spanning UAE politics, business and UAE-based investors in UK media, Reform UK is acutely vulnerable to UAE influence. Nigel Farage, deputy Richard Tice, party treasurer Nick Candy and the high-profile Conservative defector, Nadhim Zahawi have all forged strong ties to the UAE. There is no evidence to suggest the UAE is funding Reform, but a large body of evidence would suggest that Reform UK is already an asset that the UAE has used to advance its agenda in a multitude of ways, including via GB News, which itself has strong UAE links.

The UAE is a serial and serious human rights offender at home, and its interventionist foreign policy has implicated the UAE in war crimes in Sudan, Yemen and Libya in recent years. However, its violent authoritarianism has not proven any barrier to the forging of a strong and burgeoning relationship with Reform, whose most senior figures have effusively praised the UAE's governance model, defended it from criticism, and advanced its political agenda in the UK. This is most obvious in Reform's policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, which the UAE sees as an existential threat to its rule, and which Reform has pledged to ban if elected into government.

Nigel Farage has been granted remarkable access to the UAE's political elite. On the Emirati foreign minister's most recent official visit to the UK in May 2026, Farage was granted a private audience. UAE state media reported that they discussed "the strategic relations between the two countries and ways to enhance them in a manner that serves mutual interests".

Drawing on FairSquare's analysis of the UAE's foreign and domestic policy, the report explains how the UAE's overtures towards Reform are part of a clear pattern: The UAE will make common cause with any organisation willing to crack down on political Islam, regardless of the consequences. In the Middle

East this policy has had a devastating impact on regional peace and security, most notably in Sudan where UAE meddling is at the root of the world's worst humanitarian disaster, but also in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. Elsewhere it has resulted in the UAE forging alliances with the far-right in France, the United States and Hungary. Far-right social media and influencers have boosted UAE messaging. [Tommy Robinson](#) returned from a trip to the country in December 2025 repeating UAE talking points on Sudan and Yemen. In March 2026, misogynist influencer Andrew Tate, who has been facing criminal charges for rape and trafficking in the UK since 2025, [posted a video](#) that purported to show a note from the UAE authorities welcoming him to the country. Tate has described the UAE as a "[utopia](#)" and called for a "[White Dubai](#)".

The UAE demands to be treated like an ally by the UK government in view of its investments in the UK, which include its ownership of Manchester City FC, whose interests it appears to have sought to advance via the UK government. However, its inability to persuade the UK government to ban the Muslim Brotherhood has created serious tension in the bilateral relationship and, as the report outlines, the UAE often behaves more like an adversary. The UAE has arbitrarily detained and tortured British citizens, including the academic Matthew Hedges, whom they accused of being a British spy, and, as revealed by ITV News in August 2026, deployed a mercenary to covertly [surveil](#), and potentially assassinate, a British national on British soil. It has funded [smear campaigns](#) targeting a prominent UK charity, and in 2026, the UAE [announced](#) it was ending funding for Emirati students seeking to study in the UK and briefing British media about alleged Islamist "radicalisation" on university campuses.

In Reform UK, the UAE has found an ally willing to not only ban the Muslim Brotherhood, but to publicly vilify the group and repeat the UAE's unsubstantiated claims about political Islam's infiltration into various parts of British society, a narrative that aligns with the Islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiments that underpin Reform's populist politics.

In view of its well-documented record of seeking to undermine democracy and the rule of law in various countries around the world, and its adversarial approach to the UK, FairSquare is calling on the UK government to add the UAE to the "Enhanced Tier" of the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme along with Iran and Russia. The UK government should also instruct the UK's Defending Democracy Taskforce to launch an immediate and thorough investigation into the UAE's links to Reform.

UAE authoritarianism under Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nayhan



Since 2011 and the wave of democratic protests that swept across the Middle East and North Africa, the Al Nahyan family, which rules Abu Dhabi and dominates the United Arab Emirates (UAE) federal leadership, has sought to insulate itself from those it perceives as threats at home and abroad. Under the leadership of Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), the de facto ruler of the country for more than 20 years and formally president since 2022, the UAE's model of authoritarian stability, underpinned by its massive fossil fuel revenues, has turned it into a deeply repressive surveillance state.

Political parties are banned and the political system grants the emirates' hereditary rulers a monopoly on power and excludes the possibility of a change in government through elections.

The UAE has sought to play both sides of the geopolitical divide – maintaining deep military and economic alliances with Western powers, while forging ever closer ties with China, Russia and Israel. The UAE placates its traditional Western allies through the purchase of billions of dollars of the most sophisticated military hardware and the deployment of well-resourced lobbying and sophisticated public relations operations. In its near abroad, the UAE has been profoundly influential backing a range of authoritarian and abusive actors from President Sisi in Egypt to General Haftar in Libya and, most controversially, the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan.

The power that the UAE's rulers wield is rooted in their complete control over the country's oil and gas reserves. Oil and gas exports account for around 90 percent of UAE government revenue, the distribution of which ensures the fealty of elites and staves off the threat of dissent from below. MBZ has constructed a social contract which guarantees the distribution of state-controlled oil revenues to citizens who, in return for a high standard of living and generous welfare packages, have tended to exercise what Emirati academic Mira Al Hussein describes as "voluntary disinterest in political participation". The phasing out of fossil fuels therefore poses an existential threat to the government's autocratic rule. In November 2023, a joint investigation by the Centre for Climate Reporting and the BBC found that the UAE used its hosting of COP28 (the UN's annual climate summit) to promote oil and gas deals for the Abu Dhabi government's oil company, ADNOC. At a live online event that same month, the UAE's COP28 president, Sultan Al Jaber, said there was "no science" indicating that a phaseout of fossil fuels is needed to restrict global warming to 1.5°C. The UAE is seeking to maximise its output of oil following its April 2026 decision to leave OPEC after years of frustrations with the cartel's limits on oil production. Over the past decade, the UAE has restructured its oil and gas sector as part of plans to raise its oil production capacity from 4.2 million barrels per day to 5 million per day by 2030.

It is the extraction and export of fossil fuels that has funded what the UAE's elite view as the most serious existential threat to their autocratic rule: the unlikely alliance between Islamophobes in the West and the UAE – a state that bans criticism of Islam and enforces Sharia law – is largely based on their shared enmity toward political Islam.

The Muslim Brotherhood was initially tolerated by the UAE's leaders in the early years of the country's statehood – the UAE gained independence from the UK in 1971 – and the organisation built a social base in the country, and gained significant influence, particularly in education. However, as Courtney Freer, Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Emory University, explains, by the 1990s the country's rulers began to grow suspicious of the group, worrying that it could convert its networks into political influence, as had happened across the Persian Gulf. In the decades that followed, the UAE government switched to a strategy of containment and prohibition of the group's activities. The UAE felt its suspicions and fears were vindicated following the wave of protests that swept the Arab world in 2011, most notably in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood took power, and the ripple effects spread to the UAE.

Inspired by events in North Africa, a group of 133 Emiratis put their names to a 2011 petition calling for democratic reform in the UAE, including the right to vote. In response, the government ordered a clampdown and the state security apparatus began sweeping up the most prominent domestic critics, including the award-winning rights activist, Ahmed Mansoor. The government then pivoted to a crackdown on anyone associated with Al Islah, the local Muslim Brotherhood-associated group. The "UAE 94", a group of Emiratis with links or affiliations to political Islam, which included prominent lawyers and academics, were convicted of attempting to "overthrow the country's political system" in 2013, and sentenced to up to 15 years in prison after a grossly unfair mass trial. Other Emiratis who have expressed even mild criticism of its rulers have been forcibly disappeared, imprisoned, exiled or bullied into silence. In 2016, Ahmed Mansoor, who was by then known as "the last human rights defender in the UAE" and was not affiliated in any way to the Muslim Brotherhood, told an interviewer: "The UAE is living in the worst time of its history, in human rights. It's the darkest era for the UAE – we've never been in this kind of situation, or anywhere close to this situation, throughout the history of the UAE, and even before that." In March 2017, shortly after he posted criticism online of the Abu Dhabi government and of the Sisi government in Egypt, UAE authorities arrested Mansoor at his home in the middle of the night and took him to an unknown location. In 2018 a secret court handed him a ten-year sentence and he remains imprisoned.

Exporting authoritarianism: The UAE's foreign policy



MBZ's antipathy toward the Muslim Brotherhood has led to a highly interventionist and meddlesome foreign policy that has had devastating consequences. The UAE has used its immense financial resources to export its model of "authoritarian stability", backing violent and repressive actors across the globe.

Foreign policy scholar Jon Hoffman argues that following the protest wave, Gulf governments successfully constructed and advanced religious narratives to achieve political goals. In the case of the UAE, that has meant promoting religious narratives that reinforce regime security, delegitimise political Islam and project the country as uniquely moderate and stable in the region – and therefore a strong partner for Western states.

Egypt was "the first great success of MBZ's counterrevolutionary campaign". The UAE gave financial support and public backing to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's 2013 coup which overthrew the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi. In the weeks following the coup, Sisi's forces massacred at least 1,150 protestors demonstrating in support of the ousted president. The UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, has since provided Sisi's military government with more than \$114 billion in financial support, as he has overseen what Amnesty International has called "an all-out assault on peaceful dissent, an erosion of any fair trial safeguards in the criminal justice system, and unspeakable cruelty in prisons over the past decade"

In Tunisia, the UAE openly endorsed Kaïs Saïed's 2021 "self-coup" in which he seized sweeping executive powers, froze parliament and dismissed Tunisia's Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi. Social media propaganda emanating from Saudi Arabia and the UAE framed the coup as a popular revolt against the Brotherhood. Saïed's power grab drew quick support from the UAE. MBZ's top adviser travelled to the country to express the UAE's "solidarity" and praise Saïed's "positive agenda", while Saïed set about destroying the country's fragile emerging democracy.

In Sudan, the UAE's hatred of Islamist movements has been a key driver in the world's most deadly civil war. Having helped orchestrate the ousting of Omar Bashir by pro-democracy protesters in 2019, the UAE acted quickly to shore up the military – under the guise of "stability" – and undermine civilian rule. In April 2023, the UAE-backed Rapid Support Forces (RSF) launched an assault on the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), who they described as "the Muslim Brotherhood's terrorist army". The RSF has been accused by the UN of unleashing "a wave of intense violence ... shocking in its scale and brutality" in acts which show "the hallmark of genocide" during its 2025 takeover of the city of El-Fasher in Sudan. Despite denials by the UAE government of its association with the RSF, there is an abundance of evidence from multiple credible sources of its support including the UN Panel of Experts on the Sudan,

Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.

The UAE's demonisation of political Islam has found a very receptive audience among far-right actors. In an interview regularly promoted by far-right figures including Elon Musk, UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed warned a World Economic Forum panel in 2017 that "there will come a day that we will see far more radical extremists and terrorists coming out of Europe because of lack of decision- making, trying to be politically correct, or assuming that [Europeans] know the Middle East, and they know Islam, and they know the others far better than we do ... I'm sorry, but that's pure ignorance." Jon Hoffman describes this as a form of "reverse orientalism" in which Middle Eastern autocrats strategically promulgate and manipulate Islamophobia to perpetuate the "myth of authoritarian stability" that has underpinned Western policy toward the region. As Hoffman explains: "By keeping conversations centered around the supposed 'deficiencies' of the people of the Middle East or Islam, these autocrats are able to deflect attention from how their authoritarian policies are often the underlying catalysts for regional instability while sustaining Western support [for] their own authority and painting any change to the prevailing status quo as 'extreme'"

Ultimately, the UAE fears any form of organised Muslim politics or even political parties that receive significant Muslim support, typically on the progressive side of politics. As Farid Hafez, an academic specialising in Islam in Europe told Orient XXI, "the United Arab Emirates do not want to see political opposition emerge from Muslims. They therefore find themselves well aligned with rather centrist or right-wing European strategies, which seek to create a 'European Islam' with controlled structures." The result is alliances with parties of the far right and antipathy toward political organisations associated with Islam.

Fear of political Islam is arguably the key driver of Emirati foreign policy. In the UK context this fear has driven a wedge between the UAE and the mainstream political establishment, with neither Labour nor the Conservatives having done enough in the eyes of UAE ruler MBZ to tackle political Islam.

The UAE's strained relationship with the UK



The UAE has been able to exert influence in the UK through an extensive trade and investment relationship, as well as a strategic relationship focused on defence, security and foreign policy. The UAE's creation in 1971, and its transition from "the Trucial states", emerged from Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf as part of its exit from the "East of Suez". Close political, security and elite ties have continued beyond formal decolonisation, as evidenced by MBZ's schooling at Gordonstoun boarding school and his training at the Sandhurst Royal Military Academy in the UK.

Investment from the Gulf formed a key pillar of David Cameron's Conservative coalition government's plan for the UK's economic recovery in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. In 2013, Cameron's government set up a secret unit in Whitehall to encourage inward investment from the UAE in non-defence areas of the UK economy. *The Guardian* found that "Project Falcon" provided the UAE's rulers with "privileged access to Britain's political elite, prime land deals and world-famous institutions in academia and the NHS".

In sport, the UAE state-owned airline company, Emirates, has sponsored Arsenal FC since 2006, and holds naming rights for the club's stadium. Manchester City FC – owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a vice president and a deputy prime minister of the UAE – is the jewel in the crown of the UAE's investment in sports, with the club having enjoyed era-defining success since the 2008 takeover. In Manchester, this has allowed the UAE to carve out a "soft power enclave" complemented by strong political connections, successfully insulating the Gulf state from criticism from the city's civic leadership and local media.

The UAE has aggressively leveraged its influence in the UK. In 2012, it threatened to block billion-pound arms deals with the UK, stop inward investment and cut intelligence cooperation if David Cameron did not act against the Muslim Brotherhood and rein in the BBC's coverage of the group – going so far as to suggest, with no supporting evidence, that the group had infiltrated the BBC. Cameron bowed to the pressure and announced a government inquiry, which criticised the Brotherhood but fell short of recommending its proscription. More than ten years on from this incident, the trade relationship remains relatively strong.

The UAE's sovereign wealth fund pledged to invest £10 billion in "priority UK industries" in 2021, and trade between the UK and the UAE was estimated at around £25 billion in 2025. The two governments announced a "framework for enhanced cooperation" in April 2026, across foreign policy, defence, trade and technology, though the UK government has provided few details. The UAE is one of the biggest customers of the UK's arms industry, with the UK exporting over £15 million worth of arms to the UAE in 2024. The UK has also had a

regional defence coordination hub based in Dubai since 2015, responsible for managing British military engagement across the Gulf.

The UAE has invested strategically in the UK's critical infrastructure. Dubai-owned logistics company DP World operates two major deep-water ports in the UK – in Essex and Southampton – while Abu Dhabi-based renewable energy company Masdar operates three large-scale offshore wind projects. Consecutive governments have approached the UAE over investing in the Sizewell C nuclear power plant, following the government's decision in November 2022 to end Chinese government investment in the UK's nuclear energy sector on national security grounds.

However, MBZ's fixation with the Muslim Brotherhood remains an obstacle to the smooth relations that the UK government seeks with the UAE. In early 2026, the UAE again sought to put pressure on the UK government on this issue, announcing it had restricted funding for its citizens who want to study at British universities, with UAE sources telling the *Financial Times* this was due to the alleged "risk of Islamist radicalisation on UK campuses".

The bilateral relationship has also been complicated by the UAE's treatment of British nationals including multiple cases of torture in UAE detention. In May 2018, UAE authorities arrested British academic Matthew Hedges as he was preparing to leave the country following a research trip. In November that year, a court sentenced Hedges to life in prison for supposedly "spying" for the British government. Hedges said he was force-fed a cocktail of drugs during his imprisonment and was forced to sign a confession under extreme duress. When his case generated international outrage, the UAE pardoned Hedges. After his release, the UK Foreign Office was forced to apologise to Hedges for its failure over the case. Hedges said that it was "baffling" that the UK continued to work alongside the UAE "knowing how callous they are with British lives".

Ryan Cornelius is a British citizen who has been detained in Dubai since 2008, having been convicted of fraud in connection with a \$501 million loan from the Dubai Islamic Bank and sentenced to ten years in prison, extended by a further 20 years in 2018. Mr Cornelius's detention, deemed to be arbitrary by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UNWGAD), has provoked considerable concern across the political spectrum in Westminster. In November 2025, 146 parliamentarians signed a letter calling for the UAE to release him, and the former Conservative Party leader, Sir Iain Duncan Smith, has since called for sanctions on those responsible for Cornelius's detention.

A further potential point of tension surrounds Manchester City FC and the extent to which the UK government is prepared to intervene to protect the club from sanctions for breaching financial rules imposed by the Premier

League, the private body that runs England's elite football league. In 2023, months after Manchester City was charged by the Premier League with 115 breaches of financial regulation, reporting from *The Athletic* confirmed that discussions regarding the charges had taken place between UK and Emirati diplomats. In 2025, UAE officials discussed the Manchester City case and its potential impact in discussions with UK government officials. UK officials told *Bloomberg* that they were concerned that the Premier League's decision could have a detrimental impact on Abu Dhabi's broader investment in Britain. No outcome regarding this case had been announced at the date of publication of this report, in September 2026.

The UAE sought to further extend its influence in the UK in 2024 through an attempted UAE government-backed purchase of Telegraph Media Group. This move led the Labour government in May 2025 to change the law to allow foreign states to take only 15 percent stakes in UK newspapers, amid concerns from across the political spectrum that such deals pose a threat to democracy and free speech.

Beyond traditional forms of influence, spyware used in the UK has been traced to the UAE. In 2021, *The Guardian* reported that more than 400 UK phone numbers appeared in leaked data from Israeli intelligence firm NSO group, which developed Pegasus, a powerful spyware tool. *The Guardian's* analysis found that the principal government responsible for selecting the UK numbers was the United Arab Emirates. Those targeted included Matthew Hedges, a member of the House of Lords and a lawyer advising Princess Haya, the ex-wife of Dubai's Prime Minister. In 2022, investigative group Citizen Lab traced a spyware hack of UK government computer systems, including in Downing Street, to operators in the UAE.

As a result of the UAE's sophisticated lobbying operation and soft power programme, the UAE has generally escaped criticism in the UK for its serious human rights abuses at home and its backing of violent militias and authoritarians abroad. However, the UAE's support for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan, where the UK government has boosted humanitarian aid and sanctioned abusive actors, has begun to change this dynamic. The RSF has been accused by the UN of unleashing "a wave of intense violence ... shocking in its scale and brutality" in acts which show "the hallmark of genocide" during its 2025 takeover of the city of El-Fasher in Sudan. Despite denials by the UAE government of its association with the RSF, there is an abundance of evidence from multiple credible sources of its support, including from the UN Panel of Experts on the Sudan, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The UAE's role has attracted significant criticism and scrutiny from across the UK parliament for its role in Sudan. Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesperson Calum Miller has called for the UAE ambassador to be summoned, while Conservative MP Sir Iain Duncan Smith has urged sanctions against UAE government officials. Several Labour MPs have expressed concerns. In late 2025, 33 parliamentarians, primarily from the Labour Party, signed a parliamentary petition calling on the UK government to impose an arms embargo on the UAE, with a similar initiative proposed by Democratic lawmakers in the US. Despite increasing concern among MPs, the UK has withheld from public criticism of the UAE. War crimes investigator Nathaniel Raymond told a parliamentary committee in June 2026 that the UK had prioritised maintaining ties with the UAE over averting mass atrocities in Sudan, prompting further concern from MPs. It is partly within this context, with increasing concern among the UK's traditional parties about the role of the UAE, that the Gulf state has instead sought to cultivate ties and boost Reform, a party previously outside the political mainstream.

The UAE's links to Reform UK



Reform was founded as the Brexit Party in 2018, advocating for Britain to leave the EU without a deal. In 2021, the party changed its name to Reform UK and began to campaign on a wider platform but with anti-immigration as its central ideological pillar. Nigel Farage, who had stepped down from the party in 2021, returned as its leader prior to the 2024 general election, taking over a party performing strongly in the wake of the collapse in support for the Conservative Party and subsequently winning five seats. Under the Labour government, Reform rose steadily in the polls, enjoying an uninterrupted lead for over a year from May 2025 to mid-2026. Though scrutiny over financial dealings has damaged the party's reputation, it continues to be well placed to challenge Labour at the next election, and could gain power through a coalition with the Conservative Party.

Reform's most senior figures, some of whom have long-standing commercial links to the UAE, have developed strong political connections with very senior figures in the UAE government.

Nigel Farage

In December 2025, Farage and a "non-staff member" were funded to the tune of £10,000 to attend the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Abu Dhabi. According to the UK Parliament's register of interests, Farage received £1,000 from the Government of Abu Dhabi and £9,000 from "Abu Dhabi Formula 1". The *Financial Times* reported that the UAE's leadership was keen to speak to Reform "due to their shared opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood". Farage then made a second visit to the UAE in January 2026, where he gave a keynote speech at a private party hosted by GB News and attended by Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, the UAE's minister of industry and advanced technology and the chair of the media investment vehicle IMI, which was behind the failed attempt to purchase Telegraph Media Group, and Reem Al Hashimy, the UAE minister for foreign cooperation. The party was attended by other key figures from Reform including Laila Cunningham, Reform's London mayoral candidate, and former senior Conservative figure turned Reform defector Nadhim Zahawi. During the event, Farage stated that the UK "had a lot to learn" from the UAE and criticised the UK for being "too frightened" of the Muslim Brotherhood, referring to the organisation's "infiltration into universities and public offices". Farage cited the UAE as an inspiration for his constituency, "Look around at the Palm," Farage said in his speech, overlooking Dubai's Palm Jumeirah archipelago. "I want Clacton to look like this." And he assured UAE officials that "We recognise you are our friends," adding: "A Brexit London, a Reform London, will remember you."

Significantly, Farage also criticised the UK for how the UAE was treated in its attempt to purchase Telegraph Media Group, saying "I don't think we were very

straight with them over the *Telegraph* deal.” He also criticised the UK Foreign Office, saying “our Foreign Office is prone to lecturing them about how they should conduct their society ... they just want a better relationship with the UK.” These comments mark a significant departure from Farage’s prior statements on the UAE’s proposed takeover of *The Telegraph*. In a 2023 column for *The Telegraph*, Farage railed against the takeover by the UAE and specifically called on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to remove Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron from being involved in the deal due to the latter’s own ties to the UAE. Farage described the UAE as an “absolute monarchy with an abysmal human rights record” and questioned whether criticism of the UAE or UAE-based companies would be tolerated, and whether mockery of UAE’s leaders, a hallmark of the British press, would be allowed:

“Would Sheikh Mansour, the vice president of the UAE and a member of the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, allow one of his relatives to be caricatured in a Telegraph cartoon? What would he do if The Telegraph’s investigations unit began inquiring into a UAE-owned company? Or if a Spectator columnist criticised the UAE’s attitude towards homosexuality? Does anybody really want to find out the answers to these questions?”

During Farage’s January 2026 visit to the UAE, he interviewed the UAE’s minister of state for international cooperation, Reem Al Hashimy, for GB News. During the discussion, Farage praised the UAE’s tax policy and approach to crime, as well as its role in the Abraham Accords, which normalized the UAE’s relations with Israel in 2020. They also discussed the UAE’s approach to the Muslim Brotherhood, which Al Hashimy described as “an Islamist organisation that is very far away from Muslim values and Muslim principles”. In January 2026, the UAE announced it was restricting funding for its citizens who want to study at British universities, over the apparent risk of Islamist radicalisation on UK campuses. The move, praised by Farage, was widely seen as seeking to put pressure on the UK government over its decision not to proscribe the Muslim Brotherhood. At the Reform party conference in September 2025, Farage pledged to ban the group if Reform is elected to government.

Following the Reform Party’s unprecedented success in the UK’s May 2026 local elections, with the party receiving 27 percent of the national vote share, Farage held further meetings with the UAE. In an unconventional move, while on a trip to meet the UK foreign secretary, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan met with Nigel Farage. The UAE government published a photograph of the meeting and said that its purpose was to “discuss the strategic relations between the two countries and ways to enhance them in a manner that serves mutual interests”.

Richard Tice

Reform's deputy leader, Richard Tice, splits his time between his constituency in Boston and Skegness and Dubai, as his fiancée, *Telegraph* columnist Isabel Oakeshott, moved to the Emirate in opposition to the Labour government's introduction of VAT on private school fees. Tice has referenced his historical links with the UAE, stating that he has been visiting the country since the 1990s and that his family "built their first ever skyscraper in Dubai in the mid-70s", in reference to the Dubai World Trade Centre, built by his grandfather's company.

In a February 2026 interview with *The National*, an Abu Dhabi newspaper owned by a media investment group controlled by UAE vice president Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Tice branded the Muslim Brotherhood a "terror group" and told the interviewer "We don't want them in our country". Tice also proposed closer financial integration between the UK and UAE and joint listings between the UAE's exchanges and the London Stock Exchange, pairing London's "deep, trusted pools of liquidity" with the UAE's growing financial services sector. In 2025, Tice, told the BBC that the UK should "aspire to" the kind of safety seen in Dubai, as well as the Emirate's civic pride.

Tice has used his position in parliament to push the UK government to adopt positions more closely aligned with those of the UAE. In January 2025, after the UAE deemed eight UK-based businesses to be Muslim Brotherhood-aligned terror groups, Tice asked the then home secretary Yvette Cooper what actions the UK would take. Tice has also intervened in a parliamentary debate on Sudan, referencing the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and the alleged rejection of ceasefire efforts by the "Sudanese regime". His interventions used similar language to that used in multiple statements by the UAE government about the conflict. The UAE has accused the Sudanese Armed Forces of rejecting ceasefire proposals and has repeatedly referenced the alleged role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan.

Following the US's decision to launch a war against Iran in February 2026, Tice travelled to Dubai and gave an interview to GB News on 8 March where he heavily criticised Keir Starmer's decision not to enter the war, stating that after speaking to diplomats in the country, Britain was now being viewed as an "international humiliated laughing stock". Tice told GB News presenters he was there in part to signal that the UK's position toward the UAE would change if Reform were elected: "I'm here [in Dubai] not only to be with my fiancée but also actually to show solidarity with our friends and allies and partners here in the UAE and show some optimism that things will change post the next general election."

Other key figures

Reform's other key figures also hold strong ties with the UAE. Its treasurer, Nick Candy, facilitated the meeting between Nigel Farage and UAE government officials during his January 2026 visit. Candy's firm Candy Capital entered into a "strategic joint venture partnership" with Modon Holding in October 2024. Modon is chaired by a board member of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), which in turn is owned by L'IMAD Holding Company, owned by the Abu Dhabi government.

Candy has praised the UAE as an attractive place for "ultra high net worth" investors, stating: "Wealth mobility has reshaped the way the global elite think about where to live, work and invest – and all signs point to the Middle East, particularly Dubai and Abu Dhabi, as the new frontier." Candy's article celebrated "the wisdom and visionary nature of the UAE's leadership", writing that "the quality of government officials is mind-blowing". Candy compared this unfavourably with Western countries where, in his words, "politicians are often perceived as second-tier individuals who, in many cases, allow political agendas to get in the way of what is best for the country".

Nadhim Zahawi, a high-profile defector from the Conservatives who joined Reform in January 2026, is on the board of trustees of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, alongside an array of the most senior UAE officials. The Financial Times has reported that he is "particularly close" to three of MBZ's brothers – Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Abdullah, National Security Advisor Sheikh Tahnoun and Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Mansour, best known in the UK as the owner of Manchester City FC. An investigation by global climate investigations outlet DeSmog found that Zahawi has chaired the advisory board of a luxury property developer in the UAE since standing down from parliament. Zahawi's links to the UAE date back more than two decades to 2006, when he opened a YouGov office in Dubai. In 2023, unconfirmed media reports stated that Zahawi was brokering a deal between the Barclay family and investors from the UAE as part of the attempted Telegraph takeover deal. Zahawi's twin sons, Ahmad and Jafaar, are employed by two of the UAE's most prominent and powerful state-owned entities, the technology company G42, and the sovereign wealth fund Mubadala, respectively. There is no suggestion that either of Zahawi's sons were not appointed on the basis of merit, nor of any conflict of interest or undue influence.

Laila Cunningham, the London mayoral candidate for Reform UK, gave an interview to The National, in which she praised Dubai's approach to immigration, as migrants are forced to leave "when they can no longer support themselves". When questioned about the Muslim Brotherhood, Cunningham told the interviewer that, in the UK, "We have allowed Islamists to thrive because, I

don't know, we want to be politically correct" and that Gulf governments have warned London about the group for years.

Paul Marshall and GB News

GB News, which acted as a facilitator for the exchange between Farage and the UAE minister through hosting the party and the interview, and which pays Farage around £350,000 a year, has its own connections to the UAE. The organisation's two major shareholders are the Legatum Foundation, a hedge fund based in the UAE and whose chief investment officer used to work for the Dubai government, and Paul Marshall, a hedge fund manager with an office in the UAE. Marshall praised Abu Dhabi for its tax policy after his \$69 billion fund set up a new office in the Emirate.

The channel has been accused of an "excessive" focus on Muslims, bordering on an "obsession", by the Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM). The CfMM found the channel accounted for 50 percent of total mentions of Muslims across all the channels analysed, with most coverage portraying Muslims negatively, often as part of a conspiracy to undermine Britain, while downplaying Islamophobic violence. Following the UAE's decision to restrict funding to students seeking to study at British universities, former academic turned Reform candidate and GB News host Matt Goodwin dedicated a segment of his show to the story. Goodwin told his viewers, "the UAE has repeatedly questioned why the UK has refused to proscribe the Muslim Brotherhood", while his guest Ayaan Hirsi Ali told GB News viewers the mainstream parties refused to ban the Muslim Brotherhood because they were reliant on the Muslim vote.

GB News was forced to pay damages in 2025 after airing a false claim by the UAE influencer Amjad Taha that the charity Islamic Relief had funded terrorist organisations. Marshall and the UAE also share an alignment on fossil fuels. Marshall's declared holdings in fossil fuel companies almost tripled to \$2.8bn in the first quarter of 2026, while GB News has regularly platformed climate science denial reports and attacks on net zero since it launched in 2021, according to DeSmog.

The UAE's links to the transatlantic far right



The UAE's efforts to suppress political Islam in all its forms means it has common cause with far-right groups in the West, almost all of whom identify Islam and immigration as interconnected existential threats. In an interview regularly promoted by the online far right including [Elon Musk](#), UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed [warned a World Economic Forum panel](#) in 2017 that "there will come a day that we will see far more radical extremists and terrorists coming out of Europe because of lack of decision- making, trying to be politically correct, or assuming that [Europeans] know the Middle East, and they know Islam, and they know the others far better than we do ... I'm sorry, but that's pure ignorance." The UAE has since developed an international network of political alliances with far-right actors including [Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia](#), [Viktor Orbán in Hungary](#) and [Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel](#).

The UAE's nascent relationship with Reform is not an anomaly. It fits within an international strategy of supporting actors that are most likely to support the UAE's interests, and this has led the UAE to develop numerous ties to far-right actors whose Islamophobia dovetails with the UAE's efforts to curtail the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam more broadly.

In Europe, the UAE has cultivated close ties with a series of right-wing actors both in the European Parliament and national parliaments. [Mediapart](#) reported that Marine Le Pen's National Rally party (Rassemblement National, RN) developed contact with the UAE from 2014 onwards. Most significantly, a source close to Le Pen told [Mediapart](#) that a senior UAE intelligence officer met Le Pen at her family residence in July 2014 and offered her help based on their shared opposition to Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood. A member of Le Pen's entourage corroborated a claim by [IntelligenceOnline](#) (cited by [Mediapart](#)) that the UAE secretly financed her 2015 visit to Egypt, where she met senior political figures and praised President Sisi in his "unfailing combat against the Islamists". The Front National denied that any UAE representative had offered campaign financing to its leader. Le Pen did not respond to Mediapart's request for comment and, according to the article, had not publicly denied either that the 2014 meeting took place or that the UAE funded the Egypt trip.

Jordan Bardella, president of the RN and Le Pen's likely successor, visited the Emirates in June 2025, in the company of fellow French MEP Thierry Mariani (RN). According to [Intelligence Online](#), while there Bardella met with MBZ's son, Crown Prince Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, as well as with "spymaster" and financial strategist Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The UAE's interventions in French politics have not been limited to the right. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the left-wing opposition party France Unbowed (La France Insoumise, LFI), [warned in December 2025](#) that the UAE was encouraging "discrimination, hatred or violence" in France and targeting LFI as part of its broader efforts to counter the Muslim Brotherhood. In the same

article, Mélenchon pointed to well-coordinated smear campaigns against LFI politicians such as Carlos Martens Bilongo following his criticism of the UAE.

The UAE has a track record of financing misinformation campaigns. According to a 2023 investigation by *The New Yorker*, the UAE financed a smear campaign against the British charity Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), seeking to associate its officials with the Muslim Brotherhood, anti-Semitism and violent extremism. The magazine alleged, based largely on hacked internal records, that the UAE paid Swiss intelligence firm Alp Services to smear the charity, leading to attacks by the Trump administration and investigations by UK and Swedish agencies, while the German government stopped working with the organisation. A lawyer for Alp Services told *The New Yorker* that some of the hacked files were “obviously forged”, without specifying which ones. David D. Kirkpatrick, who conducted the investigation said that he independently corroborated hundreds of details contained in the leak. Islamic Relief Worldwide responded by paying for an independent commission, headed by Dominic Grieve, a former attorney general, which found that IRW was a “highly effective charity” that was free of institutional anti-Semitism.

The UAE appears to have forged a relationship with the far-right news website Visegrad24. Visegrad24 was founded in 2020 as “a Central European news aggregator” and states on its website: “We challenge the ideological filters shaping modern Western discourse and defend the moral, social, and cultural values now under siege by post-Marxist, woke, and hyper-secular agendas.” It quickly established a following through its strong anti-Muslim and anti-migration stances and by 2026 had gained over 2 million followers on X alone. An investigation by the outlet vSquare found the platform had ties with several figures in or connected with the far-right Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland. *Intelligence Online* reported that it had seen an Emirati ministry of foreign affairs and international cooperation internal memo dated 28 August 2024, discussing cooperation between Visegrad24 and the ministry, which the Emirati ministry had considered to be “feasible and likely to improve the Emirates’ reputation among Western audiences”. The outlet regularly posts positive news coverage of the UAE and in 2025 hosted an interview with the UAE influencer Amjad Taha, praising the UAE as “The Muslim Country That Rejected Radical Islam”.

In the United States, the UAE’s strategy meant actively supporting the rise of Donald Trump and establishing and entrenching itself as a key ally during both his first and second terms. In late 2022, according to *the Washington Post*, the US National Intelligence Council produced a confidential report for US policymakers on “the UAE’s bid, spanning multiple U.S. administrations, to exploit the vulnerabilities in American governance”. By 2016, MBZ had become frustrated with the Obama administration. He employed lobbyist George Nader, a convicted sex offender, to get close to the Trump campaign and simultaneously

to illegally funnel money into the Clinton campaign. In August of that year, Nader told Donald Trump Jr that the UAE and Saudi Arabia wanted his father to win the presidency. In the wake of Trump's victory, Nader visited the White House at least 13 times to meet the then chief strategist Steve Bannon. MBZ was the only world leader named by Robert Mueller's report into foreign interference in the 2016 US presidential election. His inclusion was the result of the UAE leader's role in a 2017 meeting between a Trump associate and a Russian middleman for Vladimir Putin, which took place in the Seychelles.

In Trump's second term, the UAE has been his leading partner in the Middle East alongside Israel, and is one of only two states to have sent money to the Board of Peace, which President Trump inaugurated in February 2026. Ranking members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the House Judiciary Committee have described the Board of Peace as "an opaque pseudo-governmental organization never authorized by Congress and controlled by President Donald Trump in his personal capacity as self-designated 'Chairman for Life.'" The UAE committed to investing \$1.4 trillion in the US economy after top UAE officials met President Trump in early 2025. The country has also been rewarded for its support for America's war against Iran with the loosening of restrictions on the UAE's ability to import US-made AI chips, in a move which alarmed members of Trump's administration who shared concerns about the technology finding its way into the hands of America's adversaries. The UAE's leadership has repeatedly promoted the idea of a shared vision for the region between Trump's White House and their agenda. During Trump's high-profile visit to the UAE in May 2025, MBZ told the president that the relationship between the two long-time security allies had taken "a significant leap forward" since Trump took office for the second time. One month before Trump's decision to launch a war against Iran, UAE minister Reem Al Hashimy told Nigel Farage in an interview on GB News that "President Trump has a very keen interest in reshaping and charting a more peaceful Middle East."

The UAE's support for Donald Trump and France's National Rally illustrates how it cultivates relationships with seemingly outside political parties and candidates on the assumption that, when in power, they will aid Emirati interests. Their engagement is not limited to formal party politics. Narratives aligned with UAE regional policy have been advanced by journalists, right-wing British influencers, online news platforms and state-backed UAE influencers.

British Dubai-based journalist Isabel Oakeshott, the partner of Reform deputy Richard Tice, has repeatedly written columns promoting Dubai, including one column for The Spectator titled "I love Dubai. Get over it." In 2025 Oakeshott visited eastern Libya, currently ruled by the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Haftar, who has received political and material support from the

UAE, including weapons exports in violation of a UN arms embargo. Haftar's forces have been accused by an International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor of "indiscriminate air strikes and shelling of civilian areas". Following her visit, Oakeshott, writing in *The Telegraph*, contrasted the government-controlled western Libya, which according to Oakeshott "remains a dangerous mess of warring militias, drug dealers and illegal weapons." with the transformation of the LNA-controlled eastern capital - "booming" Benghazi, supported by investment from the UAE's state developer. Bemoaning Western sanctions on the country, Oakeshott told readers that Haftar's sons, who are primed to succeed the octogenarian general, have "big ideas, and a very different leadership style", and will help gravitate the country away from Russia to help "build new relationships with Western allies".

Far-right activist and English Defence League founder, Tommy Robinson, visited Dubai in November 2025 before making a series of novel interventions related to conflicts in which the UAE is involved. In posts on X (formerly Twitter) made in early 2026 about Yemen and Sudan, Robinson presented the Muslim Brotherhood as the primary driver of both conflicts and described the UAE as "a global security partner that cannot be dispensed with". Robinson praised the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council and accused Saudi Arabia of funding terrorism in Yemen. Robinson's posts emerged amid a diplomatic feud between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over their respective roles in Yemen. At this time, Emirati news outlets were actively cautioning against a potential Muslim Brotherhood resurgence in the country.

Research by Marc Owen Jones, an academic expert on disinformation and Middle East politics, has found that these international networks of activists and platforms are complemented by an array of domestic Emirati influencers parroting identical talking points. Since 2024, several Emirati social media analysts have emerged, travelling to events in Western capitals hosted by prestigious think tanks and universities. Their content advances state-aligned narratives on key topics the UAE is concerned with, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Sudan, Islam and immigration. The UAE is "positioned as a defensive outpost of Western order ... as an exemplar state." As Jones explains, "They are a cluster of people pushing narratives that closely resemble those of the UAE government, but also of Israel and the European right and far right (and also Russian-style active measures). A number of them have even gone as far as to promote content by the anti-Islam activist Tommy Robinson."

In July 2026, UAE-backed influencers Abdulqader Almenhali and Rauda Altenaiji appeared in videos from a "Ban the Brotherhood" campaign launched by the UK-based Henry Jackson Society warning about the "infiltration that has happened in the West by the Muslim Brotherhood." The Executive Director of the Henry Jackson Society, Alan Mendoza, also serves as Reform's Chief

Advisor on Global Affairs.

Andrew Tate is a social media influencer and self-proclaimed misogynist who has been a vocal supporter of the UAE, particularly Dubai, broadcasting his positive views on the country to his vast audience. Tate, who has been in custody in Miami since July 2026 facing sex trafficking charges originating in the UK, has repeatedly celebrated Dubai as a “utopia” and the “new financial capital of the world”, encouraging visitors and investors to visit. Tate promoted the UAE’s “extremely strict” approach to “Islamisation” and contrasted it to the UK, citing an interview by the UAE foreign minister. He has also celebrated the country’s political model, while acknowledging its authoritarian nature: “I am not delusional as to the idea that UAE is not a free country. Of course not. But luckily for me, all of their views align with my views. So the things I’m not allowed to say are things I don’t want to say.”

Conclusion: Countering the UAE's threat to democracy in the UK



The Rycroft Review into foreign interference, commissioned following the conviction of the former leader of Reform UK in Wales for taking bribes from a foreign state, found that the UK faces “a persistent problem of foreign interests seeking to exert influence on, and to interfere in, our politics”. The recommendations, all of which were accepted by the UK government, include tighter controls on political donations and greater scrutiny of online activity by hostile foreign actors.

The review identified two broad domains through which foreign financial influence and interference comes: attempts to directly infiltrate UK politics by gaining direct leverage over political parties and political process; and attempts to create division and distrust among the wider public through activity on social media and via other vectors. As this report demonstrates, both of these strategies have been pursued by the UAE.

A 2019 New York Times profile of MBZ described him as “the most powerful ruler” in the Arab world, partly on account of his “increasingly bellicose agenda”. Under MBZ, the UAE has grown more powerful, more influential and has demonstrated a ruthless commitment not just to quashing political Islam in the UAE but to pursuing it abroad. The consequences of this have been dire. The UAE is a black-hole for human rights, one of the few countries in the world where there is not a single activist willing to publicly criticise the government due to the severe consequences they would face. Abroad, MBZ’s antipathy to political Islam has destroyed burgeoning democratic movements, and is at the root of the world’s worst humanitarian disaster in Sudan, where the forces it has supported are committing genocide. In Europe and the US, the growth of the far-right has been identified by the UAE as an opportunity and they have cultivated an array of relationships with organisations and individuals whose racist policies frequently target Muslim populations.

The UAE’s burgeoning relationship with Reform, whose susceptibility to deep-pocketed foreign influence has been amply demonstrated, must be set in this context.

The UAE has a clear track record of seeking to shape political decision-making in Britain and of taking matters into its own hands when its aggressive diplomacy does not achieve its aims. The UAE has accused a British academic, one of many who has suffered torture in UAE detention, of spying, financed smear campaigns against a high-profile UK charity and funded a mercenary to secretly surveil, and possibly assassinate, a British national on British soil. It has sought to damage the UK’s image by restricting funding for Emirati students planning to study at UK universities, citing concerns over alleged Islamist “radicalisation” on campuses.

To safeguard UK democratic processes from the threat posed by the UAE, policymakers should actively deploy the tools available to them.

The Foreign Influence Registration Scheme provides the UK government with a clear mechanism for protecting “the safety and interests of the UK by improving the understanding of activity taking place in the UK at the instruction of a foreign state or certain foreign state-controlled organisations.” In particular, through the “enhanced tier” of countries, which places greater requirements on those acting on behalf of countries listed in this tier. Currently, only Russia and Iran are listed in this category, with the government stating that parliamentary approval would be required to add a further state and that “national security assessments” are considered among a broad range of factors when the decision is made. Adding the UAE to this enhanced tier would demonstrate an awareness of the risks the UAE poses.

The Defending Democracy Task Force was established in 2022 as a cross-government focal point to safeguard democracy, though until now its remit has not been fully exercised. It could and should launch an investigation into the threat posed by the UAE and include in that an examination of the UAE’s relationship with Reform and other far-right actors.

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