

# The Sheikh Who Quit OPEC: How MBZ Is Rewriting the Gulf's Rulebook

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*Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).*

## 1. Explanation

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*Imagine the second-most-powerful man in the Gulf telling OPEC—the cartel that has shaped global oil prices for sixty years—to take a hike. That just happened.*

### What's Going On?

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, known as MBZ, is the president of the United Arab Emirates and one of the Arab world's most influential leaders. After a 12-day war in which Israel and the US struck Iran—and Iran fired roughly 2,800 missiles and drones at Gulf neighbours—MBZ is reshaping how his small, oil-rich country positions itself globally.

His boldest move: pulling the UAE out of OPEC quotas that had restricted how much crude it could pump. He's also distanced the UAE from Saudi Arabia (the cartel's de facto leader) and from old allies like the Muslim Brotherhood, while striking a 2020 normalisation deal with Israel and pouring money into AI, tech, and a 'knowledge-based economy.'

### How To Think About It

Think of the Gulf as a group project where Saudi Arabia has always been the loudest voice. MBZ is the ambitious classmate who decides he can get a better grade working solo—and has the resources to prove it.

- It's like the most talented player in a sports league walking out on a salary-cap agreement. The whole arrangement only worked while everyone agreed to limit themselves to keep the league sustainable. When the UAE bolts and starts pumping freely, the price floor OPEC built collapses — and every other member starts wondering whether loyalty is worth it.
- It also rhymes with how Singapore broke from regional norms in the 1960s—a tiny state betting that being a tech, finance, and trade hub matters more than being a traditional military power or political follower.

### Key Things To Know

- Iran fired about 2,800 missiles and drones at Gulf states during the recent war—most were intercepted, but the UAE's reputation as a 'safe haven' for trade and tourism took a hit.
- MBZ has spent decades building UAE military power, hiring soldiers from Pakistan and Egypt and buying advanced US weapons including F-16s and air defences.
- The UAE normalised relations with Israel in 2020 (the Abraham Accords), breaking decades of Arab consensus that had refused recognition until Palestinian statehood.
- MBZ openly opposes political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, and has cracked down on Islamist activists at home—narrowing public political discourse.
- Critics—including former US officials—accuse the UAE of 'punching above its weight,' arming the Sudanese RSF militia accused of atrocities, and pursuing its interests at allies' expense.

### Why It Matters

Oil prices affect what your family pays at the pump, what airlines charge for flights, and how fast

inflation eats your future paycheque. When a major producer breaks ranks with OPEC, global energy markets wobble. And the UAE's bet on AI, tech, and tourism—rather than just oil—is exactly the kind of economic pivot that reshapes which countries hire engineers, host start-ups, and attract international students over the next decade.

### **The Bigger Picture**

MBZ is a test case for a new kind of small-state power: rich enough to buy influence, militarised enough to project force, pragmatic enough to ditch ideology. If he succeeds, expect more 'mini-superpowers' to behave this way—diversifying economies, picking fights selectively, and ignoring traditional alliances. Watch the Saudi-UAE relationship, the future of OPEC, and whether the UAE's interventions in Sudan, Libya, and Yemen create blowback that even oil money can't paper over.

## 2. Key Terms Glossary

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### **OPEC**

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries—a cartel of oil-producing nations (founded 1960) that coordinates how much crude each member pumps in order to influence global oil prices.

### **Cartel**

A group of independent producers who agree to limit competition—usually by setting prices or restricting supply—to keep profits high. OPEC is the most famous example.

### **Crude (oil)**

Unrefined petroleum pumped from the ground, before it's processed into gasoline, jet fuel, plastics, etc. The benchmark commodity in global energy markets.

### **Muslim Brotherhood**

A transnational Sunni Islamist movement founded in Egypt in 1928 that seeks to organise society around Islamic principles. Several Gulf states, including the UAE, treat it as a political threat.

### **Conscription**

A government policy requiring citizens to serve in the military for a set period, regardless of whether they volunteer.

### **Houthi rebels**

An Iran-backed armed movement based in northern Yemen that has been fighting a Saudi-led coalition since 2015 and recently attacked Red Sea shipping.

### **Rapid Support Forces (RSF)**

A Sudanese paramilitary group accused of widespread atrocities in Sudan's ongoing civil war; the UAE is alleged to have supplied it with weapons, which Abu Dhabi denies.

### **Normalisation (of relations)**

The formal establishment of diplomatic and economic ties between two countries that previously refused to recognise each other—e.g. the UAE-Israel Abraham Accords of 2020.

### 3. Reading Comprehension Quiz

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Circle the best answer for each question.

**Q1.** The passage primarily argues that Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed is:

- A) Returning the UAE to its traditional role as a quiet follower of Saudi policy.
- B) Repositioning the UAE as an assertive, independent power pursuing its own interests.
- C) Withdrawing the UAE from regional conflicts to focus solely on domestic reforms.
- D) Aligning the UAE more closely with Iran following the recent regional war.

**Q2.** According to the passage, the UAE's 'safe haven' status was undermined because:

- A) OPEC sanctioned the UAE for breaking production quotas.
- B) Iranian missiles and drones struck the region during the recent war.
- C) Saudi Arabia imposed a trade blockade on the Emirates.
- D) The Muslim Brotherhood organised protests inside Abu Dhabi.

**Q3.** Which statement best describes the UAE's relationship with OPEC as presented in the passage?

- A) The UAE founded OPEC and continues to lead its policy decisions.
- B) The UAE has fully exited OPEC and joined a rival oil organisation.
- C) The UAE has rejected OPEC quotas that it felt limited its production.
- D) The UAE supports OPEC quotas but disagrees on pricing strategy.

**Q4.** As used in the passage, the word 'cartel' most nearly means:

- A) A criminal smuggling organisation.
- B) A coordinated group controlling supply of a commodity.
- C) A military alliance among neighbouring states.
- D) A political party with regional ambitions.

**Q5.** As used in the passage, the phrase 'punch above its weight' most nearly means:

- A) Attack opponents who are physically smaller.
- B) Exert influence greater than its size suggests.
- C) Spend more money than it can afford.
- D) Behave more aggressively than is necessary.

**Q6.** Which inference about MBZ's worldview can most reasonably be drawn from the passage?

- A) He believes religious identity should guide UAE foreign policy.
- B) He prioritises pragmatic national interest over ideological loyalty.
- C) He considers the UAE permanently dependent on Saudi protection.
- D) He views economic growth as less important than military strength.

**Q7.** The passage suggests that the UAE's intervention in Sudan has:

- A) Successfully ended the country's civil war.
- B) Drawn international criticism and embarrassed UAE allies.
- C) Been openly praised by the United States government.
- D) Persuaded Saudi Arabia to follow the UAE's lead.

**Q8.** The author's overall tone toward MBZ is best described as:

- A)** Openly hostile and dismissive.
- B)** Uncritically admiring and celebratory.
- C)** Analytical, acknowledging both ambition and controversy.
- D)** Confused and unable to reach any conclusion.

**Q9.** It can most reasonably be inferred that MBZ's economic vision for the UAE involves:

- A)** Reducing the country's reliance on oil revenue alone.
- B)** Returning the economy to traditional pearl-diving industries.
- C)** Nationalising all foreign-owned businesses in Dubai.
- D)** Ending all trade relationships with Western countries.

**Q10.** Which quotation from the passage best supports the answer to the previous question?

- A)** 'The UAE has thick skin and bitter flesh – we are no easy prey.'
- B)** 'This is about focusing on the future; the new economy, the knowledge-based economy.'
- C)** 'He's got a very black and white perspective on projection of power.'
- D)** 'I wouldn't say he's an outlier leaving the region behind.'

**My Score:** \_\_\_\_\_ / 10

## 4. Answer Key with Explanations

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**Q1.** The passage primarily argues that Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed is:

**Answer: B**

The passage repeatedly emphasises MBZ's break from Saudi leadership, his exit from OPEC quotas, and his interventions abroad—all signs of assertive independence. (A) is the opposite (TRAP A: wrong direction). SAT Tip: When a question asks for the central argument, look for claims the author returns to multiple times across different paragraphs—not a single detail mentioned once.

**Q2.** According to the passage, the UAE's 'safe haven' status was undermined because:

**Answer: B**

The passage states Iran fired about 2,800 missiles and drones at Gulf states, taking 'the sheen off' the UAE's safe-haven reputation. (C) sounds plausible from regional knowledge but is not in the passage (TRAP C: real-world plausible, unsupported). SAT Tip: For 'according to the passage' questions, the answer must be explicitly stated—your outside knowledge of the topic is irrelevant and often a trap.

**Q3.** Which statement best describes the UAE's relationship with OPEC as presented in the passage?

**Answer: C**

The passage says MBZ dropped 'the bombshell' that the UAE was exiting OPEC quotas restricting its ability to sell more crude. (B) overstates the move—it's the quotas, not the entire organisation (TRAP B: passage vocabulary, wrong combination). SAT Tip: Watch for answer choices that exaggerate a passage claim by one degree—the trap is often a more dramatic version of the truth.

**Q4.** As used in the passage, the word 'cartel' most nearly means:

**Answer: B**

In the passage, 'cartel' refers to OPEC—oil producers coordinating output. (A) is the common everyday meaning (drug cartels) and is the most tempting trap (TRAP B: common meaning, wrong here). SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context questions, substitute each option back into the sentence—the right one preserves the original meaning while the everyday definition often doesn't fit.

**Q5.** As used in the passage, the phrase 'punch above its weight' most nearly means:

**Answer: B**

The phrase describes critics' view that the UAE—a small state—wields outsized regional influence. (D) captures only the critical tone but misses the size-vs-influence meaning (TRAP B: passage vocabulary, wrong combination). SAT Tip: Idioms on the SAT are tested for their figurative meaning in context—imagine explaining the phrase to someone who's never heard it, then match your explanation to an option.

**Q6.** Which inference about MBZ's worldview can most reasonably be drawn from the passage?

**Answer: B**

The passage quotes MBZ saying the UAE is 'not ideological' and focused on the future and the knowledge-based economy. (A) is the opposite of his stated view (TRAP A: wrong direction). SAT Tip: When inferring an author's or subject's worldview, anchor on direct quotes—they are the strongest evidence and usually point clearly to one answer.

**Q7.** The passage suggests that the UAE's intervention in Sudan has:

**Answer: B**

The passage says UAE backing of Sudan's RSF militia 'has drawn widespread condemnation and confounded its allies.' (C) flips the relationship to positive (TRAP A: wrong direction). SAT Tip: When the passage uses negative framing words ('condemnation,' 'criticism,' 'confounded'), the correct answer will preserve that negative tone—watch for distractors that quietly flip the valence.

**Q8.** The author's overall tone toward MBZ is best described as:

**Answer: C**

The author presents MBZ's vision and successes alongside criticism from former officials and human-rights concerns about Sudan. (B) ignores the critical passages (TRAP C: partly true, ignores nuance). SAT Tip: SAT tone answers are almost always the moderate, balanced option—extreme tones (hostile, adoring) are usually traps unless the passage is clearly polemical.

**Q9.** It can most reasonably be inferred that MBZ's economic vision for the UAE involves:

**Answer: A**

The passage refers to MBZ's focus on 'the new economy, the knowledge-based economy' and diversifying beyond oil. (C) and (D) contradict the UAE's clearly pro-trade stance (TRAP C: outside-knowledge plausibility). SAT Tip: Inferences must be the smallest logical step from passage evidence—if an option requires you to invent a new policy not hinted at, eliminate it.

**Q10.** Which quotation from the passage best supports the answer to the previous question?

**Answer: B**

Option B directly references the new, knowledge-based economy—precisely the economic diversification inferred in Q9. (A) is about military toughness, not economics (TRAP B: passage vocabulary, wrong topic). SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, find the line that directly supports your previous answer first, then match it to the option—don't pick a quote just because it 'sounds important.'