UAE leader seeks to deepen ‘strategic’ ties in US visit during Mideast crisis

AFP – UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan is due Monday in Washington for a first official visit at a time of soaring tensions in the Middle East, seeking to highlight economic and technological cooperation.

Presidential advisor Anwar Gargash said the Emiratis, who want to reorient their economy away from oil and towards new technologies such as AI, were thinking “economy first, prosperity first” in their “strategic relationship” with the United States.

With his upcoming trip, Sheikh Mohamed will become the first sitting president of the oil-rich Gulf monarchy to make an official visit to Washington.

He is scheduled to meet with US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, who is running to succeed Biden, the White House said.

US officials said the top agenda items were the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza and the conflict in Sudan, where the UAE has been accused of backing one of the warring parties – a charge it denies.

Speaking to journalists this week, Gargash said that without ignoring “things happening in Gaza or things happening in other areas”, the president’s visit will focus on deepening business and technological ties.

The “UAE is trying to move more along an economic and technological view, with the full realisation that we are in the fall (season) of the hydrocarbon age”, the adviser said.

He said the UAE's ties with the United States were "our most important strategic relationship", even as "sometimes people like to talk about some tensions in the relationship".

The UAE, expected to be a key contributor to the Gaza Strip's post-war reconstruction, also has close ties with Russia and refused to condemn the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Sheikh Mohamed's trip follows a sharp escalation of hostilities between Israel and the Lebanese group Hezbollah that raised fears of a widening Middle East war.

The UAE, a federation of sheikhdoms, is one of a handful of Arab states to recognise Israel and enjoys growing clout in the Middle East owing to its oil wealth, business environment and reputation for stability.

It also neighbours oil giant Saudi Arabia, which the US has been pressing to forge relations with Israel in the hope of calming a region pushed to the edge by the Israel-Hamas war.

Sheikh Mohamed, who became president in May 2022 after several years of de facto rule, has strong relations with China and India and has visited both countries this year.

In April, Microsoft announced a $1.5 billion investment in UAE artificial intelligence firm G42, as Abu Dhabi simultaneously shifted away from Chinese partnerships in AI.

"Why are we betting on technology? If we believe that hydrocarbon is on the way out, slowly but surely, then we have to replace the revenue stream through something else," Gargash said.

He added: "A lot of things are in the pipeline. We're laying a map… and we need to partner with you (US) in order for us to achieve these things."

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