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TRANSFORMATION IN THE GULF ENERGY ORDER: EXAMINING THE FACTORS BEHIND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES' WITHDRAWAL FROM OPEC



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



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Introduction

For more than six decades, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has remained one of the most influential actors in the global energy system and the principal mechanism for coordinating the petroleum policies of oil-exporting states. The organization has played a pivotal role not only in regulating oil supply and stabilizing prices, but also in shaping broader geopolitical and economic dynamics at the international level. Nevertheless, structural transformations in the global energy market, the emergence of new energy actors, the rapid expansion of Shale¹ oil production in the United States, and the evolving economic priorities of member states have gradually challenged the traditional cohesion and strategic unity of OPEC.

Within this context, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as one of the leading oil producers in the Persian Gulf, has increasingly pursued a policy trajectory distinct from that of many traditional OPEC members. While maintaining its prominent position in the global oil market, Abu Dhabi has simultaneously sought to diversify its national economy and reduce long-term dependence on hydrocarbon revenues. This transformation in the UAE's economic structure and developmental strategy progressively generated a divergence between the country's national interests and the conventional policy framework of OPEC. Ultimately, this divergence became evident in the UAE's decision to withdraw from the organization.

This article seeks to examine the position of OPEC within the global energy order, the role of the United Arab Emirates in the international oil market, the political and economic factors underlying the country's withdrawal from OPEC, and the potential implications of this decision for the future of the global energy market.

THE EMERGENCE OF OPEC AND ITS ROLE IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was established in 1960 in Baghdad by five founding members: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela. The primary impetus behind its creation was the growing dissatisfaction among oil-producing countries with the dominance of major Western oil companies, which unilaterally determined oil prices and production levels without consultation with the resource-owning states. In

¹ **Shale oil in the United States:** refers to petroleum that is extracted from **Shale** rock formations. This type of oil is produced using advanced technologies such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing ("fracking"). The expansion of Shale oil production in the United States has transformed the country into one of the world's largest oil producers, significantly influencing the balance of the global energy market as well as the policy framework of OPEC.



essence, these countries sought to establish a collective institutional framework through which they could safeguard their economic interests, stabilize oil prices, and acquire greater autonomy in the face of Western corporate influence. In subsequent years, additional states—including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Algeria, Libya, and Nigeria—joined OPEC, transforming it into the world’s largest oil-producing coalition.

From its inception, OPEC was not merely an economic organization; it also possessed a pronounced political dimension. Its members quickly recognized that oil could serve as a powerful instrument of influence within the international system. One of OPEC’s principal objectives was to coordinate the petroleum policies of its member states and prevent sharp declines in oil prices. To this end, the organization sought to regulate the level of oil production among its members in order to maintain a balance between global supply and demand. This approach enabled oil-producing nations to secure higher revenues and assume a more assertive role in the global economy. Over time, OPEC came to symbolize collective action among developing countries seeking to counterbalance Western economic dominance.

OPEC’s actual influence became particularly evident during the 1970s, most notably in the context of the 1973 oil crisis. Following the Arab-Israeli War, Arab oil-exporting countries decided to reduce oil exports in response to Western, particularly U.S., support for Israel. This decision triggered a dramatic surge in oil prices within a short period, plunging Western economies into a severe energy crisis characterized by inflation and recession. The crisis demonstrated that oil was not merely an economic commodity but could also function as a potent political and geopolitical tool. Concurrently, the revenues of oil-exporting states in the Persian Gulf increased significantly, enabling them to initiate large-scale economic and infrastructure development projects.

One of OPEC’s most critical mechanisms for managing the oil market has been its production quota system. Under this framework, a specific production ceiling is assigned to each member state to prevent excessive supply and consequent price collapses. However, the implementation of this quota system has not always been straightforward, as individual countries, driven by the desire to maximize revenue, have at times exceeded their allocated limits. Among the member states, Saudi Arabia has traditionally played a central leadership role within OPEC due to its vast reserves and substantial production capacity. Its ability to adjust output levels has allowed it to exert considerable influence over global oil prices, effectively positioning it as the organization’s de facto leader.

Since the early twenty-first century, OPEC has encountered a series of new challenges. Chief among these has been the rapid expansion of Shale oil production in the United States, which has reduced OPEC’s share of the global oil market. In response, OPEC expanded its cooperation



with non-member producers, particularly Russia, culminating in the formation of the “OPEC+” alliance in 2016. This broader coalition enabled major oil-producing countries to coordinate more effectively in managing the market and preventing sharp price declines. Nevertheless, political disagreements and competing national interests among OPEC+ members have repeatedly threatened the cohesion and stability of this alliance.

In recent years, it appears that OPEC’s traditional influence has diminished compared to its dominance in previous decades. The growth of renewable energy sources, the proliferation of electric vehicles, intensifying global competition in energy markets, and the increasing oil production of countries such as the United States and Canada have collectively constrained OPEC’s capacity to fully control market dynamics. Moreover, internal divisions among member states—particularly strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—have further affected organizational cohesion. Consequently, while OPEC remains a significant actor in the global oil market, it no longer commands the absolute authority it once held during the 1970s and 1980s and now faces complex challenges within the evolving global energy landscape.

THE POSITION OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES WITHIN OPEC AND THE GLOBAL OIL ECONOMY

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is widely recognized as one of the most significant hydrocarbon-rich states in the Persian Gulf and a key actor in the global energy market. The country joined the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1967 and has since played an influential role in shaping the organization’s oil policies. The bulk of the UAE’s oil and gas reserves is located in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, which consequently serves as the principal center of national energy policymaking. Owing to its substantial reserves of crude oil and natural gas, the UAE—alongside Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—has emerged as one of the foundational pillars of energy production in the Gulf region. Furthermore, its strategic geographic position along the Persian Gulf and its proximity to major global energy transit routes have significantly enhanced its geopolitical and economic importance.

The UAE’s influence in the global oil market is exercised primarily through the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), one of the largest state-owned oil and gas enterprises in the world. ADNOC is responsible for the exploration, production, refining, and export of the country’s hydrocarbon resources. Over recent decades, the company has sought to strengthen the UAE’s position in global energy markets by adopting advanced technologies and fostering partnerships with leading international firms. Due to its considerable production capacity and its ability to rapidly scale up exports, Abu Dhabi has consistently played a prominent role in OPEC decision-making processes. In parallel, through sustained investment in port



infrastructure, pipelines, and refining capacity, the UAE has successfully consolidated its role as a major global energy trading hub.

Despite its historical reliance on oil revenues, the UAE has distinguished itself from many other regional hydrocarbon economies by systematically pursuing a policy of economic diversification over several decades. Recognizing the inherent volatility of oil prices and the risks such fluctuations pose to long-term economic stability, the country has made substantial investments in sectors such as global trade, transportation and logistics, banking, tourism, technology, aviation, and financial services. Dubai, in particular, has evolved into one of the leading commercial and financial centers in the Middle East, contributing to the gradual transformation of the UAE's economy away from an exclusively oil-dependent model. This structural transformation has, in turn, contributed to a divergence between the UAE's economic interests and those of more traditionally oil-dependent OPEC member states.

In this context, a number of analysts argue that the UAE's contemporary economic performance is less dependent on high oil prices and more closely tied to global economic growth, international trade flows, and foreign capital investment. While some OPEC members prioritize policies aimed at maximizing oil prices, the UAE has frequently favored approaches that support long-term market stability and sustainable global economic growth. This divergence in strategic outlook has gradually created a gap between the UAE's national priorities and OPEC's traditional policy orientation—a gap that became increasingly visible in disputes over production quotas, particularly after 2021.

In recent years, the UAE's energy policy has entered a new phase characterized by a dual-track approach. On the one hand, the country continues to expand its oil production capacity in order to capture a larger share of the global market. On the other hand, it has made substantial investments in renewable energy and clean technologies. The UAE has launched major initiatives in solar energy development and has actively invested in emerging energy technologies, with the objective of positioning itself as a regional leader in the future energy landscape. Hosting major international climate conferences and investing in global energy technology firms form integral components of this forward-looking strategy. This approach reflects a deliberate effort to balance current hydrocarbon-based revenues with the long-term imperatives of a transitioning global energy system.

Undoubtedly, one of the central pillars of the UAE's oil strategy has been its ambitious plan to expand production capacity. In recent years, the country has invested billions of dollars in the development of oil fields and the enhancement of its production capabilities, with the goal of reaching a capacity of approximately five million barrels per day by 2027. Current production capacity is estimated at around 4.85 million barrels per day, while the country's official quota



under OPEC+ agreements has been set at approximately 3.4 million barrels per day. This discrepancy implies that nearly 1.5 million barrels per day of the UAE's potential production capacity remains underutilized due to quota restrictions. Under such conditions, continued membership in OPEC effectively imposes constraints on the UAE's ability to maximize its energy output and national revenue, thereby intensifying the strategic rationale for reconsidering its position within the organization.

FACTORS BEHIND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES' WITHDRAWAL FROM OPEC

Given the multiplicity of factors underlying the United Arab Emirates' decision to withdraw from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), this section categorizes them into two principal dimensions. The first concerns economic drivers, which have played a particularly decisive role in shaping Abu Dhabi's strategic calculus.

Economic Factors Motivating the UAE's Withdrawal from OPEC

1. Disputes over Production Quotas: One of the most significant sources of economic dissatisfaction for the UAE has been its disagreement over oil production quotas within the framework of OPEC and the broader OPEC+ arrangement. In recent years, the UAE has invested billions of dollars in expanding its oil sector, substantially increasing its production capacity. However, the quota allocated to the country by OPEC has remained below its actual productive potential. Abu Dhabi has consistently argued that the methodology used to calculate quotas is outdated and fails to reflect the UAE's current production capabilities. As a result, the country has perceived that a considerable portion of its installed capacity remains underutilized, thereby constraining its potential oil revenues.

2. Extensive Investment in Oil Sector Development: The Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) has undertaken large-scale projects in recent years aimed at enhancing production capacity and modernizing the UAE's oil industry. These initiatives include the expansion of upstream extraction infrastructure, the development of refining capacity, and the attraction of foreign investment. From the UAE's perspective, continued adherence to OPEC-imposed production limits undermines the economic returns on these substantial investments. Consequently, Abu Dhabi has increasingly concluded that greater autonomy in determining production levels would yield more favorable economic outcomes.

3. Competition to Preserve Global Market Share: Another critical concern for the UAE has been the need to maintain and expand its share of the global oil market. In the past decade, major producers such as the United States, Canada, and Brazil have significantly increased their oil output, intensifying competition across international markets. Within this evolving landscape, the UAE has become increasingly apprehensive that strict compliance with OPEC



production constraints could erode its competitive position. Policymakers in Abu Dhabi have therefore been wary that prolonged adherence to restrictive quotas might result in the loss of key export markets and long-standing customer relationships.

4. Concerns over the Future of Global Energy Markets: A further strategic consideration driving the UAE's policy shift relates to uncertainty surrounding the long-term trajectory of global energy demand. Reports from major international energy institutions indicate that the global economy is gradually transitioning toward renewable energy sources and reducing its reliance on fossil fuels. The expansion of electric vehicles, the implementation of carbon reduction policies, and the growing investment in clean energy technologies have introduced considerable uncertainty into the future outlook of oil markets. In this context, the UAE has sought to maximize the economic value of its hydrocarbon reserves before any potential decline in global oil demand materializes. Accordingly, concerns regarding the future of energy markets have incentivized Abu Dhabi to prioritize production flexibility over compliance with OPEC's restrictive production frameworks.

Political and Geopolitical Factors Behind the UAE's Withdrawal from OPEC

1. Pursuit of Greater Autonomy in Energy Policy: In recent years, the United Arab Emirates has sought to pursue a more independent foreign and economic policy. Within this strategic reorientation, Abu Dhabi has demonstrated a growing reluctance to subordinate key decisions concerning its energy sector entirely to collective OPEC agreements. Policymakers in the UAE appear to have concluded that preserving and enhancing the country's regional and global standing requires greater flexibility in determining its oil production and export strategies. Increased autonomy in energy policymaking has thus emerged as a central consideration in reassessing its engagement with OPEC.

2. Divergences with Saudi Arabia: Although the UAE and Saudi Arabia remain close regional partners, their relationship has increasingly been characterized by strategic competition in recent years. This rivalry extends across multiple domains, including economic policy, trade, energy strategy, and certain regional geopolitical issues, such as differing approaches to the conflict in Yemen. Within the OPEC framework, the UAE has, at times, perceived that the organization's structure is disproportionately influenced by Saudi Arabia and that key decisions are often aligned with Riyadh's national interests. Such perceptions have contributed to growing dissatisfaction within Abu Dhabi regarding its role and influence in collective decision-making processes.

3. Differences over Russia's Role in OPEC+: Following the establishment of the OPEC+ framework, Russia emerged as a central actor in global oil market coordination. The UAE has expressed concerns regarding the increasing alignment of OPEC+ decisions with Russian



interests, particularly given its own strategic ties with Western economies, including the United States. The geopolitical ramifications of the Ukraine conflict and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions on Russia have further complicated cooperation within OPEC+. In this context, the UAE has been cautious about allowing its energy policy to become overly entangled with the geopolitical dynamics surrounding Russia.

4. Adoption of a UAE-Centric Policy Orientation: In recent years, the UAE has adopted a more explicitly national-interest-driven policy framework, prioritizing economic and strategic objectives at the domestic level. This “UAE-first” approach reflects a broader shift toward reducing reliance on traditional regional institutional frameworks and enhancing independent decision-making capacity. Within such a policy paradigm, continued membership in an organization that imposes constraints on national economic and energy strategies appears increasingly misaligned with the UAE’s evolving priorities.

5. Efforts to Strengthen Geopolitical Standing: The UAE has also sought to position itself as an autonomous and influential actor in the global energy system. Greater flexibility in oil production and export decisions enhances the country’s ability to engage more strategically with major global powers such as the United States, China, and India. By expanding its room for maneuver in energy policy, the UAE is able to leverage its hydrocarbon resources more effectively in pursuit of broader geopolitical influence and strategic partnerships.

6. Regional Security Considerations: Security developments in the Persian Gulf have also played a role in shaping the UAE’s strategic outlook. Ongoing regional tensions, concerns over the security of key maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, and perceived inadequacies in collective responses to threats against energy infrastructure have influenced Abu Dhabi’s policy thinking. While such considerations are not solely determinative, they intersect with the UAE’s broader desire to reduce dependence on collective frameworks and enhance its strategic autonomy in a volatile regional environment.

7. Perceived Decline in OPEC’s Traditional Influence: Finally, the UAE appears to have recognized that OPEC no longer exercises the same degree of decisive influence over global oil markets as it did in previous decades. The rise of non-OPEC producers, the expansion of alternative energy sources, and structural changes in global energy consumption have all contributed to a relative decline in the organization’s market power. From Abu Dhabi’s perspective, continued reliance on a framework whose influence is perceived to be diminishing may no longer serve the country’s long-term strategic and economic interests.



IMPLICATIONS OF THE UAE'S WITHDRAWAL FOR OPEC AND THE GLOBAL ENERGY MARKET

The withdrawal of the United Arab Emirates from OPEC represents one of the most significant developments in the global energy market in recent years. This is largely due to the fact that the UAE was not merely an ordinary member of the organization, but rather one of the largest oil producers in the Persian Gulf, possessing considerable spare production capacity. Consequently, its departure constitutes a symbolic blow to OPEC's credibility and internal cohesion. Over the past decades, OPEC has sought to project the image of a coordinated and effective organization; however, the exit of a key member such as the UAE reinforces the perception that internal divisions among members are intensifying and that the traditional consensus within the organization is weakening. In turn, this development may undermine market confidence in OPEC's ability to manage the global oil market in a cohesive and coordinated manner.

One of the most immediate consequences of this development is the potential weakening of OPEC's internal unity. Historically, the organization's influence has relied heavily on coordination among its leading members. Yet ongoing disagreements over production quotas, economic competition, and divergent energy strategies have led some members to increasingly perceive that their national interests are not fully aligned with collective organizational policies. The UAE's decision to withdraw raises the possibility that other member states—particularly those with high production capacity and similar grievances regarding quota restrictions—may consider pursuing a comparable course. Should such a trend materialize, OPEC risks a gradual erosion of its institutional cohesion and a corresponding decline in its bargaining power in global energy markets.

This development also raises a fundamental question: does the UAE's withdrawal signal the beginning of a gradual decline in OPEC's influence? Many analysts argue that OPEC's power today is significantly diminished compared to its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. During that period, the organization was capable of generating substantial shocks to the global economy through coordinated changes in production levels. In contrast, contemporary oil markets are influenced by a broader array of non-OPEC factors, including the expansion of Shale oil production in the United States, increased exports from non-OPEC countries, advances in energy technologies, and evolving global consumption patterns. From this perspective, the UAE's withdrawal may be understood not merely as a national policy decision, but as a reflection of deeper structural transformations within the global energy system.

From an economic standpoint, the UAE's exit may exert long-term effects on global oil prices. Given the country's substantial investments in expanding production capacity, its release from OPEC-imposed constraints could lead to a significant increase in oil output. An increase in



global supply may, over time, exert downward pressure on oil prices—particularly if other producers respond by raising their own output in order to safeguard market share. Nonetheless, in the short term, oil markets remain highly sensitive to geopolitical developments. Armed conflicts, economic sanctions, regional tensions in the Middle East, and concerns over the security of energy transit routes in the Persian Gulf continue to play an active role in price volatility and may offset, to some extent, the effects of increased production.

Furthermore, the UAE's withdrawal is likely to intensify competition within the global energy market. In recent years, competition among oil-exporting countries to attract new customers and maintain existing market shares has grown increasingly fierce. The UAE has sought to strengthen its global position through investments in energy infrastructure, expansion of export capacity, and the adoption of advanced technologies. This strategic orientation may encourage other producers to follow a similar path, leading to higher levels of production and intensified market competition. In such a context, the global oil market may gradually move away from a traditionally coordinated framework toward a more open, competitive, and flexible structure—thereby challenging OPEC's historical role as the primary regulator of oil supply.

At a broader level, the implications of the UAE's withdrawal extend beyond the confines of OPEC and are closely linked to the future configuration of the global energy order. The contemporary world is undergoing a transition toward the diversification of energy sources and a gradual reduction in dependence on fossil fuels. Many countries are investing heavily in renewable energy, electric vehicle technologies, and clean energy systems, trends that may contribute to a long-term decline in global oil demand. Under such conditions, hydrocarbon-producing states are actively re-evaluating their positions within the evolving international economic landscape. The UAE's withdrawal from OPEC can thus be interpreted as part of a broader strategic adjustment—one that reflects a deliberate effort by oil-producing countries to secure greater flexibility, enhance independent competition, and adapt to the emerging realities of a transforming global energy system.

CONCLUSION

An examination of the evolution of OPEC and the position of the United Arab Emirates within the organization indicates that the UAE's withdrawal was not merely a short-term decision or a technical disagreement over production quotas. Rather, it reflects deeper structural transformations in the global energy economy and shifting power dynamics within the Persian Gulf. Over past decades, OPEC demonstrated its capacity to influence global oil markets through coordinated action among its members, at times exerting significant pressure on major economic powers. However, developments such as the expansion of U.S. Shale oil



production, the growth of renewable energy, intensifying global competition, and internal divergences among member states have gradually eroded the organization's traditional influence. Within this evolving context, the UAE appears to have concluded that its emerging economic and strategic interests are no longer fully aligned with OPEC's conventional framework.

An analysis of the economic and geopolitical drivers of the UAE's withdrawal further reveals that Abu Dhabi has been pursuing increased strategic autonomy and greater flexibility in its energy policy. Substantial investments in expanding oil production capacity, concerns regarding the long-term trajectory of global oil demand, and the desire to maximize revenues prior to a potential transition to a post-oil global economy represent key economic motivations behind this decision. Concurrently, competitive dynamics among OPEC members over regional leadership, broader geopolitical rivalries, the implications of regional conflicts such as the war in Yemen, and the UAE's closer alignment with Western economies have reinforced the political and strategic foundations of this shift. Accordingly, the UAE's withdrawal can be understood as part of a broader national strategy aimed at redefining its role within both regional and global systems—one grounded in independent decision-making, economic diversification, and a more proactive engagement in the global energy market.

Ultimately, the implications of this development extend beyond the UAE and OPEC, bearing significance for the future configuration of the global energy order. The UAE's withdrawal signals a gradual transition in the global oil market away from a traditionally coordinated system toward a more competitive and flexible structure. Although OPEC is likely to remain an important actor in global energy governance, it no longer commands the unchallenged authority it once held in earlier decades and must adapt to emerging global realities. At the same time, hydrocarbon-producing states are increasingly striving to secure and redefine their economic and geopolitical positions in anticipation of a potential decline in the centrality of oil within the global economy. From this perspective, the UAE's withdrawal should be viewed not as an isolated event, but as part of a broader transformation in the international energy system and a gradual shift toward a new phase of economic and geopolitical competition.

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