



An Enduring Partnership

The U.S.-U.A.E. Defense and Security Relationship: An Update





“They’re not just willing to fight — they’re great warriors... there’s a mutual respect, an admiration, for what they’ve done — and what they can do.”

- U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, in reference to the U.A.E. military¹

INTRODUCTION

The United States has enjoyed good relations with the United Arab Emirates since the country's independence in 1971. Their similar views on a wide range of issues have made them natural allies. Meanwhile, they have developed a thriving commercial relationship marked by over \$25 billion in bilateral trade. Moreover, they have built deep and growing defense and security ties.

This defense and security cooperation between the U.S. and the U.A.E. blossomed during the First Gulf War in 1990. An early ally during the war, the U.A.E. allowed American planes and ships to operate out of its territory. The Emirates also carried out airstrikes and participated in the force that liberated Kuwait City.²

Following the cessation of combat, the U.S. military maintained a presence in the U.A.E. The U.A.E. hosted the U.S. 763rd Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron in its mission to enforce the no-fly zone over southern Iraq.³ In 1994, the Emirates and the U.S. signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) that formally provided for U.S. military use of U.A.E. facilities including Al-Dhafra Air Force Base in Abu Dhabi and Jebel Ali port in Dubai.⁴ The two countries are currently interested and have begun the process of negotiating a revised and expanded DCA.



*U.S. Aircraft Carrier USS George H.W. Bush
Pulls into Jebel Ali*

Meanwhile, the U.S. and U.A.E. partnered to bring security to the wider region. Since the first Gulf War, the U.A.E. has joined with the U.S. in actions in Somalia, Bosnia-Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya, and the campaign against the "Islamic State" (Daesh) in Syria and Iraq. As such, the U.A.E. is the only Arab country to participate in six coalition actions with the United States.⁵ In turn, the U.S. has provided military and intelligence support for U.A.E. operations in Yemen.

In recent years, shared concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions and the rise of extremism in the region have led to an even further deepening of the relationship between the two countries. Today, the defense relationship includes the hosting of U.S. troops, joint exercises and training, billions of dollars in arms sales, and deep military and intelligence cooperation in the U.A.E. and abroad. In this respect, the U.A.E. has become not just a consumer of security, but also a provider of security and a key U.S. partner in a volatile and dangerous region.

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HOSTING OF U.S. MILITARY

Both the U.S. and U.A.E. benefit greatly from the United States' ability to station personnel and preposition equipment in a strategic location like the U.A.E. The U.S. military presence in the U.A.E. deters would-be aggressors and enhances U.S. rapid response capabilities in the event of hostilities.

The U.A.E. currently hosts around 5,000 American military personnel, belonging mostly to the U.S. Air Force's 380th Expeditionary Wing stationed at Al-Dhafra Air Base.⁶ From Al Dhafra, U.S. airmen have operated refueling tankers, surveillance aircraft, F-15C Strike Eagles, F-22 Raptors, Global Hawk long-range drones, and Airborne Warning and Control Systems.⁷ Notably, Al Dhafra is the only overseas base with F-22s.⁸



U.S. F-22 Raptor in the United Arab Emirates

The U.A.E. is also home to two key deep harbor ports in the Arabian Gulf that are accessible to U.S. aircraft carriers. More American naval vessels visit Jebel Ali port every year than any other port outside the U.S.⁹ Moreover, a number of U.S. military personnel are reportedly stationed at Fujairah port as well.¹⁰ U.S. Navy ships have also visited the more recently opened Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi.¹¹

JOINT TRAINING AND EXERCISES

American and Emirati troops regularly train together and conduct joint exercises in order to advance readiness, ensure interoperability, promote information sharing, and build trust. About 600–800 U.A.E. military personnel travel to the U.S. every year for military training and partnership, largely through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program.¹² Moreover, the U.A.E. annually participates in approximately a dozen U.S.-sponsored military exercises, demonstrating a credible capability to potential adversaries and allies alike.



U.S.-U.A.E. Military Training

Some of this training occurs at dedicated facilities in the U.A.E. Since 2003, Al Dhafra has hosted the U.S. Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) Air Warfare Center (AWC), which helps facilitate training of personnel from throughout the region. AWC holds biannual seven-week Advanced Tactical Leadership Courses (ATLC) that are designed to train pilots how to become mission commanders.¹³ The AWC also

operates an Integrated Air and Missile Defense Center (IAMD) and supports a joint terminal attack controller schoolhouse, combat search and rescue training, and academic courses.¹⁴

Other training occurs in the United States. Since 2009, U.A.E. pilots have regularly participated in Red Flag training exercises at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, considered the best and most realistic air-to-air combat training exercise in the world.¹⁵ Only the best and most capable air forces are invited to participate. U.A.E. pilots have also participated in Green Flag training exercises, which are focused on air-to-ground operations.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the U.A.E.'s Presidential Guard has conducted unit enhancement training with partnered U.S. Marine units at the Marine Corp Air Ground Combat Center, and it has trained three times per year at the USMC Mountain Warfare Training Center.



U.A.E. F-16 at Red Flag Exercise

In addition to the above, the U.S. and U.A.E. have engaged in a plethora of other bilateral and multilateral military exercises in the U.S., U.A.E., and throughout the region. These exercises have included:

- Iron Claw: In December 2016, U.A.E. and U.S. ground forces held a five-day joint military exercise in Abu Dhabi named Iron Claw 2.¹⁷
- Eagle Salute: In March 2016, the U.A.E., the U.S., and Egypt conducted a four-day joint naval exercise in the Red Sea called Eagle Salute 2016.¹⁸
- International Mine Countermeasures Exercise (IMCMEX): In April 2016, the U.A.E. participated in IMCMEX, a 30-nation Arabian Gulf exercise hosted by the U.S. that focused on mine countermeasures and other maritime security operations.¹⁹
- Eager Lion: In May 2015, the U.S. and U.A.E. joined 16 other countries in participating in Eager Lion military exercises in Jordan that emphasized special operations.²⁰
- Eagle Resolve: In March 2015, the U.S. and U.A.E. were among 29 countries that participated in the Eagle Resolve exercise in Kuwait.²¹

PURCHASES OF U.S. WEAPONS

The U.A.E. has markedly increased its military spending over the past decade as the country has expanded the size of its military¹ and made substantial investments in training and equipment modernization.²² The 2016 International Trade Administration (ITA) Defense Markets report estimated that U.A.E. defense expenditures would reach \$23.5 billion in 2016, up 7.4% from an estimated \$21.8 billion in the previous year.²³

U.S. defense companies have benefitted greatly from this spending, as the U.A.E. is one of the largest customers for the FMS program. Indeed, in 2015, the U.A.E. was the fifth largest importer of U.S. defense articles, according to Census Bureau export data.²⁴ This trend likely continued in 2016.

Along these lines, the U.A.E. has purchased a wide variety of sophisticated aircraft and associated weapons systems from the United States:

- Fighter Jets: The U.A.E. Air Force has a fleet of 80 F-16 Block 60 “Desert Falcon” aircraft, which were manufactured by Lockheed Martin in Texas.²⁵ These highly sophisticated jets are fully interoperable with U.S. systems and have been equipped with advanced missiles and bombs including the Raytheon AIM-120 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM),²⁶ Raytheon AIM-9 SIDEWINDER tactical missile,²⁷ Raytheon High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile (HARM),²⁸ Raytheon AGM-65 Maverick air-to-surface missile,²⁹ and Boeing Joint Direct Action Munitions (JDAM).³⁰ In November 2015, the U.S. State Department approved the sale of additional JDAMs to the U.A.E. at an estimated cost of \$380 million.³¹
- Helicopters: The U.A.E. has long operated a fleet of Boeing AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters,³² equipped with Lockheed Martin Hellfire missiles.³³ The country also operates a number of Sikorsky (part of Lockheed Martin) UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters,³⁴ Boeing CH-47F Chinook helicopters, and Bell 407 light attack helicopters.³⁵ In December 2016, the U.S. State Department approved the sale to the U.A.E. of an additional 28 AH-64E Remanufactured Apache attack helicopters and 9 new AH-64E Apache



Emirati Helicopter Pilots with a Boeing AH-64D Apache Longbow Attack Helicopter

¹ In 2014, the U.A.E. instituted mandatory military service for males ages 18-30 who are in good health. Emirati women were also given the option to participate in this program.

attack helicopters,³⁶ just months after it approved the sale of another 4,000 AGM-114 R/K Hellfire missiles.³⁷

- **Transport Aircraft:** The U.A.E. has a fleet of advanced Boeing C-17 Globemaster III airlifters,³⁸ for which the U.S. State Department recently approved the sale of AN/AAQ-24(V)N Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures (LAIRCM) equipment.³⁹ The U.A.E. also has six Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules aircraft.⁴⁰ These transport aircraft are essential for not only the U.A.E.'s military capabilities, but also its extensive humanitarian relief efforts.
- **U.A.V.s:** The U.A.E. agreed in 2013 to purchase unarmed Predator X-P U.A.V.s from General Atomics, in a deal worth approximately \$200 million.⁴¹ In so doing, the U.A.E. became the first non-NATO customer for this drone, which it is acquiring commercially. The U.A.E. also operates Scan Eagle and Integrator U.A.V.s, both made by Boeing.

The U.A.E. has also purchased a range of other military equipment from the United States:

- **Surface-to-Surface Missile Systems:** The U.A.E. operates the Lockheed Martin M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), a light multiple rocket launcher that can be mounted on a medium tactical vehicle truck frame. These launchers are paired with Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMs), a surface-to-surface missile also created by Lockheed Martin. In September 2014, the U.S. State Department approved the sale of an additional 12 HIMARS launchers to the U.A.E,⁴² and, two months later, it approved the sale of 100 additional ATACMs.⁴³ The U.A.E. also operates Javelin anti-tank guided missiles produced by a joint venture between Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.⁴⁴
- **Surface-to-Air Missile Systems:** In 2008, the U.A.E. signed a contract for the Patriot missile defense system; Raytheon, as the prime contractor, provided radar systems and GEM-T missiles, while Lockheed Martin provided PAC-3 missiles.⁴⁵ Then, in 2011, the U.A.E. signed an initial order for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) from Lockheed Martin, with Raytheon also being a prime contractor.⁴⁶ In so doing, the U.A.E. became the first international customer for this advanced system.⁴⁷ The U.A.E. also operates HAWK medium-range surface-to-air missile batteries supplied by Raytheon.⁴⁸
- **Armored Vehicles:** The U.A.E. operates American-made Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles supplied by Oshkosh Corporation. In September 2014, the State Department agreed to sell the U.A.E. an additional 4,500 refurbished MRAPs from U.S. Army stock as Excess Defense Articles (EDA).⁴⁹

It is important to note that all of the major systems above are supported by a wide array of subsystems made by other U.S. defense companies.

JOINT CONFRONTATION OF REGIONAL CHALLENGES

U.S.-U.A.E. basing agreements, joint training, and weapons sales are not merely for show. They are key components of a broader bilateral security partnership that has contributed demonstrably to security in the Arabian Gulf region and the wider Middle East.

The U.S. and the U.A.E. have cooperated to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Despite historical commercial and financial ties between the U.A.E. and Iran, the Emirates fully implemented multilateral sanctions on Iran, causing trade between the two countries to drop from around \$23 billion in 2010 to as low as \$4 billion in 2013.⁵⁰ This move helped exert the requisite financial pressure on Iran that brought it to the negotiating table and led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to “ensure that Iran’s nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful.”⁵¹

In addition, the U.S. and U.A.E. have collaborated to counter destabilizing Iranian regional activities, such as those in Yemen. The U.A.E. is part of a Saudi-led coalition that, with U.S. logistics and intelligence assistance, has sought to restore Yemen’s legitimate government following the military takeover of much of the country by Iran-backed Houthi rebels. Notably, in July 2015, U.A.E. Special Forces helped local anti-Houthi forces recapture Aden, Yemen’s second-largest city, from the Houthis. More recently, the U.S. and U.A.E. have worked toward a negotiated solution to Yemen’s ongoing conflict.



U.A.E. Military Personnel

At the same time, the U.S. and U.A.E. have worked together to combat the threat of Al-Qa’ida. Indeed, the U.A.E., in partnership with U.S. Special Forces, has achieved significant success in halting and reversing the spread of Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen. In April 2016, U.A.E. forces helped expel AQAP from their stronghold in the southern city of Mukalla, Yemen’s third-largest port.⁵² Ahead of this move, the U.A.E. reportedly asked the United States for air power, intelligence, and logistics support, including help regarding medical evacuation and combat search and rescue.⁵³

The U.S. and U.A.E. have also partnered in the fight against Daesh. The U.A.E. was an early supporter of U.S.-led efforts to combat Daesh, and, during the initial part of the coalition air campaign against this group, the Emirati Air Force conducted more air strikes against Daesh targets in Syria than any other country aside from the U.S.⁵⁴ Taking part in these strikes was the U.A.E.’s first female combat pilot, Major Mariam al-Mansouri, whose actions dealt a symbolic blow to Daesh by demonstrating a powerful contrast with Daesh’s own repression of women. The U.A.E. also hosted

substantial numbers of international forces participating in the airstrikes against Daesh.⁵⁵

The U.A.E. has also worked with the United States to bring stability to Iraq. Although wary of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.A.E. allowed American military use of its facilities for operations in Iraq.⁵⁶ Moreover, in 2008, after sectarian strains had caused many countries to shutter their embassies in Iraq, the U.A.E. became the first Arab country to restore full diplomatic relations



U.A.E. Air Force Pilot Mariam Al-Mansouri

with the country.⁵⁷ That year, the U.A.E. also forgave \$7 billion in bilateral Saddam Hussein-era debt;⁵⁸ in 2012, it forgave an additional \$5.8 billion.⁵⁹ Following the departure of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, U.A.E. leaders engaged more broadly with current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, hosting him in December 2014.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the U.A.E. opened a consulate in Iraq's Kurdish region in 2012,⁶¹ while supporting coalition actions against Daesh in Iraq and hosting coalition troops involved in combating the group. In October 2016, the U.A.E. announced the allocation of \$50 million to support the stability and reconstruction of the Iraqi city of Mosul after its liberation from Daesh.⁶²

Finally, the U.A.E. has participated in coalition efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. The U.A.E. made its military facilities available to U.S. and other allied forces involved in ousting the Taliban.⁶³ U.A.E. troops were the only Arab combat forces to take part in the mission in Afghanistan, and a 250-person contingent of elite Presidential Guards has deployed to the country since 2003, remaining in the country even after the December 2014 transition to Afghan-led combat.⁶⁴ From 2012-2014, as other allies were reducing their commitment in Afghanistan, the U.A.E. deployed six F-16s, in addition to other fixed-wing and rotor aircraft, to Kandahar, Afghanistan.⁶⁵ U.A.E. and Australian pilots were the only non-NATO forces trusted to fly close air support missions to protect coalition troops.⁶⁶ The Emirates also gave significant financial support to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

COUNTER-TERRORISM COOPERATION

In addition to helping stabilize the region, U.S.-U.A.E. security cooperation has helped protect against terrorist threats to both countries.

The 2015 State Department Country Report on Terrorism credits the U.A.E. with “continuing to reinforce its firm counterterrorism stance” through, among other things, “implementation of strict counterterrorism laws.”⁶⁷ The U.A.E. instituted new legislation in late 2014 that made it easier to prosecute terrorist activity, increased penalties for such offenses, and authorized the cabinet to set up lists of designated terrorist organizations and individuals.⁶⁸ This new legislation served as the basis for the U.A.E.’s execution in mid-2015 of an Emirati woman convicted of the ideologically-inspired murder of an American school teacher in Abu Dhabi.⁶⁹

The U.A.E.’s strong counterterrorism partnership with the United States is another reason for its counterterrorism success. The U.S. and the U.A.E. regularly share counter-terrorism intelligence across various agencies, including the U.A.E.’s State Security Directorate (SSD). In partnership with the U.S., the U.A.E. has foiled terrorist plots directed at the U.S., most notably a 2010 plot by Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to send explosives on cargo planes bound for the U.S.⁷⁰

The U.S. and U.A.E. cooperate particularly closely on combating terror financing. In 2014, the U.S. and U.A.E. set up a joint financial counter-terrorism task force focused on combating extremist fundraising and financial networks in the region. At the time, David Cohen, the U.S. Treasury Department’s Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, lauded both the “very good close relationship with the Emiratis in combating terrorist financing” and the U.A.E.’s “steadfast commitment” in this regard.⁷¹

Port security is another key area of bilateral cooperation. The U.A.E. was the first country in the region to join the U.S. Customs Department’s Container Security Initiative, which permits American and Emirati customs officials to co-locate inside U.A.E. ports to inspect U.S.-bound containers.⁷² The country also participates in the U.S. Department of Energy’s Megaports Initiative, to improve detection of nuclear materials in cargo containers.⁷³ In addition, the U.A.E. takes part in the U.S. Department of State’s Proliferation Security Initiative, which seeks to improve coordination of efforts to stop shipments of weapons of mass destruction, delivery systems, and related materials.⁷⁴

The U.S. and U.A.E. also have a special aviation security partnership. A joint preclearance program allows U.S. Customs agents to inspect U.S.-bound commercial passengers at Abu Dhabi International Airport (AUH) prior to departure. The preclearance facility was the first of its kind in the Middle East. The U.S. assists in training Emirati immigration and customs officials.⁷⁵

The U.A.E. has also worked with the U.S. on terrorist counter-messaging, where the U.A.E. has long played a leading role. In 2012, the U.A.E. launched Hedayah, an international center of excellence based in Abu Dhabi dedicated to facilitating dialogue, advancing research, and providing training for individuals and



groups involved in countering violent extremism.⁷⁶ Then, in 2014, the U.A.E. became host to the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, which brings intellectuals and thinkers around the world every year to emphasize the peaceful nature of Islam.⁷⁷ The next year, in 2015, the U.S. and U.A.E. launched the Sawab Center, a multinational program that uses direct online engagement to counter terrorist propaganda.⁷⁸

Finally, the U.A.E. has supported U.S. efforts to reduce the number of detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility. In November 2015, the U.S. Department of Defense transferred five Yemeni detainees from Guantanamo to the U.A.E. Seven months later, the U.S. announced it had transferred another 15 Guantanamo detainees, comprising 12 Yemenis and 3 Afghans.⁷⁹ Three additional detainees were transferred to the U.A.E. on the final day of former President Barack Obama's presidency.⁸⁰

SHARED SUPPORT FOR A STRONG GCC

At the same time that they have developed strong bilateral security cooperation, both the United States and the U.A.E. have pushed for the creation of a strong GCC with a close relationship with the United States.

U.S. policy has traditionally been supportive of moves toward greater integration and cooperation among GCC states. As such, the U.S. participates in joint military exercises and trainings with the GCC as a group, and American and U.A.E. officials meet regularly at GCC policy gatherings including the U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum and annual U.S.-GCC Defense Ministerial.



This U.S. policy dynamic was perhaps best on display during the May 2015 Camp David summit between former President Obama and leaders of the six GCC states. In a statement following this summit, the U.S. asserted its readiness to “work jointly with the GCC states to deter and confront an external threat to any GCC state’s territorial integrity.” Moreover, it said that GCC states committed to “develop a region-wide ballistic missile defense capability” and that the U.S. and GCC had agreed to “a new, recurring, large-scale exercise emphasizing interoperability against asymmetric threats.”⁸¹

In this vein, the U.A.E. has contributed to the development of a closely allied GCC with joint military capabilities and interoperability. As mentioned, military forces from all GCC countries, as well as the U.S., train at the U.A.E.’s Air Warfare Center and Integrated Air and Missile Defense Center. In addition, the Emirates agreed in late 2013 to host a GCC-wide Gulf Academy for Strategic and Security Studies,⁸² and it volunteered the next year to host a GCC police force known as GCC-Pol.⁸³

FUTURE CHANNELS OF COLLABORATION

The fundamentals of the U.S.-U.A.E. security and defense relationship are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future; in fact, they are likely to only become stronger. Personnel from the U.S. Air Force's 380th Expeditionary Wing will likely continue to find a home in Abu Dhabi, and Jebel Ali will still be a frequent port of call for the U.S. Navy. Meanwhile, joint training exercises will take place in both countries, and the U.A.E. will turn to the U.S. for sophisticated military equipment. The U.S. and U.A.E. will also remain united in their opposition to terrorism and Iranian regional meddling, leading to close and sustained military and intelligence cooperation.

However, while the fundamentals of the relationship will remain largely the same, some of the details of the relationship will change. The U.S.-U.A.E. security relationship will evolve to meet new threats and challenges. Moreover, the U.A.E.'s defense acquisition priorities will change in the process.

In the short-term, the U.A.E.'s acquisition priorities will likely be defined by immediate needs for the war in Yemen, particularly in light of lower oil prices. Lower oil prices have led the U.A.E. to rationalize defense expenditures, and spending has focused on the immediate needs of troops deployed in Yemen. According to the 2016 International Trade Administration's Defense Markets Report, the U.A.E.'s weapons imports in the fourth quarter of 2015 "consisted largely of tactical equipment, such as bombs, missiles, tanks, armored trucks, and antitank weapons, needed on the battlefield immediately."⁸⁴ This will likely continue as long as the U.A.E. continues to be engaged in combat operations in Yemen.

In the medium term, the U.A.E.'s defense priorities are likely to be shaped by its experiences of the war in Yemen. Yemen has seen the first large deployment of Emirati troops in a foreign country. This new experience has highlighted the U.A.E.'s need for greater sustainment, logistics, and maintenance equipment, particularly when it comes to expeditionary forces. It has also revealed the need to build up the U.A.E. Navy for purposes of logistical resupply. In addition, it has highlighted the need for more Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance capabilities (particularly the tools that help process, store, and utilize data) and a need for force protection equipment.



F-35 Joint Strike Fighter

As the war winds down and oil prices recover, the U.A.E.'s acquisition priorities are likely to shift to its more traditional needs. These include "high-tech naval, air power and surveillance, and missile products and systems."⁸⁵ Most notably, the U.A.E. is

interested in a new fleet of fighter aircraft, for which it is reportedly considering buying the F-35 “Joint Strike Fighter” if and when it were to become available.⁸⁶

Given the significantly increased scope and tempo of military and defense cooperation between the U.S. and the U.A.E. in recent years, both countries are interested and have begun the process of negotiating a revised and expanded Defense Cooperation Agreement. This agreement would institutionalize the two countries’ current levels of defense cooperation and provide a framework for even greater cooperation in future.

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