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# **THE U.S.-U.A.E. DEFENSE & SECURITY RELATIONSHIP**

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## PREFACE

Since the publication of the fourth edition of this report in February 2019, the defense and security partnership between the U.S. and the U.A.E. has grown and broadened in very measurable ways. There are a number of notable developments that warrant mention at the outset of this updated study:


- The signing of the Abraham Accords: While the U.A.E. and Israel have enjoyed longstanding security cooperation, the normalization of bilateral relations through the September 2020 signing of these accords now has the opportunity to expand partnerships, particularly in areas such as cyber security, joint military exercises, and planning.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, the warm peace that continues to develop between the U.A.E. and Israel is slowly changing the tone concerning the U.A.E. in Congress. Despite continued U.S. Congressional oversight of the mandate to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge (QME), the dialogue of how best to do that will change with countries who have signed the Abraham Accords. Another advantage of this normalization lies in the opportunity for the United States and Israel to come together in selling defense systems to the U.A.E.
- The Trump Administration designating the U.A.E. and Bahrain as "Major Security Partners": The U.S. decision to name the U.A.E. as a Major Security Partner in January 2021 reflects the importance the U.S. assigns to its security ties with the U.A.E., and it indicates that the U.S. and the U.A.E. expect to continue to grow their mutually beneficial defense and security partnership in the future. More so, this designation signifies the importance of the U.A.E.'s defense and security contributions throughout the region.
- The new Biden Administration and Congress: The U.A.E. enjoys a significant degree of good will with both the Administration and Congress as a result of the Abraham Accords and the long history of close economic, political, and military partnership between the two countries. However, there has been notable demand particularly among Democratic lawmakers for more review and scrutiny of U.S. arms sales to the U.A.E. The Biden Administration may more carefully review and consider sales of military equipment to the U.A.E. than the Trump Administration. In fact, in late January 2021, it was reported that the Biden Administration ordered a review of new U.S. arms sales to the U.A.E. and imposed a freeze on new arms sales to Saudi Arabia.
- The U.S. and U.A.E. signing a letter of agreement on a historic, \$23.3 billion arms sale: This January 2021 agreement for 50 F-35 Lightning II aircraft, 18 MQ-9B drones, and air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions demonstrates the U.A.E.'s continued desire to turn to the U.S. for the most up-to-date defense systems. Moreover, it will likely mean a further deepening of the bilateral defense and security relationship for decades to come.



- The evolving regional threat environment: The September 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil facility demonstrated the potentially devastating power of UAV swarms, and the need for the U.A.E. to be able to defend itself from a similar fate at the hands of unmanned aircraft. Iranian sponsored attacks on U.A.E. shipping in the Gulf and possible planned attacks on U.A.E. critical infrastructure have also highlighted the evolving threat environment. As a result, the U.A.E. has reexamined its air, land, and naval defense capabilities and acquisition priorities, not only within their arsenal of systems, but also the training of their operators.<sup>2</sup>
- The U.A.E. withdrawal of its forces from Yemen: The U.A.E.'s withdrawal of its forces from Yemen has given the U.A.E. an opportunity to focus more on improving the institutional capacity of the U.A.E. Armed Forces. Meanwhile, the U.A.E. continues to evaluate learned lessons from this conflict.<sup>3</sup> One such lesson is the importance of protection of assets: both people and equipment. The U.A.E. saw over 80 soldiers killed or injured in a missile and drone attack in Yemen.<sup>4</sup> The conflict also highlighted the need for greater sustainment, logistics, and maintenance equipment, particularly when it comes to expeditionary forces. It has shown the need for more Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, particularly the tools that help process, store, and utilize data. In addition, it has revealed the need to build up the U.A.E. Navy for purposes of logistical resupply. Lessons learned from the U.A.E.'s experience in Yemen have impacted U.A.E. activities elsewhere in the region, including in the Horn of Africa.
- The creation of EDGE: The U.A.E. has long sought to become more self-sufficient in meeting its aerospace and defense needs by investing heavily in domestic capabilities and, through offsets, forging strategic partnerships with some of the biggest and most respected multinational companies in these industries. Building on these efforts, the U.A.E. formed the EDGE Group in November of 2019, consolidating over 25 companies, many of which were part of Emirates Defense Industries Company (EDIC). According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, EDGE currently ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> out of the 25 top global arms companies in the world, accounting for 1.3 percent of total global arms sales in 2020.<sup>5</sup> This is the first time a Middle Eastern company has found itself among the top 25 global arms companies.<sup>6</sup> Other Emirati companies such as International Golden Group (IGG) also play



a very important role in building up the U.A.E.'s national defense industrial base and providing for the U.A.E.'s security needs.

- An increase of the landed presence of western defense companies within the U.A.E: The U.A.E. has encouraged Western defense companies to establish a landed presence in the country. This practice was grounded in a revised version of the U.A.E.'s national defense offset policy that was announced in February 2019. In December 2017, Raytheon had led the way by forming a wholly owned local subsidiary, Raytheon Emirates, in Abu Dhabi to oversee its operations in the country and contribute to the country's economic diversification and Emiratization goals. Other firms have followed suit or are considering doing so. Recent changes in the U.A.E.'s foreign ownership laws can be found here: <https://international-adviser.com/how-will-foreign-ownership-rules-impact-the-uae-advice-market/>).
- Changes to the U.A.E. Offsets Program: There have been welcome changes to make the U.A.E. offset program more flexible, most notably with the issuance of new offset program guidelines in 2019. For example, the sector focus of this program expanded beyond defense to include projects that meet the strategic needs of the U.A.E. in priority sectors as wide-ranging as aerospace, infrastructure and transportation, communication technology, education technology, environment and climate change, food and water security, and more.<sup>7</sup> There are further updates to the U.A.E. Offset Program, which can be found nicely summarized at <https://www.bakerbotts.com/thought-leadership/publications/2019/june/the-uae>.
- Reconciliation between Gulf States: Bridging the divide between Qatar and the coalition of the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, and Egypt will take more time. Recent developments in the reconciliation process involving the re-opening of air and naval routes are positive developments. There is much more progress to be made and setbacks may occur in the reconciliation process. However, all states share an interest in a strong GCC with close security ties to the United States that can jointly address regional challenges.

Ultimately, when taken together in their totality, these trends mean the U.S.-U.A.E. bilateral defense and security relationship has only grown stronger and portend even deeper and closer cooperation in the years ahead.



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## HISTORY

The United States has enjoyed robust 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 partners. 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.<sup>8</sup>

Following the cessation of combat, the U.S. military maintained a presence in the U.A.E., which hosted the U.S. 763<sup>rd</sup> Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron in its mission to enforce the no-fly zone over southern Iraq.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> An updated Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) went into force on May 24, 2019 that, among other things, serves to highlight both nations' commitment to a collaborative approach in defeating terrorism within the region.<sup>11</sup>



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

Since the First Gulf War, the U.A.E. has partnered with the U.S. in every major U.S.-led military coalition, save for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Indeed, 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.<sup>12</sup> In turn, the U.S. provided logistics and intelligence support for U.A.E. operations in Yemen.

In recent years, shared concerns over Iran's regional meddling 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.



*U.A.E. Minister of State for Defense HE Mohamed Al Bowardi Enters 2019 IDEX Dinner*



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.

## 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 strategically important 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 3,000 American military personnel, belonging mostly to the U.S. Air Force's 380<sup>th</sup> Expeditionary Wing stationed at Al-Dhafra Air Base.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> Alongside these operations, the U.S. has also deployed F-35 aircraft to Al Dhafra.<sup>15</sup>



*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.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a number of U.S. military personnel have reportedly been stationed at Fujairah port as well.<sup>17</sup> U.S. Navy ships have also visited Zayed Port and Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi.<sup>18</sup>

## 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> The AWC also operates an Integrated Air and Missile Defense Center (IAMDC) and supports a joint terminal attack controller schoolhouse, combat search and rescue training, and academic courses.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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 Union 14: In January 2021, U.S. and U.A.E. land forces commenced an 11-day series of joint military exercises in Abu Dhabi named "Iron Union 14."<sup>24</sup> These joint exercises are the latest in a series of annual joint exercises between the two nations in the region.



*U.S., Egyptian, and Emirati ships take part in Eagle Salute*

- Joint Crisis Response Exercise: In January 2021, the U.S. Marines Corps' Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force – Crisis Response and the U.A.E. Presidential Guard joined together in a military exercise in Kuwait consisting of live-fire training and small-unit tactics.<sup>25</sup>



- Live Fire Exercise: In August 2020, the U.S. and U.A.E. conducted joint air operations in support of a maritime surface warfare exercise in the Arabian Gulf.<sup>26</sup>
- Native Fury: In March 2020, U.S. and U.A.E. forces participated in a biennial joint exercise at Al-Hamra Military Base.<sup>27</sup>
- Eager Lion: In August and September 2019, the U.S. and U.A.E. joined 20 other countries in participating in the annual “Eager Lion” military exercises in Jordan.<sup>28</sup>
- Iniohos 2019: In April 2019, U.S. and U.A.E. forces once again participated in a complex military exercise in Greece named “Iniohos.” Other nations participating in this aerial exercise included Italy, Cyprus, and Israel.<sup>29</sup>

Of note, the U.A.E. has also joined Greece, Egypt, and Israel in joint exercises, most recently the joint Greek-Egyptian-Cypriot Medusa-10, from November through December 2020 off the coast of Alexandria.<sup>30</sup> The partnership between these nations comes in the midst of tensions with Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>31</sup>

## **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 military<sup>i</sup> and made substantial investments in training and equipment modernization.<sup>32</sup> U.S. defense companies have benefitted greatly from this increase in spending, as the U.A.E. is one of the largest customers for the FMS program.<sup>33</sup>

Most recently, in January 2021, the U.S. and U.A.E. signed a letter of agreement for the U.A.E. to purchase up to \$23.3 billion of defense equipment, including manned and unmanned aircraft, along with munitions.<sup>34</sup> This historic purchase comes on the heels of the U.A.E.’s signing of the Abraham Accords, normalizing relations between the U.A.E. and Israel.

Important components of this sales are as follows:

- F-35 Aircraft: The U.S. State Department approved the U.A.E.’s purchase proposal for up to 50 F-35 Lightning II aircraft, totaling approximately \$10.4 billion dollars.<sup>35</sup> This fifth-generation fighter can hold up to 5,700 pounds of internal ordinance, with the option to convert the fighter to “beast mode” carrying a load of 22,000 pounds of internal and external ordinance combined. The F-35 Lightning II is compatible with the Raytheon AIM-120 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM), Raytheon AIM 9X Sidewinder, and the General Dynamics Mark 84 bomb.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

- MQ-9B UAVs: The State Department also approved the U.A.E.'s purchase proposal for up to 18 General Atomics MQ-9B SkyGuardian Unmanned Aerial Systems. The MQ-9B SkyGuardian contains hardware and software upgrades to its predecessor, the MQ-9 Reaper. This Unmanned Aerial System is designed to survive lightning and bird strikes, as well as a variety of other flying conditions.<sup>37</sup> This approved purchase totals approximately \$2.97 billion.
- Munitions: As a part of the approved purchase proposals, the U.S. Department of State additionally approved the purchase of air-to-ground munitions, to include the Raytheon AGM-154E Joint Stand-Off Weapon-Extended Range cruise missiles.<sup>38</sup> This State Department approved purchase includes other ancillary items as well, totaling about \$10 billion.<sup>39</sup>

Notably, discussions continue on possible future purchases of Boeing EA-18G Growler Jets. Nothing has yet been approved nor solidified.

These significant new sales follow a long track record by the U.A.E. of purchasing top-of-the-line U.S. defense equipment:

- Fighter Jets: The U.A.E. Air Force currently has a fleet of approximately 74 F-16 Block 60 "Desert Falcon" aircraft, which were manufactured by Lockheed Martin in Texas.<sup>40</sup> 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), Raytheon AIM-9 SIDEWINDER tactical missile, Raytheon High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile (HARM), Raytheon AGM-65 Maverick air-to-surface missile, and Boeing Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM). In August 2018, the U.A.E. signed a Letter of Offer and Acceptance (LOA) for 300 AIM-9X Block II missiles. Moreover, in February 2019, the U.A.E. awarded Raytheon a \$1.55 billion contract to supply its air force with platform systems to launch missiles.
- Helicopters: The U.A.E. has long operated a fleet of Boeing AH-64D Apache Longbow attack helicopters,<sup>41</sup> equipped with Lockheed Martin Hellfire missiles.<sup>42</sup> The country also operates a number of Sikorsky (part of Lockheed Martin) UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters,<sup>43</sup> Boeing CH-47F Chinook helicopters, and Bell 407 light attack helicopters.<sup>44</sup> In October 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense announced a deal for Boeing to provide the U.A.E. with 17 Apache (8 refurbished and 9 new) AH-64E aircraft.<sup>45</sup>



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



- Transport Aircraft: The U.A.E. has a fleet of advanced Boeing C-17 Globemaster III airlifters,<sup>46</sup> for which the U.S. State Department approved the sale of AN/AAQ-24(V)N Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures (LAIRCM) equipment.<sup>47</sup> The U.A.E. also has six Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules aircraft.<sup>48</sup> 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. In so doing, the U.A.E. became the first non-NATO customer for this drone, which it acquired 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. The U.A.E. also operates Javelin anti-tank guided missiles produced by a joint venture between Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.<sup>49</sup>
- 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.<sup>50</sup> In February 2019, the U.A.E. awarded Raytheon a \$350 million contract to supply the U.A.E. with Patriot missiles.<sup>51</sup> Separately, 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.<sup>52</sup> In so doing, the U.A.E. became the first international customer for this advanced system.<sup>53</sup> In addition, the U.A.E. operates HAWK medium-range surface-to-air missile batteries supplied by Raytheon.<sup>54</sup> Raytheon has also integrated Rolling Airframe Missiles and other missile systems onto the U.A.E.'s Baynunah class of ships since 2006.<sup>55</sup>
- 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 approved the sale of up to 4,500 refurbished MRAPs from U.S. Army stock as Excess Defense Articles (EDA).<sup>56</sup>

It is important to note that all of the major systems above are supported by a wide array of subsystems and other defense products made by other U.S. companies. Moreover, it is a major priority that the above systems are supported on the backend with U.S.-developed software and training. For instance, in 2017, Harris

Corporation won a \$189 million contract to provide an integrated battle management system to the U.A.E. Armed Forces.<sup>57</sup>

## **JOINT CONFRONTATION OF REGIONAL CHALLENGES**

U.S.-U.A.E. basing agreements, joint training, and weapons sales are key components of a broader bilateral partnership that – through diplomatic and economic as well as military measures – 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 ensure Iran’s nuclear program is peaceful. Despite historical commercial and financial ties between the U.A.E. and Iran, the Emirates pursued robust implementation of 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.<sup>58</sup> This move helped exert the requisite financial pressure on Iran to bring it to the negotiating table, and it helped lead to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to “ensure that Iran’s nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful.”<sup>59</sup>

Following President Trump’s 2018 decision to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA, the U.A.E. Foreign Ministry expressed support for this stance, encouraging the international community “to respond positively to President Trump’s position to rid the Middle East of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>60</sup> Moreover, it cooperated with the Trump Administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran.

As a Biden Administration enters office, the U.A.E. is poised to once again work alongside the United States to ensure the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program. As a candidate, President Biden said he would like the United States to rejoin the JCPOA, if Iran returns to compliance with the deal. The U.A.E. will likely seek to be involved or consulted regarding any such negotiations with the Iranian regime and will expect that Iran’s other troublesome behaviors be addressed as part of any new negotiations with Iran.

Beyond the JCPOA, the U.S. and U.A.E. have collaborated to combat Iranian meddling in the region and expose Iran’s regional proliferation activities, such as those in Yemen. The U.A.E. was part of a Saudi-led coalition that sought to restore Yemen’s legitimate government following the military takeover of much of the country by Iran-backed Houthi rebels. In support of the territorial defense of its allies, the U.S. provided intelligence and



*U.A.E. Military Personnel*

logistics assistance, including aerial refueling of aircraft.<sup>61</sup> <sup>ii</sup> It directly prevented Iranian weapons flows to the Houthis.<sup>62</sup> It also publicly exposed Iran's proliferation of weapons in Yemen through the Iranian Materiel Display at Fort Bolling.<sup>63</sup> While the U.A.E. withdrew from Yemen in 2019, the U.S. and U.A.E. continue to share the goal of curtailing nefarious Iranian influence in that country and elsewhere in the region.

At the same time, the U.S. and U.A.E. have worked together to combat the threat of Al-Qa'ida. The U.A.E., in partnership with U.S. Special Forces, 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> Later, in August 2017, 2,000 Yemeni forces, backed by dozens of U.A.E. advisors and a handful of U.S. Special Operations commandos, began an offensive against AQAP in Shabwa province, in what was the largest military operation against AQAP since April 2016.<sup>66</sup> In August 2018, U.S. officials expressed confidence that a U.S. drone strike killed Al-Qa'ida master bomb-maker Ibrahim Al-Asiri, who was behind the 2009 underwear bomber plot.<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup> 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. has also hosted substantial numbers of international forces participating in the airstrikes against Daesh.<sup>69</sup>



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

The U.A.E. and U.S. have also worked together to achieve shared objectives in Iraq. Although wary of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.A.E. allowed American military use of its facilities for operations in Iraq.<sup>70</sup> 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 with the country.<sup>71</sup> That year, the

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<sup>ii</sup> In November 2018, Saudi Arabia and the United States decided to suspend U.S. refueling of aircraft to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

U.A.E. also forgave \$7 billion in bilateral Saddam Hussein-era debt;<sup>72</sup> in 2012, it forgave an additional \$5.8 billion.<sup>73</sup>

In more recent years, the U.A.E. has sought to build bridges across the Iraqi political spectrum and counter Iranian influence. Following the departure of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, U.A.E. leaders engaged more broadly with his successor, former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, hosting him in December 2014.<sup>74</sup> In August 2017, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the U.A.E.'s Armed Forces, hosted Iraqi nationalist cleric Moqtada Al Sadr in Abu Dhabi.<sup>75</sup> In November 2018, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed hosted new Iraqi President and Kurdish politician Barham Ahmed Salih in the U.A.E. capital as well. The U.A.E. continues to engage with Iraqi authorities across the sectarian divide in pursuit of shared interests and regional stability.

Meanwhile, the U.A.E. has supported the reconstruction of the country. In April 2018, the U.A.E. agreed to fund the rebuilding of Mosul's famous 800-year-old Al Nuri Mosque, which was where Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi announced in 2014 that he had established a "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria.<sup>76</sup> Daesh subsequently destroyed this iconic cultural landmark before being expelled from the city.

Finally, the U.A.E. has participated in coalition efforts in Afghanistan. The U.A.E. made its military facilities available to U.S. and other allied forces involved in ousting the Taliban.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, U.A.E. troops were the only Arab combat force to take part in the mission in Afghanistan, and a 250-person contingent of elite Presidential Guards deployed to the country in 2003, remaining in the country even after the December 2014 transition to Afghan-led combat.<sup>78</sup> In addition to deploying Presidential Guards to Afghanistan, from 2012-2014, as other allies were reducing their commitment in the country, the U.A.E. deployed six F-16s, as well as other fixed-wing and rotor aircraft, to Kandahar, Afghanistan.<sup>79</sup> U.A.E. and Australian pilots were the only non-NATO forces trusted to fly close air support missions to protect coalition troops.<sup>80</sup>

In 2017, tragedy struck the U.A.E. in Afghanistan. In February of that year, the U.A.E. Ambassador to Afghanistan, His Excellency Juma Mohammed Abdullah al-Kaabi, died from wounds sustained during an explosion at the governor's compound in Kandahar.<sup>81</sup> U.S. forces in Afghanistan supported the U.A.E.'s response and recovery teams' efforts after that attack.

The U.A.E. has also worked to promote peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan. In December 2018, the U.A.E. hosted talks between Afghan Taliban representatives and U.S. officials in Abu Dhabi to bring an end to the 17-year-old war. The Emirates has also given significant financial support to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Finally, the U.A.E. and the U.S. have shared an interest in stabilizing the Horn of Africa. Although the U.A.E. currently has strained ties with Somalia's federal government, it has invested heavily in the economic prosperity and security of the



Horn writ large, making landmark investments in regional ports and military bases. Notably, in the summer of 2018, the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia helped broker a landmark rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, ending 20 years of war.<sup>82</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo lauded this agreement, which he said will “further the cause of stability, security, and development in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea.”<sup>83</sup>

## **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 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.<sup>84</sup>

The U.S. and U.A.E. also cooperate 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.<sup>85</sup>

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.<sup>86</sup> The country also participates in the U.S. Department of Energy’s Megaports Initiative, to improve detection of nuclear materials in cargo containers.<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup>

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, in a program that was the first of its kind in the Middle East. The U.S. has also assisted in training Emirati immigration and customs officials.<sup>89</sup> In July 2017, the U.A.E. worked with U.S. authorities to implement extra security measures at U.A.E. airports after the U.S. temporarily instituted a ban on passengers carrying laptops in cabins on flights to the U.S. from the U.A.E. and 7 other countries.<sup>90</sup>

The U.A.E. has also worked closely 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.<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> Building on this foundation, 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.<sup>93</sup> The U.S., U.A.E., and U.K. also co-lead the “Counter-Messaging Working Group” for the Global Coalition against Daesh.<sup>94</sup>



Beyond these bilateral initiatives, it is important to note the U.A.E. serves as a regional leader in promoting and inculcating the values of tolerance, creating a powerful counternarrative to extremist messaging. In February 2019, the U.A.E. hosted Pope Francis for the first ever visit by a Pontiff to the Arabian Peninsula. In September of that year, the U.A.E. announced the construction of the Abrahamic Family House, bringing together a mosque, church, and synagogue in Abu Dhabi. More recently, the signing of the Abraham Accords between the U.A.E. and Israel have led to an outpouring of expressions of support for the U.A.E.’s Jewish community and interfaith tolerance.

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.<sup>95</sup> Three additional detainees were transferred to the U.A.E. on the final day of former President Barack Obama’s presidency.<sup>96</sup>

## **SHARED SUPPORT FOR STRONG REGIONAL ALLIANCES**

At the same time that they have developed a strong bilateral security relationship, both the United States and the U.A.E. have historically pushed for the creation of a strong GCC with close ties to 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 GCC officials meet jointly at regular GCC policy gatherings including the U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum and annual U.S.-GCC Defense Ministerial. The U.S. has also long promoted a coordinated GCC-wide ballistic missile defense network to protect against Iran.

In turn, the U.A.E. has historically 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,<sup>97</sup> and it volunteered the next year to host a GCC police force known as GCC-Pol.<sup>98</sup>



Moves toward greater GCC integration had been sidetracked by the Gulf crisis, which saw the severing of relations in June 2017 between the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, on the one hand, and Qatar, on the other. However, relations between the GCC as a whole, to include between the U.A.E. and Qatar, are expected to improve. In January of 2021, Kuwait and the U.S. brokered a joint declaration between the six members of the GCC, pledging restored collaborative efforts between the neighbors.<sup>99</sup>

## **2019 DEFENSE COOPERATION AGREEMENT**

In May 2017, the U.S. and U.A.E. signed a new Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) so as to better “reflect the broad range of military-to-military cooperation that the U.A.E. and U.S. enjoy today.”<sup>100</sup> This updated agreement was publicly revealed on May 15, 2017 during Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the U.A.E. Armed Forces His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed’s visit to Washington, D.C., where he met with both then-U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and U.S. President Donald Trump. The accord went into force during the visit of then-National Security Adviser John Bolton to Abu Dhabi in May 2019.

Thanks in part to this revised DCA, the fundamentals of the U.S.-U.A.E. security and defense relationship will likely remain strong for the foreseeable future. Personnel from the U.S. Air Force’s 380<sup>th</sup> 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.

## **2021 DESIGNATION OF U.A.E. AS MAJOR SECURITY PARTNER**

On 16 January 2021, the Trump Administration designated the U.A.E. and Bahrain as Major Security Partners. This never-before-used classification of the two nations has further demonstrated U.S. confidence in its relationship with the U.A.E. The White House tied this designation to the normalization of relations between the U.A.E.,

Bahrain, and Israel. Additionally, the White House stated the new designation, “reflects (the U.A.E.’s) extraordinary courage, determination and leadership” while also noting the two nations have been involved in many military exercises.<sup>101</sup>



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