



POLICY REPORTS

AN ENDURING PARTNERSHIP:

The U.S.-U.A.E. Defense & Security Relationship

Feb 2025



PREFACE

The U.S.-U.A.E. relationship has witnessed significant improvement in an already robust longstanding bilateral defense and security partnership since the publication of the sixth edition of this report in February 2023.

Following are key developments in the last two years that have impacted the U.S.-U.A.E. bilateral relationship:

- **New Administration:** Former President Donald Trump was re-elected as President of the United States in the November 2024 elections. While the regional landscape has changed dramatically since President Trump was last in office, his legacy of the Abraham Accords remains intact, with hopes for new such agreements in his current term, including with Saudi Arabia. During President Trump's first term in office, the U.A.E. and the United States remained strong partners, and they signed a letter of agreement for the U.A.E. to purchase up to \$23.3 billion of defense equipment, including the F-35 joint strike fighter. Notably, this sale was paused once the Biden Administration took office in 2021.



H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed & President Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago

The outlook for the U.S.-U.A.E. bilateral relationship under President Trump appears exceptionally positive, particularly in the areas of trade and investment, with artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced technologies in focus. In addition to increased economic cooperation, it is expected that the U.A.E. will continue to play a crucial role as a security partner to the United States, and President Trump will look to the U.A.E. as a stabilizing force and strategic partner in the region, leading to increased cooperation and growth in the U.S.-U.A.E. defense relationship.

- **Historic visit of H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Washington, D.C.:** On September 23, 2024, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan embarked on an unprecedented visit to Washington, D.C., the first sitting U.A.E. President to visit the White House. During his visit, His Highness met with then-President Biden and Vice President Harris, then-former President Donald Trump, and key members of Congress and private sector leaders. This visit marked the leaders' fourth bilateral meeting in the Biden-Harris Administration.¹

This historic visit showcased the depth of the bilateral U.S.-U.A.E. political and security relationship, and significant expansion of geoeconomic ties in the areas of space and aerospace, defense, digital technology, and artificial intelligence. The U.A.E. committed to remaining a strategic partner in the region and maintaining bilateral defense cooperation with the United States. The leaders pledged to pursue new opportunities to strengthen their economic and defense partnership; promote peace and stability across the Middle East and wider region; and deliver global leadership on issues of shared importance.



H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed & President Joe Biden in the Oval Office

- **U.A.E. designation as Major Defense Partner of the United States:** During His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's historic visit, then-President Joe Biden recognized the U.A.E. as a Major Defense Partner of the United States, underscoring the U.S. and U.A.E.'s deepening security partnership and cooperation in advanced technology and defense acquisition, and shared interest in preventing conflict and de-escalation. The U.A.E. is joined only by India as a Major Defense Partner of the United States. As stated in the U.S.-U.A.E. Leaders' Joint Statement, "this unique designation will allow for unprecedented cooperation through joint training, exercises, and military-to-military collaboration, between the military forces of the United States, the U.A.E., and India, as well as other common military partners, in furtherance of regional stability."² This Major Defense Partner designation is expected to lead to increased cooperation between the two countries, including cooperation among the trilateral partners in order to prevent future conflicts and maintain de-escalation in the region.
- **War in Gaza:** On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched the deadliest terrorist attack in Israel's history from the Gaza Strip into Israel, killing over 1,200 civilians and taking 251 hostages. This attack resulted in wider conflict between Israel and Hamas, including multiple airstrikes and ground invasions by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). As of the time of publishing, over 41,000 Palestinians have been killed as a result of this conflict and 90% of Gaza's residents have been displaced.³

The conflict spread to neighboring countries, drawing in Hizballah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. The escalating conflict led to instability in Lebanon, continued threats to shipping lanes in the Straits of Hormuz and in the Gulf, and the toppling of the Assad government in Syria.

The U.A.E. has maintained normal diplomatic relations with Israel as a result of the Abraham Accords, while advocating for an immediate ceasefire, continued humanitarian access, release of the hostages, respect for international law, and “a renewed commitment by Israel and a reformed Palestinian Authority to the two-state-solution.”⁴ The U.A.E. continues to provide humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in Gaza, including the opening of field hospitals, conducting of aid delivery via a maritime corridor and aerial drops, and housing more than 1,200 Palestinian evacuees, including sick and injured children, in Abu Dhabi.⁵

The U.A.E. is also playing a role in helping Israel and Hamas achieve and maintain a lasting ceasefire, and is actively participating in discussions towards a plan for a post-war Gaza. The U.A.E. continues to play a role in maintaining regional stability and reaffirmed its commitment to work with the United States to end the conflict.

While the Trump administration signals a new direction for the bilateral relationship, ongoing conflicts and pre-existing instability in the region and globally will continue to impact the bilateral defense and security relationship. In addition, changes within the U.A.E. defense and security infrastructure will also continue to impact the U.A.E. procurement process.

- **Ongoing War in Ukraine:** The Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 remains a major focus for the United States and many countries around the world. The United States has committed military equipment and funding to Ukraine in support of the war effort, shifting the focus of U.S. defense companies to the provision of the equipment under an expedited timeline. In addition, the Ukraine war has led to increased demand for U.S. military equipment from NATO allies. This increased demand far surpasses current defense supplies, which has forced other defense sales to the back burner, leaving no indication that this increased demand will slow in the near future.

Politically, the United States and the U.A.E. diverged in some respects in their policy towards the war in Ukraine, frustrating some aspects of the relationship. The U.A.E. faced criticism for abstaining from the initial UN Security Council Resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine,⁶ but subsequently voted in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution in March 2022. The U.A.E. has also been criticized for its perceived reluctance to take action to relieve pressure on oil prices, benefiting from increased trade with Russia, and its hosting of Russian oligarchs and emigres. However, there is expectation that President Trump’s re-election may change the dynamics of the conflict and could result in a ceasefire.

- **Continued Regional Instability:** While the war in Gaza has exacerbated regional instability, ongoing conflicts in several countries in the region, as well as in Africa, remain a topic of concern for the U.A.E., which continue to fuel demand for defense and security spending. Instability in Yemen and the threat of the Houthis to shipping lines and to the territorial integrity of the U.A.E. and its partners remain concerns. Conflict in Sudan, instability in Libya and Lebanon, and the threat of Iran and its proxies, remain foreign policy challenges for the region, which have been further complicated by the war in Gaza.

The January 2025 announcement of a ceasefire in Gaza, which was preceded by the new government in Lebanon and toppling of Assad's regime in Syria, signal new dynamics that could portend relative peace and stability in the region if sustained.

- **U.A.E.'s Relationship with China:** The U.A.E. continues to maintain strong economic ties with China, with energy and non-oil trade at the forefront. According to the Congressional Research Service, the U.A.E. was China's largest non-oil trading partner in the Middle East in 2023, with bilateral trade reaching \$81 billion in 2023. China continues to invest heavily in the U.A.E. across various sectors helping the U.A.E. diversify its economy away from oil and gas. Over the last several years, U.S. officials had expressed concern over the U.A.E.'s close technology relationship with China. However, in 2024, the U.A.E. took deliberate steps to pivot from China to the United States for its advanced technology partnerships. The \$1.5B G42-Microsoft deal in early 2024 heralded a new era of technology and AI cooperation between the United States and the U.A.E.

Despite positive developments in the overall technology sphere, the United States continues to remain concerned about the strengthening U.A.E.-China defense relationship. In August 2023, the U.A.E. and China conducted joint aerial combat exercises in Xinjiang, China for the first time, dubbed "Falcon Shield 2023" and conducted a second iteration of the exercise in July 2024.⁷ These U.A.E. exercises with China are an ongoing concern for the United States.

- **Expanded role of Tawazun:** Historically, since its creation in 1991, Tawazun has overseen the U.A.E.'s 'offsets' program, and it has held stakes in various local defense-related companies. However, in February 2021, Tawazun took charge of the U.A.E.'s military procurement processes and has been given "full control over all defense and security acquisitions for the U.A.E. armed forces and Abu Dhabi police."⁸ Tawazun is also in charge of preparing, managing, and allocating the budget for all defense and security procurement. This new mandate is accompanied by additional responsibilities including the management of the Tawazun Economic

Program, development of defense technology and innovation, and development of local human capacity through training and education programs. The Tawazun Economic Program is the extension of its “offsets” program which requires defense companies to invest a portion of the local sales revenue on projects aimed at developing local capacity through technology transfer and contribution to local manufacturing. By empowering Tawazun with procurement and “offsets”, the U.A.E. government has made it clear that developing indigenous defense capability through local manufacturing and technology transfer will be essential components of all defense and security contracts moving forward. As the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, D.C. noted, “transfers of technology could become an absolute condition for defense contracts moving forward,” instead of other rationales. While the authorities of Tawazun have been made clear, execution of these new authorities remain complicated and opaque in the view of some stakeholders. Tawazun continues to undergo organizational changes, further complicating the procurement process.

- **Continued growth of EDGE Group:** 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, acquiring foreign defense companies, 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 ranks among the 25 top global arms companies in the world, the first in the region to do so.⁹ Over the last five years, EDGE has continued to expand its portfolio considerably through significant acquisitions and increased local production capability. In December 2024, on the occasion of the company’s fifth anniversary, the company had more than 200 “cutting-edge solutions across air, land, sea, and cyber domains” with products in 91 countries and \$5 billion in 2024 annual revenue.¹⁰



EDGE Group’s Chairman of the Board of Directors H.E. Faisal Al Bannai addresses IDEX 2023 Dinner guests

The focus of EDGE is to increase local production capability in order to reduce the U.A.E.’s dependence on foreign military equipment. At the U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council IDEX Dinner in February 2023, keynote speaker H.E. Faisal Al Bannai, Chairman of the Board of Directors at EDGE Group, told the audience that “EDGE Group intends to partner with international defense and aerospace companies that are committed to joint manufacturing in the U.A.E.,

as well as joint research and development and knowledge sharing.” He was clear that the U.A.E. is now moving forward in building partnerships encompassing far more than traditional sales and supplier relationships and said that success for U.S. companies in the U.A.E. in the future would require these new components.

In addition, the group is now a major global exporter of military and security equipment, expanding its presence in Europe and Latin America. The core areas of focus for EDGE are autonomous systems, smart weapons and electronic warfare, intelligence, and secure communications systems. EDGE Group made headlines at IDEX 2023 with its subsidiaries accounting for \$4 billion of total IDEX 2023 purchases.

IDEX 2023 Deals at a Glance

- ◇ The U.A.E. closed IDEX 2023 with \$6.4 billion in purchases.
- ◇ Tawazun Council and GM Defense signed an MoU to collaborate on developing advanced mobility and power solutions.
- ◇ Tawazun Council and Boeing signed an agreement to open a complex for unmanned systems at Tawazun Industrial Park.
- ◇ EDGE Group subsidiaries accounted for \$4 billion of total IDEX 2023 purchases.

In the context of ongoing and new challenges and opportunities outlined above, U.S. defense and aerospace companies can expect new avenues for partnership, collaboration, and sales in the coming years. The growth of technology cooperation in the non-defense environment will lead to opportunities for technology cooperation in the defense sector as well. Positive strategic and political progress stemming from the White House visit and perhaps accelerated by the change in administration in the United States will also lead to increased defense and security cooperation. Changing regional dynamics and realignments will also contribute to increased opportunities for defense partnerships.

- **New opportunities for investment and partnership in technology:** As part of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan’s historic visit to Washington, D.C. in September 2024, then-U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and U.A.E. National Security Advisor H.H. Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan “reaffirmed the shared intention of the United States and the U.A.E. to promote cooperation in artificial intelligence (AI) and related technologies.”¹¹ During the Biden Administration, U.S. technology companies made significant investments in the U.A.E., such as Microsoft’s \$1.5 billion



H.H. Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed & Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella

investment in Emirati AI and technology company G42, and allowed for export of advanced AI chips to the U.A.E.

On January 7, 2025, Mr. Hussain Sajwani, Chairman and Founder of Emirati developer company DAMAC Properties, announced a \$20 billion investment for data centers in the United States. On January 21, 2025, President Trump announced a \$500B new AI-focused project named “Project Stargate,” which will be funded by Japan’s Softbank, Oracle, OpenAI, and U.A.E.-based MGX. Under the Trump Administration, the U.A.E. is likely to significantly increase investment in AI and advanced technology in the United States, a possible benefit for defense companies seeking to establish defense technology partnerships with U.A.E. entities.

- **New regional order:** The U.A.E. continues to play a critical role in the broader region and will continue to look to do so, including in Gaza, Iran, Syria, and Africa. The U.A.E. may seek to play a role in post-war Gaza, and took part in recent discussions with the United States and Israel regarding its participation in a “provisional administration of post-war Gaza until a reformed Palestinian Authority is able to take charge.”¹² Along those lines, the U.A.E. continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Iran to avoid greater conflict in the region. The U.A.E. and Iran held a meeting of the bilateral joint economic cooperation commission to discuss trade and investment issues, the first in over a decade.¹³

The ousting of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 has led to the resumption of diplomatic activities between the U.A.E. and Syria, with H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan welcoming the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Syrian Transitional Government to Abu Dhabi on January 6, 2025. The U.A.E. seeks to aid in Syria’s sovereignty and stability as a new government takes shape. Additionally, the U.A.E. has broadened its investments in Africa, and will continue to play a role in the Horn of Africa, particularly in countries such as Somalia and Sudan.

Ultimately, when the above developments are taken together in their totality, this is a critical time for the U.S.-U.A.E. defense and security relationship and for U.S. companies to demonstrate their long-term commitment to partnership with the U.A.E.

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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 nearly \$31.4 billion¹⁴ in annual bilateral trade. Moreover, they have built deep and growing defense and security ties.

This defense and security cooperation between the United States 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 liberation of Kuwait City.¹⁵

After the war, the U.S. military established a persistent presence in the U.A.E., which hosted the U.S. 763rd Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron in its mission to enforce the no-fly zone over southern Iraq.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ An updated Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) came into effect on May 24, 2019 that, among other things, serves to highlight both nations' commitment to a collaborative approach in defeating terrorism within the region.¹⁸



*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 United States in every major U.S.-led military coalition, with the exception of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The U.A.E. joined the United States and actively participated in operations in Somalia, Bosnia-Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya, and the campaign against the "Islamic State" (Daesh) in Syria and Iraq. The U.A.E. is the only Arab country to participate in six coalition actions with the United States.¹⁹ In turn, the U.S. provided logistics and intelligence support for U.A.E. operations in Yemen.

In recent years, despite some policy differences, shared concerns over Iran's nuclear program and its nefarious activities in the region, and the rise of extremism in the region have led to further deepening of the relationship between the two countries. Today, the defense relationship is generally strong and is bolstered by the hosting of U.S. troops in the U.A.E., joint exercises and training programs, billions of dollars in arms sales, and military and intelligence cooperation in the U.A.E. and abroad. Over the years, this strategic relationship has contributed significantly to the development of the U.A.E. as a key security and military presence in the region and a strong partner of the United States in a volatile and dangerous region.

HOSTING THE U.S. MILITARY

Both the United States and the U.A.E. benefit greatly from the presence of U.S. military personnel and pre-positioned equipment in a strategically important location like the U.A.E. U.S. military presence in the U.A.E., along with that in other GCC countries, serves as a deterrent to hostile actors and allows for greater rapid response capability in the broader region.

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.²⁰ 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.²¹ Alongside these operations, the United States has also deployed F-35 aircraft to Al Dhafra.²²



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 for routine service stops every year than any other port outside the United States.²³ Moreover, a number of U.S. military personnel are stationed at Fujairah port.²⁴ U.S. Navy ships have also visited Zayed Port and Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi.²⁵

JOINT TRAINING AND EXERCISES

American and Emirati troops regularly train together and conduct joint bilateral and multilateral exercises in order to ensure readiness, advance interoperability, promote information sharing, and build trust. About 600–800 U.A.E. military personnel travel to the United States every year for military education, training and partnership, largely through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and IMET program.²⁶ 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 across the region. AWC holds biannual seven-week Advanced Tactical Leadership Courses (ATLC) that are designed to train pilots on how to become mission commanders.²⁷ 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.²⁸

U.A.E. military personnel also participate in training exercises 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.²⁹ Participation in the annual exercise is limited to the best and most capable air forces. U.A.E pilots have also participated in Green Flag training exercises, which are focused on air-to-ground operations.³⁰ Meanwhile, the U.A.E.'s Presidential Guard participates in unit enhancement training with partnered U.S. Marine units at the Marine Corp Air Ground Combat Center, and also trains 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 United States and the U.A.E. engage in a plethora of other bilateral and multilateral military exercises in the United States, the U.A.E., and throughout the region. These exercises include:

- **Iron Defender:** In October 2024, U.S. NAVCENT and U.A.E. naval forces conducted a 10-day maritime exercise in the Arabian Gulf. The exercise aimed to broaden levels of cooperation, support long-term regional security, and enhance interoperability.³¹
- **Eager Lion:** In May 2024, the United States and U.A.E. joined 34 other countries in participating in the annual “Eager Lion” military exercises in Jordan.³²
- **Native Fury:** In May 2024, the U.S Marine Corps led a bilateral operations and logistics exercise with U.A.E. and Saudi forces. Training exercises took place at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia and in the U.A.E.³³
- **Desert Flag 9:** In April – May 2024, U.S. forces participated in the Desert Flag exercise, hosted by the U.A.E. The United States was one of 10 participating countries, aimed at building upon a cohesive fighting force in defense of the Arabian Peninsula.³⁴

- **Joint Professional Development Course:** In August 2023, U.S. Airforce and U.A.E. Armed Forces conducted a joint professional development course at Al-Dhafra Air Base, “strengthening interoperability and reinforcing the partnership between the two nations.”³⁵
- **Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation:** In February 2023, U.S. and U.A.E. soldiers took part in training exercises at Fort Polk in Louisiana. This was the first time that a military partner from the U.S. CENTCOM area of operations participated at the company level at a combat training center in the United States.³⁶
- **IMX/CE:** In February - March 2023, the United States and the U.A.E. participated in the International Maritime Exercise (IMX) combined with exercise Cutlass Express (CE) in Bahrain. This exercise focused on combined command and control, maritime security, mine countermeasures, unmanned systems and artificial intelligence integration, and global health.³⁷
- **HAWKEX:** In May 2022, U.S. and U.A.E. forces partnered together to conduct the semi-annual Hawk Exercise at Al-Dhafra Air Base.³⁸



U.S. and Emirati ships take part in Iron Defender 2024

Of note, in November 2021, the U.A.E. joined Bahrain, Israel, and the United States NAVCENT in a “multilateral maritime security operations exercise” in the Red Sea. This was the first ever naval exercise involving these four countries.³⁹

Additionally, on January 26, 2023, the United States CENTCOM and Israel Defense Forces completed “the largest U.S.-Israel partnered exercise in history,” known as Juniper Oak 23.2.⁴⁰ This exercise integrated U.S. and Israeli fifth-generation fighter assets, along with the USS George H.W. Bush Carrier Strike Group, unmanned aerial vehicles, strategic bombers, and precision fires.⁴¹ Some planners are advocating for the inclusion of the U.A.E. and Bahrain in future iterations of the Juniper exercise series between the United States and Israel.

PURCHASE 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 militaryⁱ and made substantial investments in training and equipment modernization.⁴² U.S. defense companies have benefitted greatly from this increase in spending, as the U.A.E. became one of the largest customers for the FMS program.⁴³

ⁱ 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.

The U.A.E. maintains a long and consistent track record of purchasing top-of-the-line U.S. defense equipment:

- Fighter Jets: The U.A.E. Air Force currently has a fleet of approximately 78 F-16 Block 60 “Desert Falcon” aircraft, which were manufactured by Lockheed Martin in Texas.⁴⁴ 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,⁴⁵ equipped with Lockheed Martin Hellfire missiles.⁴⁶ The country also operates a number of Sikorsky (part of Lockheed Martin) UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters,⁴⁷ Boeing CH-47F Chinook helicopters, and Bell 407 light attack helicopters.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹



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,⁵⁰ for which the U.S. State Department approved the sale of AN/AAQ-24(V)N Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures (LAIRCM) equipment.⁵¹ The U.A.E. also has six Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules aircraft.⁵² 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. In October 2024, the U.S. Government approved the possible sale of 259 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) M31A1 Unitary Pods and 203 ATACMS M57 Unitary Missiles, contracted by Lockheed Martin.⁵³ The U.A.E. also operates Javelin anti-tank guided missiles produced by a joint venture between Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.⁵⁴
- 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.⁵⁵ In February 2019, the U.A.E. awarded Raytheon a \$350 million contract to supply the U.A.E. with Patriot missiles.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ In so doing, the U.A.E. became the first international customer for this advanced system.⁵⁸ In August 2022, the U.S. Government approved a \$2.2 billion FMS sale to the U.A.E. for purchase of 96 Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) missile rounds, 2 THAAD launch control stations, and 2 THAAD tactical operations stations from Lockheed Martin.⁵⁹ In addition, the U.A.E. operates HAWK medium-range surface-to-air missile batteries supplied by Raytheon.⁶⁰ Raytheon has also integrated Rolling Airframe Missiles and other missile systems onto the U.A.E.'s Baynunah class of ships since 2006.⁶¹
- 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).⁶²
- Radar: In December 2023, the U.S. Government approved the possible sale of 18 AN/TPQ-50 Radar Systems and related equipment from SRC.⁶³

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 (now L3Harris) won a \$189 million contract to provide an integrated battle management system to the U.A.E. Armed Forces.⁶⁴

Notably, in January 2021, the United States 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.⁶⁵ The Biden Administration, however, paused the sale for review upon taking office, and, according to the Congressional Research Service, “a variety of issues, including a U.S. request for additional U.A.E. measures to ensure the security of the aircraft at U.A.E. bases, have delayed finalizing the sale, to date.”⁶⁶ In December of 2022, Iran announced that it was receiving advanced SU-35 fighter jets from Russia. U.A.E. Minister of Foreign Affairs H.H. Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed and a senior-level U.A.E. military delegation visited Washington, D.C. and officially requested to restart negotiations on the F-35 with the U.S. Government.

Important components of this sale were as follows:

- **F-35 Aircraft:** The U.S. State Department had approved the U.A.E.’s purchase proposal for up to 50 F-35 Lightning II aircraft, totaling approximately \$10.4 billion.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸
- **MQ-9B UAVs:** The State Department had 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.⁶⁹ This approved purchase totaled approximately \$2.97 billion.
- **Munitions:** As a part of the approved purchase proposals, the U.S. Department of State additionally had approved the purchase of air-to-ground munitions, to include the Raytheon AGM-154E Joint Stand-Off Weapon-Extended Range cruise missiles.⁷⁰ This State Department approved purchase included other ancillary items as well, totaling about \$10 billion.⁷¹

The delay in moving forward with this weapons package deal is an indicator of the shift in the U.S.-U.A.E. defense sales relationship in recent years. However, with the new administration, there is hope that the two countries will restart discussions on the purchase of the F35 and the associated weapons package. The demand for U.S. equipment for the war in Ukraine, coupled with a perceived political and military gap between the Biden Administration and the U.A.E. government, has seen a decline in U.S. defense sales to the U.A.E. in the last two years. This is exacerbated by the U.A.E.’s increased focus on diversification of its military acquisition partnerships, investment in local production, and an overall shift to a less militarily-aggressive foreign policy. While these trends are likely to be temporary, U.S. defense

and security companies, nonetheless, must be prepared for a much more competitive U.A.E. market for U.S. defense sales in the future.

Recent changes in the U.A.E.'s defense infrastructure, both in terms of policy and structure, have signaled an increased focus on self-sufficiency and developing indigenous capability. The expanded role of Tawazun to include procurement of equipment and management of the "offsets program" clearly indicate that future procurement decisions will have a strong local manufacturing component and will require transfer of technology. This, along with the growth of EDGE Group through acquisitions and partnerships focused on increasing the country's local production capability, further complicate how U.S. defense companies compete for and win contracts in the U.A.E. market.

With the new announcement of closer defense ties and the return of the Trump administration, there is momentum and movement towards greater cooperation between the United States and the U.A.E. However, future cooperation will largely be dependent on knowledge-sharing and transfer of technology to empower and expand local production capability in this sector.

U.A.E.'S GLOBAL PARTNERS

The U.A.E. will continue to look to the United States to procure military equipment, including weapons, vehicles, and fighter jets. Nevertheless, the U.A.E. is looking to diversify its defense acquisitions by purchasing military equipment from other U.S.-allied countries, such as France, India, and South Korea. In addition, in the last few years, the U.A.E. has purchased military and security equipment from countries such as Russia and China and continues to build defense relationships with them, ties that may further complicate the U.S.-U.A.E. defense relationship.

Russia

The U.A.E. continues to play an important diplomatic role in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, including brokering multiple prisoner exchange deals between the two countries.⁷² However, the U.A.E. retains close ties with the Russian government, with H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed and Russian President Vladimir Putin maintaining a diplomatic and economic relationship. In October 2024, President Putin remarked that "bilateral investments between Russia and the U.A.E. have reached \$7 billion"⁷³, with the U.A.E. greatly benefitting from the flight of capital and people from Ukraine and Russia as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the United States has continued to sanction individuals and entities providing support to Russia's military, including U.A.E.-based individuals and companies. U.S. Government agencies, such as the U.S.

Department of the Treasury, have expressed concerns regarding the re-export of dual-use or militarily useful electronic items to Russia by U.A.E.-based entities.⁷⁴

China

The U.A.E. and China continue to remain close economic and strategic partners in the region. The United States remains concerned about the strengthening U.A.E.-China defense relationship, which has continued to grow over the years. In August 2023, the U.A.E. and China conducted joint aerial combat exercises in Xinjiang for the first time, dubbed “Falcon Shield 2023,” and conducted a second iteration of the exercise in July 2024.⁷⁵ During both exercise iterations, the U.A.E. deployed “at least six Dassault *Mirage* 2000-9DAD/EAD fighter ground-attack aircraft”⁷⁶, fueling concerns that these exercises may present information gathering opportunities for China.

The U.A.E. also continues to purchase Chinese military equipment. At the 2023 Dubai Airshow, the U.A.E. Ministry of Defense closed a contract with China’s National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation (CATIC) to purchase a fleet of 12 L-15 advanced jet trainers for \$440 million.⁷⁷ With Emirati-Chinese defense cooperation taken into consideration, the United States is likely to continue to advocate that the U.A.E. prioritize their defense partnership with the United States, in line with the new administration’s expected hard lines on China.

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 cooperation – has contributed demonstrably to security in the Arabian Gulf region and the wider Middle East.

Israel

The U.A.E. normalized relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords, a diplomatic normalization agreement established under then-President Trump in 2020 and signed by H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.⁷⁸ Since then, the U.A.E. and Israel established a free trade agreement, in effect since March 2023, with bilateral trade between the two countries reaching \$2.95 billion by the end of 2023.⁷⁹

The U.A.E. has maintained its diplomatic relations with Israel, while continuing to advocate with regards to Gaza for an immediate ceasefire, continued humanitarian access, release of the hostages, respect for international law, and “a renewed commitment by Israel and a reformed Palestinian Authority to the two-state-solution.”⁸⁰ The U.A.E. continues to provide humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in Gaza, including the opening of field hospitals, conducting of aid

delivery via a maritime corridor and air aerial drops, and housing more than 1,200 Palestinian evacuees, including sick and injured children, in Abu Dhabi.⁸¹ As of July 2024, the U.A.E. is currently second in the world for donations to the UN OCHA's Palestinian response plan with over \$200 million provided.⁸²

The U.A.E. is also playing a role in helping Israel and Hamas achieve and maintain a lasting ceasefire, and is actively participating in discussions towards a plan for a post-war Gaza, including “participating in a provisional administration of post-war Gaza until a reformed Palestinian Authority is able to take charge.”⁸³ The U.A.E. continues to play a role in maintaining regional stability and reaffirmed its commitment to work with the United States to end the conflict.

Iran

Over the years, the U.A.E.'s relationship with Iran has remained largely aligned with U.S. foreign policy towards Iran. For example, the United States and the U.A.E. cooperated to curb Iran's nuclear ambition and limit its advancement, evidenced by the U.A.E.'s implementation of multilateral sanctions on Iran in 2013⁸⁴ to bring Iran to the negotiating table to establish the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to “ensure that Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful.”⁸⁵ Similarly, following then-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.”⁸⁶ Moreover, it cooperated with the Trump Administration's “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran.

Despite unsuccessful attempts to revive the JCPOA under the Biden Administration, the U.A.E. was prepared, once again, to change course with regard to Iran. The Biden Administration restarted negotiations on the JCPOA early in its tenure, but ultimately announced that it was no longer pursuing a renewed JCPOA with Iran, as other conflicts had taken priority, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, war in Gaza, and conflicts in Lebanon and Yemen. It is expected that the Trump Administration will revert back to a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, including tightened sanctions on Iran's severely weakened economy. Newly appointed Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced on January 21, 2025, that the Trump administration will look to “snapback” the U.N. sanctions that were lifted in 2015 due to the JCPOA.

Despite tensions over the 2022 attacks on the U.A.E. from Iran-backed proxies, the U.A.E. and Iran have worked over the last two years to de-escalate tension and restore diplomatic and economic bilateral ties to prevent further conflict in the region. In August 2022, the U.A.E. decided to re-establish diplomatic ties and sent its Ambassador back to Iran, with Iran following suit in April 2023.⁸⁷ In April 2024, the U.A.E. and Iran held a meeting of the bilateral joint economic cooperation commission to discuss trade and investment issues, the first in over a decade,

highlighting “the U.A.E. is the top source for Iran’s imports and the third largest destination for Iran’s exports.”⁸⁸ Despite the improved relationship between the U.A.E. and Iran, we expect the U.A.E. to support the Trump Administration’s policy towards Iran and return to a sanctions regime.

Lebanon

The United States and the U.A.E. have long considered Hizballah as a terrorist organization that poses a national security threat to the GCC. Most recently, Hizballah’s involvement in the Gaza-Israel conflict, and their strong opposition to the Abraham Accords, has threatened to destabilize the region. In May 2021, the U.A.E. summoned its Lebanese ambassador and closed its embassy in protest against then Lebanese Foreign Minister Charbel Wehbe’s remarks suggesting that Gulf countries provided backing to extremists.⁸⁹ Most recently, in January 2025, Lebanon elected its first president in two years, Gen. Joseph Aoun, who previously served as commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces. The U.A.E. has responded positively to the election of Aoun and subsequently reopened their embassy in Beirut and held talks with Lebanon’s new president.

The U.A.E. has provided ongoing humanitarian aid to Lebanon in times of crisis and most recently following Israel’s invasion of the country in October 2024. That same month, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan launched a humanitarian initiative dubbed “U.A.E. Stands with Lebanon”, which provided a \$100 million aid relief package to the country. The U.A.E. will most likely play a diplomatic role in Lebanon’s new government in order to de-escalate tensions in the region and fill the power vacuum left behind by the previous government.

Yemen

The United States and the U.A.E. have collaborated to combat Iranian nefarious activities in the region, including its support of terrorist proxies, 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 United States provided intelligence and logistics support, including aerial refueling of aircraft.⁹⁰ ⁱⁱ The United States also thwarted and exposed Iran’s illicit arms shipments to Yemen in



U.A.E. Military Personnel

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

violation of sanctions through Combined Maritime Force patrols in regional waters. It also publicly exposed Iran's proliferation of weapons in Yemen through the Iranian Materiel Display at Fort Bolling.⁹¹

While the U.A.E. officially withdrew from active operations in Yemen in 2019, it remained an influential actor, played an active role in peace talks, and continued to support anti-AQAP activities. Houthi rebels have continued to pose a threat to the U.A.E. and its interests. This was brought home by the January 2022 drone and missile attacks on the U.A.E., which Houthis claimed to be in response to continued U.A.E. support for certain Yemeni factions. While U.S. forces played an important role in the aerial defense of Emirati territory, Emirati leaders viewed the U.S. response as slow and insufficient, ultimately resulting in the United States apologizing for its perceived delay in response.

More recently, the United States and U.A.E. have both supported a series of UN-brokered ceasefires that have helped bring a modicum of stability to this war-torn country. In December 2023, the warring parties committed to a nationwide ceasefire.⁹² The humanitarian consequences of the U.A.E. war effort in Yemen have resulted in congressional opposition to the U.S. logistical support provided to the effort and to some U.S. arms sales to the U.A.E.⁹³

Meanwhile, the U.A.E. continues to evaluate lessons learned from this conflict.⁹⁴ 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 or drone attack in Yemen.⁹⁵ 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.

At the same time, the United States and U.A.E. have worked together to combat the threat of Al-Qaeda in Yemen. The U.A.E., in partnership with U.S. Special Forces, achieved significant success in halting and reversing the spread of Al-Qaeda 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.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷ 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 2016.⁹⁸ In August 2018, U.S. officials expressed confidence that a U.S. drone strike killed Al-Qaeda master bomb-maker Ibrahim Al-Asiri, who was behind the 2009 underwear bomber plot.⁹⁹

However, the instability in Yemen does not remain contained within Yemen. The Houthis continue to pose a threat to the region, evidenced by over 100 attacks since November 2023 targeting international shipping lines in the Red Sea and in the Straits of Hormuz as a result of the war in Gaza.¹⁰⁰ In July 2024, the Houthis launched a drone attack that hit Tel Aviv, reminiscent of the attacks that were targeted by the Houthis on Saudi and U.A.E. territory in January 2022.

In December 2023, the Biden Administration launched “Operation Prosperity Guardian”, a coalition initiative focused on maritime security in the Red Sea.¹⁰¹ The U.A.E. did not join this coalition due to previous disagreements with Washington regarding the previous Yemen conflict¹⁰² and a desire to prevent any future escalation with Iran. Given the historical connections and proximity of the Houthi conflict to the Gulf states, the U.A.E. will need to continue to play an active role, at least politically and diplomatically, to restore peace and stability in Yemen.

Syria

The United States and the U.A.E. have partnered in the fight against Daesh in Syria. The U.A.E. was an early participant in U.S.-led efforts to combat Daesh. 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 United States.¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴



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

Over the last two years, U.A.E. policy towards Syria in the aftermath of the civil war, particularly towards Syrian President Bashar al Assad, exposed gaps between the United States and the U.A.E. In March 2022, the U.A.E. hosted President Assad in what was his first official visit to an Arab country since the war, signaling the U.A.E.’s intent to help reintegrate Assad into the regional Arab fold. U.S. officials said the United States was “profoundly disappointed and troubled” by this visit.¹⁰⁵ U.A.E. Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited Damascus on January 4, 2023, which according to the official press release, was intended to “emphasize continued efforts of stability in Syria and the U.A.E.’s interest to facilitate bilateral relations and solidity between the two countries.”¹⁰⁶

On December 8, 2024, Syrian rebel groups took control of Damascus, forcing President Assad to flee to Russia and abdicate power, ending the longstanding Assad

regime. The United States and the U.A.E., along with eight other country representatives, issued a joint statement expressing their support for the stability and sovereignty of the Syrian state, with the U.A.E. looking to assist in the peaceful transition of power.¹⁰⁷ U.A.E. Foreign Minister H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan welcomed Foreign Minister in the Syrian Transitional Government Asaad Hassan al-Shibani to the U.A.E. on January 6, 2025, and they discussed “bolstering brotherly ties” and stability between the two countries.¹⁰⁸

Iraq

Following the close cooperation of the U.A.E. with the United States during Operation Iraqi Freedom, in more recent years, the U.A.E. has sought to build bridges across the Iraqi political spectrum and counter Iranian influence while engaging moderate Iraqi Shia leaders. 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 2014.¹⁰⁹ In August 2017, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who was then 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.¹¹⁰ In November 2018, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan 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.¹¹¹ Daesh subsequently destroyed this iconic cultural landmark before being expelled from the city.

Following the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to the U.A.E. in April 2021, the two countries have renewed relationships and increased their cooperation. The U.A.E. has also extended investment and financial support to develop key sectors. The U.A.E. announced \$3 billion of investment in Iraq to strengthen ties between the two nations and support economic and development for the benefit of the Iraqi people. The U.A.E. also sent medical and financial support to Iraq during the height of the Coronavirus pandemic.¹¹² In 2023, the U.A.E.'s Crescent Petroleum signed three 20-year contracts to develop natural gas fields in the Basra and Diyala provinces.¹¹³

On February 9, 2023, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani visited His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in the U.A.E, highlighting the two countries' strengthening bilateral relationship.¹¹⁴ Both leaders have spoken over the phone since this meeting, most recently on December 23, 2024.¹¹⁵

Afghanistan

The U.A.E. 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.¹¹⁶ A 250-person contingent of elite Presidential Guards deployed to the country in 2003 and remained in the country even after the December 2014 transition to Afghan-led combat.¹¹⁷ 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.¹¹⁸ U.A.E. and Australian pilots were the only non-NATO forces trusted to fly close air support missions to protect coalition troops.¹¹⁹

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.¹²⁰ U.S. forces in Afghanistan supported the U.A.E.'s response and recovery teams' efforts after that attack.

The U.A.E. 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 also gave significant financial support to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

The U.A.E. has played an important and constructive role in dealing with the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021. Many Afghans, including ousted president Ashraf Ghani, sought refuge in the U.A.E. and were airlifted to the U.A.E. for processing and eventual repatriation to the United States.¹²¹ Many Afghans are still residing in refugee camps in the U.A.E. waiting for visas to relocate to the United States or other countries who will accept them.

In May 2022, the U.A.E. government announced that it had won the contract to administer three of Afghanistan's major airports, including in Kabul. Part of the revenue from airport and cargo fees would reportedly be distributed to the Taliban government.¹²² In December 2022, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan welcomed Afghanistan's Acting Minister of Defense Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, and they discussed Afghanistan's security and issues of common interest.¹²³ On June 4, 2024, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed welcomed Afghanistan's Minister of Interior Affairs Sirajuddin Haqqani, along with a visiting Afghan delegation, to the U.A.E, where discussions focused on regional stability and development in Afghanistan.¹²⁴ This visit marked Haqqani's first trip since August 2021. Two months later, Afghanistan appointed Badruddin Haqqani as its first ambassador to the U.A.E., indicating the U.A.E.'s willingness to work with the Taliban government.¹²⁵ However, Abu Dhabi has stated that the diplomatic accreditation of Afghanistan's ambassador "does not represent a recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan."¹²⁶

Libya

After the fall of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, the U.A.E. and the United States initially adopted different approaches to bring an end to the civil conflict and stem the growth of extremist factions, especially those aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. The U.A.E., in the early stages of the civil conflict, decided to provide military, political, media, and economic support to anti-Islamist General Khalifa Haftar and the LNA.¹²⁷ The United States, for its part, largely opted to support diplomatic efforts without taking sides in the armed conflict. Despite short periods under the first Trump Presidency when the Administration supported General Haftar, at least politically, U.S. involvement in Libya has been largely limited to support for UN-led efforts towards peace talks. During this period, the United States and the U.A.E. largely differed on their policy towards Libya, leading to U.S. criticism of the U.A.E.'s "interventionist" foreign policy in Libya.

However, since 2021, the U.A.E. has taken a different tactic in Libya, largely abandoning its support for General Haftar and opting instead to support the political process, including the role of the Government of National Unity (GNU), bringing the U.A.E. closer in line with U.S. policy towards Libya. This shift was largely due to external factors, most notably its shift away from a muscular, interventionist foreign policy towards an "economy first" policy towards its neighbors, including with Turkey. On February 13, 2024, His Highness Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan welcomed Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, Prime Minister of the GNU, during the World Governments Summit in Dubai, showcasing the U.A.E.'s continued support of the GNU.¹²⁸ In August 2024, the U.A.E. announced infrastructure development projects in Libya, including an agreement between U.A.E.-based Emaar Properties and Libya's National Development Agency to design and implement the new Benghazi "Downtown" project and the Elmreisa Free Zone (EFZ)¹²⁹, that aims to reshape the Libyan economy.

Horn of Africa

The U.A.E. continues to play an active role in the Horn of Africa in terms of political influence, economic relationships, and counter-terrorism efforts. The United States and the U.A.E. work together on protecting shipping lanes and countering regional terrorist threats, including through counterterrorism efforts against Al Shabaab in Somalia. However, the U.A.E.'s relationship with Somalia suffered in the past several years because of the U.A.E.'s special relationship with the semi-autonomous governments of Somaliland and Puntland, including a port concession that Dubai-based port operator DP World secured with the government of Puntland in 2017, which the Somali government condemned as illegitimate. The relationship deteriorated further in 2018 when Somalia accused the U.A.E. of interference and the U.A.E. suspended military cooperation. However, the relationship between the two countries has improved significantly following the U.A.E.'s decision to send humanitarian assistance to Somalia in early 2022, and the signing of a military cooperation agreement between the two countries in January 2023. Moreover, the U.A.E. helped spearhead a historic peace agreement to end the two decades of

“frozen war” between Ethiopia and Djibouti in 2018, eliciting praise from the United States. The U.A.E. and the United States also recently pledged public support for the UN and African Union-led peace process for an end to the Tigray War in Ethiopia, leading to a ceasefire agreement in November 2022. In addition, the U.A.E. has sought to de-escalate tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, by calling for negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

The United States and the U.A.E. have expressed concern for the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Sudan. H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed and then-President Biden “reaffirmed their shared commitment to de-escalate the conflict” and prevent the resurgence of terrorist groups during His Highness’ visit to Washington, D.C. in September 2024.¹³⁰ However, U.S. Government agencies, including the U.S. Department of the Treasury, have issued sanctions on several U.A.E.-based companies, citing financial and military support to Sudan’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

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 United States 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 United States, the U.A.E. has foiled terrorist plots directed at the United States, most notably a 2010 plot by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to send explosives on cargo planes bound for the United States.¹³¹

The United States and the U.A.E. also cooperate closely on combating terror financing. In 2014, the United States and the 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.¹³² The U.S. Department of the Treasury has worked closely with relevant U.A.E. authorities to stem funding networks of Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in the U.A.E. and elsewhere.¹³³ The U.A.E. has seriously enhanced its anti-money laundering/counter-terrorism financing (AML/CFT) regime since the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) placed the U.A.E. on its “gray list” in March 2022, which subsequently aided in the U.A.E.’s removal from the gray list in February 2024.

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.¹³⁴ The country also participates in the

U.S. Department of Energy's Megaports Initiative, to improve detection of nuclear materials in cargo containers.¹³⁵ 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.¹³⁶

The United States and the 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. U.S. Customs also provides training to Emirati immigration and customs officials.¹³⁷ 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.¹³⁸ Additionally, in October 2024, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) launched a Global Entry partnership with the U.A.E., which allows Emirati citizens to apply for a Global Entry membership, enhancing security and promoting bilateral trade and tourism.¹³⁹

The U.A.E. has also worked closely with the U.S. Department of State 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.¹⁴⁰



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.¹⁴¹ Building on this foundation, in 2015, the United States and the U.A.E. launched the Sawab Center, a multinational program that uses direct online engagement to counter terrorist propaganda.¹⁴²

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. The Abrahamic Family House opened to the public in March 2023 and aims to encourage dialogue and facilitate learning while bringing together people of different Abrahamic faiths to promote peace and understanding among one another.¹⁴³

More recently, the signing of the Abraham Accords between the U.A.E. and Israel has led to an outpouring of expressions of support for the U.A.E.'s Jewish community

and interfaith tolerance. On January 9, 2023, the U.A.E. government announced that schools in the U.A.E. will now include Holocaust education at the primary and secondary levels as part of the national curriculum. The U.A.E. is the first country in the region to include Holocaust education in its education system.¹⁴⁴

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 Gulf Cooperative Council (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. military 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 United States 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 United States, 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,¹⁴⁵ and it volunteered the next year to host a GCC police force known as GCC-Pol.¹⁴⁶



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, have improved in the last few years. In January 2021, Kuwait and the United States brokered a joint declaration between the six members of the GCC, pledging restored collaborative efforts between the neighbors.¹⁴⁷

Looking ahead, one particular area of enhanced cooperation will be integrated missile defense. In March 2022, the United States and GCC convened Working Groups on Integrated Air and Missile Defense and Maritime Security at the GCC's headquarters in Riyadh. In May 2024, the Working Groups met in Riyadh, and they discussed "multilateral efforts to counter shared threats in light of unprecedented destabilizing activities by malign actors in the Middle East."¹⁴⁸ The Working Groups affirmed the longstanding defense partnership between the United States and the

members of the GCC and reaffirmed a shared commitment to regional security, under the framework of the GCC-U.S. Strategic Partnership.¹⁴⁹

FUTURE U.S.-U.A.E. DEFENSE AND TECHNOLOGY COOPERATION

In May 2017, the United States 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.”¹⁵⁰ This updated agreement was publicly revealed on May 15, 2017 during then-Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the U.A.E. Armed Forces His Highness Sheikh Mohamed 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 effect during the visit of then-National Security Adviser John Bolton to Abu Dhabi in May 2019 with a 15-year duration period.

On January 16, 2021, the Trump Administration designated the U.A.E. and Bahrain as Major Security Partners. This never-before-used classification of the two nations 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.¹⁵¹

The September 2024 designation of the U.A.E. as a Major Defense Partner of the United States further elevated the strong, strategic bilateral relationship between the two countries. This unique designation “will allow for unprecedented cooperation through joint training, exercises, and military-to-military collaboration, between the military forces of the United States, the U.A.E., and India, as well as other common military partners, in furtherance of regional stability.”¹⁵² The Trump Administration may utilize this designation to solidify the U.A.E.’s position in the region and allow for greater cooperation and collaboration in the bilateral defense and security relationship.

The U.A.E. also made strategic moves in 2024 to build closer technology and AI partnerships in the United States. The \$1.5B Microsoft and G42 deal, and numerous subsequent announcement of partnerships, investments, and acquisitions, set the stage for close, strategic partnership between the two countries on innovation in technology and artificial intelligence. During the U.A.E. President, H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed’s September 2024 visit to Washington, the two countries announced their intent “to closely collaborate to advance safe, secure and trustworthy AI, align regulatory frameworks to strengthen innovation ecosystems, promote ethical AI research and development, broaden and deepen cooperation in AI protection and cybersecurity, facilitate opportunities for trusted trade and investment, foster talent development and exchange, promote clean energy for the AI future, and

support AI for sustainable development in developing countries.”¹⁵³ Since the return of the Trump administration, U.S.-U.A.E. AI partnerships have been accelerated by the \$20B investment in the United States for AI datacenters announced by DAMAC’s Hussain Sajwani, and the January 21, 2025 announcement by President Trump regarding Project Stargate, backed by Abu Dhabi-based MGX and Softbank and powered by Oracle and Open AI. This strategic collaboration on AI and technology will no doubt provide opportunities for U.S. defense, security, and technology companies to provide technology and AI-based solutions to the U.A.E. in the defense, security, and aerospace sectors.

The United States and U.A.E. are currently negotiating a strategic framework agreement that includes a component on defense and security but also covers economic, trade, science, and technology issues. While we anticipate that China will remain a focus for the Trump Administration, the United States and the U.A.E. will find ways to work together and progress defense cooperation. The U.S.-U.A.E. AI and advanced technology relationship will continue to grow, with increased investments in the defense and technology sectors. The United States and the U.A.E. will remain strong partners in the region and will continue to look to one another regarding policy decisions and stabilization efforts.

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