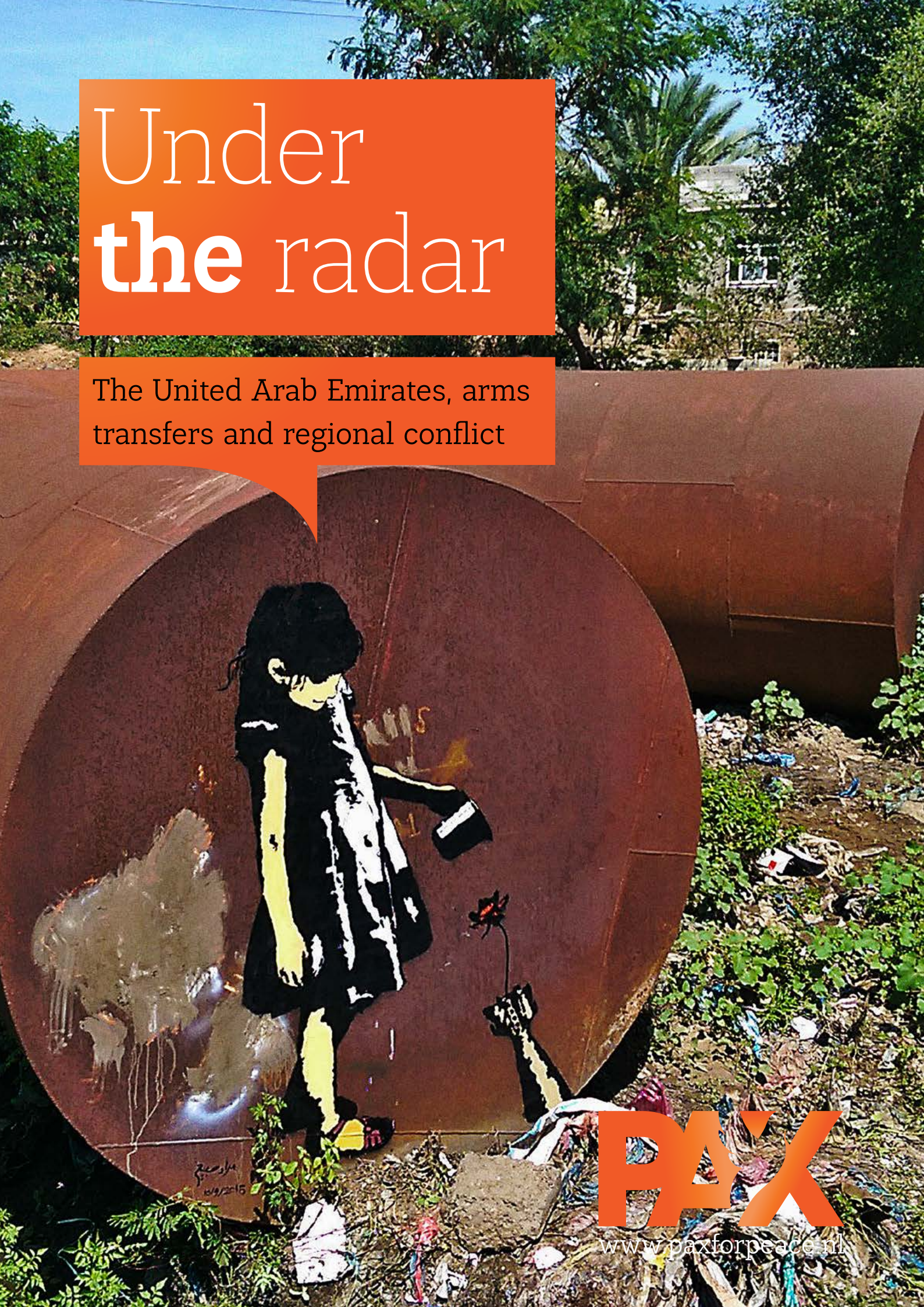


Under the radar

The United Arab Emirates, arms transfers and regional conflict



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About PAX

PAX works with committed citizens and partners to protect civilians against acts of war, to end armed violence and to build peace. PAX operates independently of political interests.

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Executive summary

Over the past 15 years, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been developing an assertive, even aggressive foreign policy to advance its economic and foreign policy interests in the Middle East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa. It is doing this by shifting its stance from traditional neutrality to power projection. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, the UAE has intervened militarily in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and, most recently, in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia and the United States (US) are its closest military partners. Nevertheless, the UAE is operating increasingly independently of them. In Libya, for example, the UAE is continuing its military support to General Haftar's forces, which oppose the government brokered by the United Nations (UN). Despite a UN arms embargo, the UAE has transferred large quantities of weapons and aircraft to the country.

The UAE, with the Saudis, is most active conducting land, air and naval operations in Yemen. Plans to invade the key Yemeni port town of Hodeidah are deeply worrying, and reports of secret prisons in Yemen involving UAE-supported forces are alarming. In the last two years, conflict has led to tens of thousands of Yemenis being killed or wounded, and millions of citizens now lack access to essentials such as food, fresh water and basic healthcare.

The impressive build-up of the UAE's military forces—often second to none in the region—over the past 25 years is essential to its changed posture. Roughly 25 per cent of all arms trade are destined for the Middle East, and the UAE has recently become the world's third largest importer of arms. Indeed, it is the fifth largest arms importer of the last 20 years. Considering the Gulf state's small size, these statistics are significant.

The US is by far the largest supplier of weapon systems to the UAE, with around two-thirds of the UAE's arsenal supplied by American companies. In recent years, 19 per cent of all US arms exports went to the UAE. The US has supplied much of the UAE's air force equipment, including vast quantities of bombs and missiles. That supply has continued since the UAE's involvement in the war in Yemen. The second largest supplier of arms to the UAE is France; fighter aircraft and warships dominate the list of purchases. Russia, Italy and Sweden are other important sources of military assets.

The UAE has been developing a national arms industry by cooperating with foreign companies since the mid-1990s. Steadily increasing foreign sales and military aid to its partners have made it a top-30 global exporter. The UAE is also sending military equipment and/or lending military support to Eritrea, Libya and Somalia without UN authorisation, thereby disregarding UN arms embargoes.

It is business as usual for most states supplying arms to the UAE, despite their obligations to the UN and European Union (EU) export control regimes. This is deeply worrying. The risk that weapons will be used in the 'forgotten' conflict in Yemen or sent to embargoed destinations is considerable and should be sufficient reason to stop the majority of arms supplies. Sadly, countries continue to export arms to the UAE, which means the Yemeni people are likely to continue suffering for the foreseeable future. ♦

Foreword

Every person has a right to a dignified life. This principle underpins our solidarity with people who long for and work towards a peaceful existence. It is human dignity, solidarity and the common good that shape the values of our peace work. We believe that these values are intrinsically human and that they apply to all people. Ultimately, they determine the quality of our peace work. They help us expose, interpret and tackle social injustice, and the very dimensions of life that infringe our human rights.

Those human rights are largely absent in Yemen, a country that has been ravaged by war for more than two years. Yet there is still no sign of an end to the conflict. Meanwhile, a major cholera epidemic is sweeping across the country, which has few, if any, functioning medical facilities. Food insecurity has left millions of people dependent on access to aid, which trickles in at a frustratingly slow rate. Nevertheless, Western countries keep supplying parties involved in the conflict with weapons, anything from attack helicopters and bombs to warships and battle vehicles. These are the same states that claim to maintain the highest of standards when exporting weapons.

Despite the obvious risk that exported weapons will end up being used in conflicts, arms exports to the Middle East—home to some of the most violent conflicts in the world—have accelerated in recent years. With the third Conference of States Parties to the UN Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) due to take place this month (September 2017), it is high time such arms exports are stopped.

As you read this report, you will discover the dominant but often less visible role of the UAE, which is increasingly deploying its military force in regional conflicts. You will also learn about the UAE's controversial intervention in Yemen and Libya, and surely conclude that the export of weapons to the UAE must stop. The risk is clear: these arms are being used to prolong regional wars and break arms embargoes.

Jan Gruiters
General Director, PAX

Introduction

The UAE may be overshadowed by its military partner Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, since March 2015 it is playing a key role in the Yemeni civil war, which has brought immense suffering to the citizens of Yemen. Three million people have fled their home, and more than ten thousand have been killed; many more have been wounded.¹ According to the UN, more than ten million people need acute assistance.² Besides hunger and starvation, a raging cholera epidemic is threatening hundreds of thousands of people in the country.

The UN Panel of Experts (PoE) on Yemen has concluded that there is strong evidence a significant number of coalition air strikes in Yemen have violated international humanitarian law. In addition, the coalition's blockade of food, fuel and medical supplies has contributed to the deteriorating humanitarian situation.

The military intervention is generally referred to as the 'Saudi-led coalition'. However, this clouds the role of the UAE, which has been significant throughout the conflict in Yemen. This report will show that the extent of the UAE's role in the conflict is the clearest example yet of the drastic change to the UAE's economic and military posture in the region and beyond.

The UAE is not active only in Yemen. It is violating the UN arms embargo on Libya by supporting militarily the rebel forces led by General Haftar, who is considered a spoiler of the UN-brokered government.

The UAE has for decades received major military support from Western countries, in particular the US. Likewise, the Gulf state's oil wealth has been a lifeline for Western arms producers selling large-scale quantities of military equipment to the UAE. At the same time, we see the UAE investing heavily in the development of a national arms industry, with key support from Western companies. Consequently, the UAE is becoming a relevant arms exporter itself.

Continuing arms supplies and military support to the UAE have been instrumental in sustaining conflicts and aggravating the humanitarian situation in Yemen particularly. Moreover, as a weapons exporter, the UAE has become a notorious violator of UN arms embargoes, especially regarding Libya. However, most countries exporting weapons to the UAE seem not to consider the fact that these arm transfers may be contributing to continuing conflict or international law violations.

This report highlights the role of UAE arms transfers in the context of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. The first chapter sketches a drastically changed UAE foreign policy. Chapter 2 provides an overview of arms transfers to the UAE, and shows how the small Gulf state is developing a national arms industry and becoming an exporter itself. Chapter 3 describes the major UAE role in military interventions in Yemen and Libya. The paper ends with a conclusion and recommendations. ♦



Map.

Arabian Peninsula

1. Emerging Arab power

The United Arab Emirates, commonly known as the UAE, was established in 1971 upon gaining independency from the United Kingdom (UK), and is a federal monarchy consisting of seven emirates.³ Each emirate is governed by an absolute monarch; together, they jointly form the Federal Supreme Council. Situated on the east side of the Arab peninsula it shares land borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman and sea borders with Qatar and Iran. The land area of the UAE (83,600 km²) compares to Austria.

Remarkably, only 1.4 million of its estimated 9-10 million inhabitants are Emirati citizens; all others are expatriates. Two-thirds of the UAE population live in either Abu Dhabi or Dubai. While Dubai is the most visited tourist destination in the Middle East, the UAE remains principally reliant on the export of petroleum and natural gas. Fossil fuel exploitation, discovered only in the 1980s, has transformed it from an impoverished desert region to a modern state. Emirati citizens are now among the wealthiest in the world, and the government has used its wealth to maintain popular support, especially since the Arab Spring.

One of the UAE's closest allies is Saudi Arabia, yet the two countries have distinctively different outlooks. Whereas Saudi Arabia has its foundations based on the ultraconservative Islamic doctrine of Wahhabism, the ruling families of the UAE have long considered Islamism the single greatest threat to its power.⁴ Likewise, Saudi Arabia has spent billions of dollars exporting Wahhabist ideology, while the UAE appears more inclined towards tolerance and modernism. In 2015, UAE ambassador to the US Yousef al-Otaiba wrote: "We are testing a new vision for the region—an alternative, future-oriented ideology. It is a path guided by the true tenets of Islam: respect, inclusion, and peace. It empowers women, embraces diversity, encourages innovation, and welcomes global engagement. [...] In the UAE, we believe it is possible to be Muslim, moderate, and modern at the same time. We are committed to promoting this ideology of openness, optimism, and opportunity across the region."⁵

Regardless of the contrast with Saudi Arabia, the UAE is clear in its rejection of "even the most limited challenges to their absolute authority. Their lesson from the Arab Spring was that no space can be allowed for political activism; bloggers appealing for even modest reforms can expect arrest", as David Goldfischer, an expert on international security and the Middle East, notes.⁶ In March 2017, for example, Emirati academic Nasser bin Ghaith, held prisoner by UAE authorities since August 2015, was convicted to ten years in prison for tweeting criticism of Egypt and, in the words of the judge, "communicating with secret organisations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood".⁷ Amnesty International considers Nasser bin Ghaith a prisoner of conscience and called the sentence "another devastating blow for freedom of expression in the United Arab Emirates."

Another activist, Ahmed Mansoor, was arbitrarily detained earlier in 2017 for his online posts. In 2016, he received the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for bringing public attention to arbitrary arrests and torture concerns in the UAE. In June 2017, support for Qatar by any means of communication became a ‘cybercrime’, which could result in prison sentences between three and fifteen years, or at least the equivalent of EUR 122,000.⁸

It is not only individuals who are punished for ‘political activism’. In 2012, the government closed the offices of several foreign-origin organisations that it considered too intrusive into UAE politics. These included the US-funded National Democratic Institute and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which is linked to the Christian Democratic Union of Germany.⁹ Political parties are banned in the UAE, although there is limited parliamentary representation. Of the 40 seats of the Federal National Council, half go to indirectly elected individual candidates, with the other half chosen by the rulers of the seven emirates.

Foreign and security policy

UAE foreign and security policies have often been couched in terms such as ‘credibility’ or ‘armed neutrality’, but its military doctrine is composed of hard-power dissuasion and territorial defence. This is reflected in the build-up of well-equipped armed forces and the participation in UN operations, including those in Afghanistan.¹⁰ The UAE describes its foreign policy as follows:

“The foundations of UAE foreign policy comprise good neighbourliness, understanding, and non-interference in internal affairs, as well as the amicable resolution of disputes. [...] The UAE diplomacy has successfully led an intensive and effective effort aiming at containing and resolving armed conflicts and emerging crises in many regions around the globe. It works relentlessly to strengthen its direct and indirect humanitarian aid programmes, especially those extended to the countries and regions ravaged by military conflicts or natural disasters. In addition, the UAE has made significant contributions in the fields of peacekeeping missions and reconstruction efforts in the post-conflicts regions, an effort that reflects the country’s keenness to maintain peace and security on the regional and international levels.”¹¹

These characterisations, which probably do not fully reflect current realities, will be examined in more detail with regards to Yemen and Libya in Chapter 3.

The UAE may cooperate closely with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, sometimes within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC—see box), yet it is the cooperation with the US that has been central to the UAE’s military strategy.¹² Similarly, the UAE is a key partner for US military presence in the Middle East. About 5,000 military personnel are stationed at UAE facilities, including the ports of Fujairah and Jebel Ali and the air base at al-Dhafra.¹³ The 1994 Defense Cooperation Agreement between the two countries was updated in May 2017 “to better reflect the broad range of military-to-military cooperation that the UAE and US enjoy today”.¹⁴ Accordingly, the Trump administration has increased cooperation with the UAE in Yemen against al-Qaeda, and appears inclined to increase support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen fighting Houthi rebels and troops loyal to ex-president Saleh (see Chapter 3).¹⁵

France is another close ally of the Emirates, having a long-term military presence in the country and being only second to the US in terms of arms exports (see Chapter 2).¹⁶

Over the past 15 years, the UAE—as well as Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar—has developed an assertive, even aggressive foreign policy by shifting “to an actual projection of hard power capabilities along specific interests which no longer reflect neutrality.”¹⁷ In part, this should be seen within the context of changed regional dynamics: the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein; the post-Arab Spring weakening of traditionally leading states such as Egypt, Syria and Libya; and the consequential rise in influence of non-Arab States, mainly Iran and Turkey, as well as non-state actors including al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Central to the UAE’s threat perception is Iran, which is a result of territorial disputes and a more general fear of Iran’s regional agenda of supporting Shia interests in places such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.¹⁸ The UAE has often criticised Iran’s aspirations, especially after the UN’s nuclear deal with Iran had been reached in 2015. At the UN General Assembly later that year, the UAE’s Foreign Minister said, “The UAE stands firm with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia against Iranian attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of the Arab States”.¹⁹

Enormous oil wealth and the accumulation of military might has enabled the UAE and other Gulf states to play an active regional role, though only rather recently. In the UAE in particular, a new generation of leadership and the emergence of a stronger and more centralised federal state have also contributed to a change in foreign and military policy.²⁰ Thus, in a departure from past policy, the UAE has played a much more active and independent military role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since the Arab Spring. The UAE and Qatari air forces, for example, operated alongside NATO to remove Colonel Qaddafi from power in Libya in 2011. It was also involved with ground forces, the first time the UAE’s air force had conducted offensive operations abroad. The UAE continues to play a significant role in supporting General Haftar’s faction in Libya, which is opposed to the UN-brokered government in Tripoli.

In the context of Syria, the UAE wants President Bashar al-Assad to go. It has “been contributing to a multi-country pool of funds to buy arms for approved rebel groups in Syria” fighting against the Syrian regime, though it has reportedly not directly supplied any weapons (in contrast to Saudi Arabia and Qatar).²¹ Since 2014, the UAE has also taken part in air raids as part of the US-led anti-ISIS²² coalition operating in Syria.²³ In the first months of the campaign, which started in September 2014, the UAE’s al-Dhafra air base launched more strike aircraft than any other military facility in the region, and Emirati fighters “conducted more missions against the Islamic State [...] than any other member of the multinational coalition” apart from the US.²⁴

Major Mariam al-Mansouri, a female pilot with the UAE air force, played a key role in a publicity stunt, photographed in the cockpit of the F16 fighter jet she had flown in the first wave of attacks. “Thumbs up and beaming for the camera, it was a striking image that combined empowered Muslim women, the Arab fightback against jihadi extremism – and the pride of the small but wealthy Gulf state that is flaunting a new-found assertiveness and promoting its political agenda in a region in profound turmoil”, penned a journalist from the Guardian.²⁵

However, the clearest sign of change in the UAE’s foreign policy has been its extensive involvement and prominent role as a partner in the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen since March 2015. The UAE’s involvement in the Yemeni and Libyan conflicts will be the focus of Chapter 3.²⁶

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

The UAE is part of the GCC, which was established in 1981 and is the political and economic union of all Arab states of the Persian Gulf except for Iraq.²⁷ It was initiated by Saudi Arabia in reaction to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and considered an “institutional alternative identity (beyond their state identities) that would compete with Iran’s Islamic revolutionary and Iraq’s secular Arab nationalist platforms”.²⁸

The GCC’s military arm is called the Peninsula Shield Force, intended to deter and respond to military aggression against any GCC member. It was involved in the liberation of Kuwait from Iraq in 1991 and was deployed to protect Kuwait against potential Iraqi attacks on the eve of the 2003 Iraq War.

In March 2011, with popular uprisings spreading throughout the MENA region, Bahrain requested support from Peninsula Shield Forces to “secure Bahrain’s vital and strategically important military infrastructure from any foreign interference” and to protect its borders, while Bahraini forces were “preoccupied with its internal security”.²⁹ Accordingly, 500 UAE police officers joined 1,000 Saudi soldiers, and GCC states currently have security personnel stationed in Bahrain to provide support.³⁰

These interventions notwithstanding, external military cooperation within the GCC framework “has remained at the margin of the organisation’s core purpose. [...] Thirty-five years after its establishment, the GCC remains an institutional forum for the Gulf monarchies to coordinate policies and work out their differences, but has failed to integrate them and evolve into a real military alliance. The GCC members have opted instead to rely on powerful extra-regional protectors, in particular the United States.”³¹ While GCC policies converge on most foreign policy issues, the smaller GCC states remain wary of ceding too much authority to Saudi Arabia.³² The US has strongly supported GCC cooperation, particularly in liaison with the US. A 2015 joint statement reiterated the US commitment to security cooperation with GCC states, including the facilitation of US arms transfers to GCC states as well as a Gulf-wide ballistic missile defence capability.³³

The increasingly assertive Gulf states’ foreign policies have caused new and renewed rivalries between those representing competing interests. Branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Libya and Syria, for example, have been supported by Qatar, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider the Brotherhood a major security threat. These competing interests have been plainly evident in Egypt; the democratically elected Brotherhood President Morsi was supported with billions of dollars of aid from Qatar, until he was brought down in a 2013 military coup led by current President al-Sisi, endorsed and subsequently financially supported by Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.³⁴

Tensions over Egypt culminated in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrawing their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014, and the Saudis designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation.³⁵ In an even more dramatic move, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and Yemen simultaneously cut all diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017, imposing sanctions that include closing borders with and banning flights to and from Qatar.³⁶

HORN OF AFRICA

The UAE has recently signed agreements with self-declared independent state of Somaliland and Somalia's semi-autonomous region of Puntland to develop their sea ports. These agreements are seen as part of the UAE's increased foreign military orientation; in the case of Somaliland's Berbera port, there is little doubt about the military intent—potentially to support operations in Yemen.³⁷ The reasons for establishing a presence in Puntland's Bosaso port are less clear. However, the UAE has been financing the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) since 2010, which also operates three UAE-donated Ayers Thrush aircraft and an Alouette III helicopter.³⁸ Saracen International Ltd., a company backed by Blackwater founder Erik Prince, staffed by South African military trainers, and funded by the United Arab Emirates, took care of the development of the PMPF, “representing a significant violation of the general and complete arms embargo on Somalia”. The UAE is also known to be financing and training the Puntland Intelligence Agency.³⁹

These activities of the UAE are not only breaching the UN arms embargo but are also helping to perpetuate Somalia's fragile position. Paradoxically, the UAE is maintaining strong relations with the central government in Mogadishu. It recently expanded its long-running Train and Equip partnership with Somalia's counter-terrorism unit and National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA), among others. In October 2015, the UAE even pledged to pay the salaries of the Somali federal government security forces for four years.⁴⁰ In the same year, it supplied 15 armoured vehicles to Somalia, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).⁴¹ Moreover, the UAE has gained access to a number of air and sea ports in Yemen and Eritrea. This will be covered in more detail in Chapter 3.

As Mello and Knights, two international security experts, note, “The United Arab Emirates could begin to emerge as a powerful actor in the Horn of Africa, East Africa and western Indian Ocean. Like prior trading empires from the Portuguese to the Omanis, the United Arab Emirates is aiming to become an important player up and down Africa's eastern seaboard, mixing hard military power with soft-power approaches. [...] The United Arab Emirates could begin to play a kingmaker role across the region.”⁴²

Armed forces and military spending

Originally, for the UAE, “developing the armed forces [was] part of a larger goal: the centralization of power” and state building, to promote the image of a strong, credible and united state.⁴³ But foreign policy changes have altered its military posture. Its armed forces, and in particular its inventory of advanced Western-origin weaponry, were for a long time mostly of symbolic value, to show off its wealth and military status. They were, so to speak, ‘toys for boys’. However, since 2011, the UAE's active involvement in conflicts abroad has clearly increased the importance of its armed forces and its weapons.

The UAE's armed forces consist of an estimated 65 thousand professional soldiers.⁴⁴ These have been supplemented by conscript soldiers since 2014, when compulsory military service was introduced to "instil values of loyalty and sacrifice in the hearts of the citizens".⁴⁵ Some 600-800 UAE military personnel study and train in the US every year.⁴⁶ To make up for its limited national manpower, the UAE has added scores of foreign personnel to its armed forces. The commander of the Emirati Presidential Guard, for example, is an Australian citizen.⁴⁷

Research by The New York Times revealed that the UAE subcontracted Reflex Responses (R2)—a private military security company linked to notorious Blackwater founder Erik Prince—for a USD 529 million job. Its task was to help assemble an 800-strong force to conduct special operations, to protect Emirati installations from terrorist attacks and to put down internal revolts.⁴⁸ Supposedly, the group consists of South African, Colombian and other foreign troops, trained by Western military veterans. By 2015, the foreign contingent had grown to some 1,800 soldiers, and the force is now part of the UAE forces.⁴⁹

Since the 1990s, the UAE has been investing heavily in its military apparatus, which is undoubtedly a reason for the steep spike in its military spending. According to data from SIPRI, the UAE's military budget, corrected for inflation, more than tripled between 1997 and 2014, with the largest increases taking place since 2007 (see Table 1).⁵⁰ Rising budgets in the 1990s and early 2000s could easily be paid from ever higher economic growth. Thus, military spending as a percentage of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased slowly from 6.8 per cent in 1997 to an all-time 'low' of 3.2 per cent in 2006.⁵¹ However, the global economic crisis (from 2008 onwards) and the continual purchasing of major weapon led to military spending increasing significantly from 2009, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP.

Table 1.

Developments in the military budget of the UAE (2005-2014)

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Military spending*	10,086	10,013	10,640	12,936	15,262	19,141	20,793	20,486	25,094	23,681
As % of GDP	3.7	3.2	3.3	3.7	5.5	6.1	5.5	5.1	6.1	5.7

*: Constant budget value in millions of US dollars (2015); all numbers are SIPRI estimates.

Source: SIPRI (<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>)

The UAE has invested heavily in the capabilities of its armed forces over the past two decades. Even among its wealthy Gulf neighbours, the UAE stands out for its modern, advanced weaponry, often being the first in the region to have certain types of weapons, whether they are missile defence systems (THAAD and PAC-3), drones (Predator XP) or warships (Baynunah). The navy, for example, has emerged as one the region's most advanced, and it is at least on par with its regional rival Iran. The combination of modern warships and the development of an

extended network of naval bases across Yemen and the Horn of Africa especially has boosted the UAE's profile.

The air force is considering a new fighter jet deal, even though it already has some 88 F-16s and 32 Mirages. It has also expanded its airlift capacity with three Airbus A330 tanker/transport aircraft and eight Boeing C-17 Globemasters. Meanwhile, the Presidential Guard Command, which commands the country's battlefield helicopters, has grown its inventory of UH-60 Black Hawks to an estimated 40 helicopters, in addition to 30 Apache Longbow attack helicopters; another 37 Apaches have just been ordered. The increased number of aircraft has led to significant investments in expanded and new facilities.⁵²

The army's inventory has grown to some 3,000 armoured vehicles; most newly ordered vehicles are currently being produced locally by some rapidly growing manufacturers, some through joint-ventures with foreign companies.

The UAE's build-up of its weaponry through massive imports, the emergence of an indigenous arms industry and subsequent exports will be detailed in the next chapter. ♦

2. Arms transfers and the UAE industry

Traditionally, the Middle East has been a major source of income for the international arms industry. Roughly 25 per cent of all arms exports have a Middle Eastern destination.⁵³ Since the Arab Spring, arms transfers to the region have only grown. “The increasing flow of weapons has significantly improved the military capacity of the recipients in numerous areas, particularly in terms of their capacity to undertake the combined air, land and sea operations that have taken place in Yemen”, according to SIPRI.⁵⁴

While Saudi Arabia is well known for being the most prolific buyer of arms in the region, the UAE has quietly become the second biggest customer in the region. Even from a global perspective, the UAE has long been one of the largest arms importers. Looking at a twenty-year period between 1997 and 2016, it is the world’s fifth largest arms importer; for the 2007-2016 period, it was sixth and over the last five years it was third—behind only India and Saudi Arabia (Table 2). In contrast, Iran, perceived as the UAE’s major regional threat, has received hardly any weapons from abroad over the past ten years. This is due partly to the 2010 UN arms embargo for its nuclear programme (and much older US and EU embargoes), which has left the country with a generally outdated arsenal.

Despite the country’s size and very small population, the UAE has built one of the most advanced militaries in the Arab world on the back of its oil wealth. This expansion has been crucial in its ability to play a prominent role in recent military interventions in, for example, Libya, Syria and Yemen.

This chapter provides further details of the UAE’s most important arms suppliers, as well as its arms exports and the emergence of an Emirati military industry.

Arms transfers to the UAE

Until the late 1990s, France and, to a lesser extent, the UK were the UAE’s dominant arms suppliers. From 2004, however, the US became its main supplier, dwarfing all others with a string of high-value deals; it currently accounts for some 63 per cent of UAE weapons imports. Other significant suppliers over the past ten years have been France, Russia, Italy, Sweden and Spain (see Table 3).

Table 2.

The world's largest arms importers (1997-2016, SIPRI TIV*)

1997-2016		2007-2016		2012-2016	
1. India	46,552	India	30,987	India	18,239
2. China	37,052	Saudi Arabia	15,438	Saudi Arabia	11,689
3. Saudi Arabia	25,130	China	13,544	UAE	6,593
4. South Korea	21,939	Pakistan	10,729	China	6,381
5. UAE	19,265	South Korea	10,677	Algeria	5,312
6. Turkey	18,780	UAE	10,642	Turkey	4,721
7. Taiwan	16,502	Algeria	10,386	Australia	4,636
8. Pakistan	16,120	Australia	9,608	Iraq	4,598
9. Greece	15,614	United States	8,422	Pakistan	4,494
10. Australia	15,553	Turkey	8,040	Vietnam	4,273

*: Values in millions. SIPRI uses a Trend Indicator Value, reflecting military relevance, not trade value (see: <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods/>).

Source: SIPRI, generated 5 July 2017 (http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_toplist.php).

Significant recent export deals from the main supplying countries are tabled below. Information is based on SIPRI data, unless otherwise noted.

Table 3.

Top arms supplying countries to UAE (2007-2016)

Supplier	SIPRI TIV*
US	6,672
France	1,385
Russia	672
Italy	465
Sweden	309
Spain	294
Turkey	227
Germany	183
Switzerland	123
South Africa	67

*: Values in millions. SIPRI uses a Trend Indicator Value, reflecting military relevance, not trade value (see: <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods/>).

Source: SIPRI, generated 2 June 2017 (http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php)

- **US:** Saudi Arabia and the UAE are extremely important customers for American companies. Together, the countries accounted for 19 per cent of all US arms exports in the 2011-15 period.⁵⁵ Over the past two years, Washington has approved a number of arms deals that have a potential use in the current war in Yemen. They include 6,600 guided bombs (type GBU-12 Paveway and GBU-31 Joint Direct Attack Munition or JDAM), the sale of which was justified by direct reference to the UAE's participation in 'the Saudi-led coalition to restore the legitimate government in Yemen' and the need to act against 'Houthi aggression'.⁵⁶ Additionally, more than 14,000 'guidance kits' for Paveway and JDAM missiles used by UAE fighter jets were approved for export in July 2016.⁵⁷ Some experts see the sales of JDAMs to the UAE also as signal to Iran because the bombs are said to be effective against hardened targets, so-called 'bunker busters'.⁵⁸

In December 2016, the outgoing Obama administration authorised the USD 3.5 billion sale of another 37 Apache attack helicopters made by Boeing.⁵⁹ Under a USD 117 million deal, Raytheon delivered 1,000 TALON missiles for UAE Apaches in 2015-16, with another 1,000 on order.⁶⁰ Raytheon and Abu Dhabi-based NIMR Automotive also outfitted the NIMR armoured vehicle with the TALON rocket, previously found only on helicopters and other aircraft.⁶¹ IOMAX Archangel aircraft have also recently been modified to enable use of the TALON.⁶²

In 2010, IOMAX sold 24 armed Air Tractor AT-802s to the UAE. In 2012, IOMAX started using in its armed configuration Thrush aircraft called Archangel, of which the UAE bought another 24 in 2014. Developed initially as agricultural aircraft, they have become popular as cheap counter-insurgency attack aircraft. They are now being used in offensive roles in Yemen and Libya, even though they were originally bought as UAE border patrol aircraft. The UAE has donated six AT-802s to Jordan and twelve to Egypt.⁶³

One of the largest arms deals of 2017, announced just before US President Trump's Middle East visit in May 2017, was a USD 2 billion Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3) air defence sale by Lockheed Martin and Raytheon.⁶⁴ The UAE is currently using its older Patriot missile systems in Yemen to intercept missiles fired by opposing forces. Militarily more sophisticated than the Patriot missile systems is the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Air Defense) system. The UAE has become the first Gulf user of the THAAD system, and Saudi Arabia is expected to follow suit.

In 2014, the UAE requested permission to buy more than 4,500 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs), in different types, from the Pentagon's surplus stocks, of which some 500 had been delivered by March 2017. The order size had "prompted speculation that the UAE intended to transfer some of the vehicles to allied forces".⁶⁵ Caiman MRAPs, for example, have indeed been seen in southern Yemen, operated by local forces supported by the UAE.

In 2015, the UAE ordered an undisclosed number of Predator XP unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones) and related ground systems from General Atomics for USD 197 million. They were delivered in early 2017.⁶⁶ This export variant of the Predator has been modified specifically so that it cannot carry weapons. However, reportedly in response to the US refusal to sell its armed versions, China's Chengdu Aircraft Industries Group (CAIG), which is a division of Chinese aerospace conglomerate AVIC, sold a number of Wing Loong 1 (Pterodactyl 1) UAVs to the UAE. These drones, often referred to as China's Predator, have allegedly been used by the UAE for operations in Yemen and Libya. Some of the drones were equipped with South African targeting equipment, though they have not been seen armed with missiles.⁶⁷

Table 4.

Selected US arms export deals for the UAE (2012-2016)

Order description	Ordered	Delivered	Order value, comments
24 AT-802 border patrol/light attack aircraft	2010	2010-14	
40 UH-60M Black Hawks	2009-10	2011-13	USD 600 million
12 CH-47F Chinook transport helicopters	2011	2012-15	
750 M-ATV (MRAP All-Terrain Vehicles)	2012	2013	USD 380 million
2 THAAD anti-ballistic missile systems + 96 missiles	2011-12	2015-16	USD 2.5 billion
30 Bell-407 armed helicopters	2013	2014-16	
2,000 TALON missiles for Apache	2013	2015-16	USD 117 million; end 2016 1,000 delivered
3,600 JDAM guided bombs	2014	2015-16	
5,000 GBU-39 Small Diameter Bombs	2014	2015-?	End 2016 ± 1,500 delivered
24 Archangel light attack aircraft	2014	2015-17	Assembled in UAE
2 C-17 Globemaster transp aircraft	2015	2015	USD 625 million
10 RQ-1 Predator XP UAVs	2014	2016-17	USD 200 million
1,150 Caiman MRAPs	2014	2016-?	March 2017: 488 delivered*
3,360 MaxxPro MRAPs	2014	2016-19	March 2017: 29 delivered*
390 GMLRS guided rockets	2015	2017	
4,000 JDAM guided bombs	2016	2017	
12 HIMARS multiple rocket launchers + 124 missiles	2015	2018?	USD 143 million + 174 million

*: Jeremy Binnie, 'UAE to get 1,085 refurbished MaxxPro MRAPs', Jane's Defence Weekly, 8 March 2017.

Source, unless noted otherwise: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database: http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/trade_register.php

- **France:** For a few years, aerospace company Dassault Aviation has been trying to sell 60 Rafale jets to the UAE as a successor to its Mirage jets. A contract—estimated at USD 10 billion—has so far not been signed. Related to that sale, the UAE aims to sell its redundant Mirage jets to Iraq, but Paris is said to be unwilling to grant permission.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, UAE Mirages are extensively being used for operations in Yemen, including from Assab airbase in Eritrea (see Yemen section in Chapter 3).

Under an EUR 800 million contract, French shipyard CMN delivered the first of six Baynunah class corvettes to the UAE navy in 2011; the following five were assembled at Abu Dhabi Shipbuilding (ADSB).⁶⁹ These warships have been participating in naval operations around Yemen since 2015 (see Chapter 3).

- **Russia:** The main arms deal with the UAE between 2009 and 2013 was the supply of 50 Pantsyr mobile air defence systems (on German MAN trucks), including 1,000 SA-19 missiles, for an estimated USD 720-800 million. The largest contract announced during the 2017 IDEX arms fair in Abu Dhabi was between the UAE and Russia's export agency JSC Rosoboronexport for an undisclosed number of anti-tank weapons, worth USD 709 million.⁷⁰ A much-reported joint UAE-Russian fighter jet project is still far from materialising. Cooperation plans appear to be related to US unwillingness to supply F-35 fighter jets to the UAE and must, therefore, also be seen as pressure on Washington.⁷¹

- **Italy:** In 2013, Italy's Fincantieri shipyard delivered the Abu Dhabi corvette and two heavily armed Falaj 2 naval patrol vessels to the UAE. It also upgraded the local Al-Fattan shipyard.⁷² Other Italian companies have delivered radars and naval guns for the six Baynunah corvettes built under French-Emirati cooperation.

In 2015, Leonardo (formerly Finmeccanica) sold nine AW-139 helicopters to the UAE armed forces under a USD 200 million contract. A year later, Piaggio Aerospace sold eight Hammerhead drones to the UAE under a EUR 316 million contract. The Hammerhead is the unmanned version of its P180 business aircraft. A test version crashed during trials in 2016, but company officials say deliveries to the UAE are on track to start in 2018. Since 2015, Piaggio has been fully owned by Mubadala, an Abu Dhabi-based investment firm.⁷³

- **Sweden:** In 2015, the UAE ordered two GlobalEye G6000 surveillance aircraft from Saab under a USD 1.27 billion deal, with a third confirmed during the IDEX arms fair in 2017.⁷⁴ The UAE is the first customer for this system; it also operates its predecessor, the Erieye. In 2013, Saab signed an agreement with UAE's Tawazun for a joint venture radar company, a first of its kind in the region.⁷⁵

Swede Ship Marine has supplied a range of smaller size ships built in cooperation with Abu Dhabi Shipbuilding. Between 2013 and 2015, under a deal worth USD 252 million, 12 new 27m Ghannatha boats were delivered to the UAE navy. All 12 new ships are configured as missile boats, able to strike targets at ranges over 30 km. Another 12 existing craft were retrofitted: six are now mortar boats, the other six fast gun boats.⁷⁶

- **Spain:** Three A-330 tanker/transport aircraft were delivered in 2013 by Spain's Airbus facility for EUR 730 million. They can refuel Mirage and F-16 fighter jets in-flight.

- **Turkey:** In 2013, Roketsan won a USD 196 million deal to sell 10,000 Cirit laser-guided missiles, for use with Apache attack helicopters among other things.⁷⁷ An estimated 5,000 of them had been delivered by the end of 2016. In 2017, Otokar received a USD 661 million order to build 400 Rabdan amphibious infantry vehicles in cooperation with UAE's Tawazun.⁷⁸

- **Germany:** In 2016, Germany approved the export of 203,448 detonators for 40 mm shells, produced by Junghans, as well as EUR 126 worth of armour-plating for military vehicles, made by Dynamit Nobel. Condemning these sales, Green Party MP Agnieszka Brugger said, "Instead of finally stopping all arms deals with the states participating in the bloody war in Yemen, the CDU and SPD [Germany's governing coalition parties] are ignoring Germany's arms export guidelines once again".⁷⁹ In 2016, Germany allowed the export of military goods worth EUR 154 million, making the UAE Germany's ninth arms export destination.

Over the years, MTU has provided the diesel engines for much of the UAE navy, including its six Baynunah and two Falaj-2 corvettes, as well as its French-made Leclerc main battle tanks. In 2014, Germany also supplied two Rmah-class torpedo vessels. DST, part of German armoured vehicle maker Krauss-Maffei Wegman, has been servicing the UAE's M109 howitzers since 2004; it signed a three-year follow-on contract in 2016.⁸⁰

- **Switzerland:** Pilatus exported 25 PC-21 trainer aircraft to the UAE air force in 2011 and 2012 under a USD 515 million contract.

- **South Africa:** Between 2006 and 2016, Denel supplied an estimated 192 RG-31 Nyala (locally designated as Agrab) armoured mortar carriers to the UAE in cooperation with local company International Golden Group (IGG). The vehicles are equipped with mortar systems supplied by **Singapore's** ST Kinetics.⁸¹ The mortar vehicles are known to have been used in Yemen.

Another significant deal was the sale of Al-Tariq (South African: Umbani) guided bombs for Mirage jets, produced by Tawazun Dynamics, a joint venture between UAE's Tawazun and South Africa's Denel. Under the USD 500 million deal, some 1,200 bombs of a total order of 1,600 had been delivered by the end of 2016.⁸²

- **UK:** The UAE reportedly declined to buy BAE Systems' Typhoon fighter jets in late 2013 to show its displeasure with the UK's perceived inaction against the Muslim Brotherhood.⁸³ It has not stopped all military trade though. Two Bombardier Global 6000 business jets have recently been converted for the UAE into 'special mission' (likely intelligence) aircraft by Marshall Aerospace.⁸⁴

- **Finland:** An estimated 45 mortar-carrying vehicles were sold through **Polish** subcontractor Rosomak. In 2016, the UAE was Finland's main arms destination, at a value of EUR 65 million, due largely to the export of 40 of these vehicles.⁸⁵ The Finnish ministry of Foreign Affairs "sees no international or security policy obstacles to granting an export permit", even though the vehicles' deployment in Yemen is commonly foreseen.⁸⁶

The case of the Netherlands

Arms exports to the Arab world have been central to much of the export control debate in the Netherlands since the Arab Spring in 2011 and the start of the military intervention in Yemen in 2015. While direct military exports to Saudi Arabia have come to a near-complete stop, the UAE is treated more liberally. Exports to the UAE are generally allowed for navy-related trade, but usually blocked with regard to its army and air force. With an export value of EUR 145 million (2007-2016), the UAE is the seventh largest non-NATO customer for the Dutch military industry.

The UAE's most remarkable military deal with the Netherlands was the 1996 sale of two surplus frigates from the Dutch navy for USD 320 million. The retrofitted warships served for another ten years, but never met expectations: they were considered too complex and required too many crew.⁸⁷ They have since been converted into luxury mega-yachts.

In 1999, the UAE took delivery of 85 upgraded ex-Dutch army 155 mm M-109 howitzers, bought for some USD 32 million. The Dutch government now believes it is likely that these were recently used in Yemen.⁸⁸

Another major deal was awarded to Thales Nederland, contracted in 2009 to supply its SOTAS communication system in UAE's Leclerc tanks for some

EUR 47 million.⁸⁹ Leclerc tanks operate in Yemen. It is unclear to what extent this order has been fulfilled since the Dutch government no longer requires export licences for SOTAS, which has also been exported for Saudi Arabia's Abrams tanks.⁹⁰

The largest export deal of recent times was by Damen Shipyards, which sold two 67m Arialah offshore patrol vessels with helicopter decks. The ships were built at its Romanian yard, and the integration of the combat systems was done at Abu Dhabi Shipbuilding (ADSB). Thales Nederland is a major subcontractor, supplying most of the electronic equipment and taking responsibility for combat systems integration.⁹¹ The ships are heavily armed with a BAE Bofors 57 mm gun, two Leonardo Marlin 30 mm guns and a Raytheon 11-cell missile launcher. In addition to a crew of 42, the ship can transport 35 troops and a three-person helicopter detachment. The total deal is valued at USD 272 million, with the first ship delivered in February 2017.

The deployment of a wide range of UAE naval ships around Yemen makes any future role of the Arialahs in the conflict likely. However, in answer to parliamentary questions, the Dutch government denied the role of the UAE navy in the conflict and emphasised its "important role in maintaining the arms embargo against Houthi rebels". It omitted any mention of the disastrous humanitarian consequences of the naval blockade on basic supplies to the people of Yemen (see Chapter 3).⁹²

Dutch policy changes in response to the UAE's role in Yemen appear rather biased. On the one hand, it has strengthened some controls from the start—denying, for example, fighter jet parts—and later extending those restrictions to equipment that "could indirectly contribute to the conflict", following repeated UN reports of violations of international humanitarian law.⁹³ Indeed, from September 2015 until the end of 2016, 11 out of 40 denied arms export licences were for the UAE (another seven were for Saudi Arabia), compared to zero Dutch denials for the UAE from 2010 to 2014.⁹⁴ Moreover, a dual use export licence for 'lawful intercept' equipment for the UAE National Electronic Security Authority was rejected in December 2016 because of "a real risk of violation of human rights".⁹⁵ Nonetheless, naval exports to the UAE may continue without such concerns, despite their key role in the war in Yemen.

Emerging arms industry and exports

The bi-annual International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) in Abu Dhabi is among the largest of its kind and certainly the largest in the Middle East. It focuses on the broad spectrum of land, air and naval forces, and it has been the place for all major buyers and sellers to meet since the 1990s.⁹⁶ The Gulf states' militaries, with their lavish budgets, are particularly prominent at the event.

Since the mid-1990s, the UAE has been developing a national arms industry to supply its armed forces and to export military equipment. In need of foreign technology, it has established partnerships with Western industries to help set up local industries. Over the past decade, the UAE has made significant progress in fulfilling its ambition to become more self-sufficient and, at the same time, competitive on the international market. Production of armoured vehicles, ships and drones are the most visible niches, but its industry is expected to diversify further. Meanwhile, it has become a top-30 global arms exporter. It may not be compared with the US or Russia, but it is on a par with India, Denmark and Bulgaria.

Much of the UAE's military industry has been integrated under the Emirates Defence Industries Company (EDIC), jointly owned by three major Emirati companies: Mubadala, Tawazun and Emirates Advanced Investments.⁹⁷ NIMR Automotive is one of the largest companies within EDIC; it built its 1,000th vehicle in 2016. In addition to large sales to UAE forces, including a deal for 1,750 vehicles announced at IDEX 2017, NIMR vehicles have been exported to Algeria (partly locally assembled), Libya and Turkmenistan. It aims to access the European market with Czech company VOP CZ.⁹⁸

As mentioned earlier, IGG has been working with South Africa's Denel to manufacture the Agrab mortar carrier. In another joint venture, it has been cooperating with Turkish company Aselsan; at IDEX 2017, IGG-Aselsan signed a memorandum with Estonian company Milrem to jointly develop an unmanned ground vehicle for the UAE armed forces.⁹⁹

Armoured vehicles manufacturer STREIT Group (STREIT), established in Canada in 1992, built its largest factory in Ras al-Khaimah, the northernmost emirate of the UAE, after receiving major orders from the US and Iraqi governments, soon after Saddam Hussein was toppled. "We transfer all our benefits to free zones—countries with no taxes and low labour costs—so that we can pass the benefits on to the clients", explained Russian-Canadian owner Guerman Goutorov.¹⁰⁰ STREIT makes a wide range of armoured vehicles, mostly in the lower-cost segment, with many of STREIT's military customers in war-torn countries that include Libya, Nigeria, South Sudan and Sudan. The Canadian government has probed STREIT for selling military equipment to embargoed destinations: Sudan and Libya (see Chapter 3).¹⁰¹

A fourth UAE vehicle manufacturer is Dubai-based Minerva Special Purpose Vehicles (MSPV), which has built Panthera T6 armoured vehicles for Egypt's military. It delivered an estimated 50 vehicles by 2015. The Libyan National Army (LNA) has taken delivery of Panthera T6s that were donated by the UAE, and, in 2016, Indian forces introduced the vehicle for use mainly in Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁰²

A number of small arms and ammunition manufacturers are part of the Tawazun Group, including Burkan, Caracal, Merkel and Remaya. Tawazun Dynamics co-produces the Al-Tariq missile with South Africa's Denel.

In the aerospace sector, Mubadala is a major player. It provides, among other things, maintenance and upgrades of military aircraft such as the UAE's Black Hawk armed helicopters. It also owns Italian aircraft producer Piaggio.¹⁰³ Another Mubadala company is the Advanced Military Maintenance Repair and Overhaul Centre (AMMROC), which works closely with Lockheed Martin and Airbus.¹⁰⁴

Adcom Systems is the UAE manufacturer of drones (UAVs), including the Yabhon Flash 20 and Hazim-15.¹⁰⁵ Another type, the United 40, has reportedly been transferred to Egypt, much against the will of the US, which has threatened sanctions against UAE entities.¹⁰⁶

Abu Dhabi Shipbuilding (ADSB) was founded in 1996, initially providing mainly maintenance and refitting work.¹⁰⁷ The Ghannatha project with Swede Ship Marine (see section on Sweden) was its first major shipbuilding project, which started in 2009.¹⁰⁸ It has also worked on other UAE orders, including Baynunah corvettes (with French company CMN) and Arialah patrol vessels (Damen, Netherlands). ADSB sold eight landing craft to Kuwait's navy.

Etihad Shipbuilding is a joint venture with Italian yard Fincantieri; it has built the Falaj offshore patrol vessels and Abu Dhabi-class corvette for the UAE navy.¹⁰⁹

DIVERSION OF WEAPONS

The UAE has a reputation for diverting weapons to third countries, and a number of cases have emerged in recent years. The re-export to Jordan of Swiss hand grenades sold originally to the UAE in 2003 and 2004 is a case in point. The grenades have been used in Syria, which has led to new Swiss rules that require foreign buyers to declare that they will not re-transfer war materiel without Switzerland's agreement.¹¹⁰

Armament Research Services (ARES), an independent technical intelligence consultancy, documented Bulgarian Arsenal self-loading rifles with Libyan, Yemeni and Sudanese armed forces. "In each of these cases, sources indicate that the weapons in question may have been provided by the United Arab Emirates (UAE)".¹¹¹ Some 30,000 assault rifles formed part of a 2010 deal between Bulgaria and UAE.

The next chapter will show that a range of military equipment originally or officially destined for the UAE was eventually transferred to rebel forces in Libya. ♦

3. Intervention in the conflicts in Yemen and Libya

Yemen

The Houthi movement is a Shia-led religious-political movement that emerged in Sa'dah, in northern Yemen, in the 1990s. It has been fighting against the government on and off since 2004. In November 2011, as a consequence of the Arab uprisings, which also took to the streets in Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh resigned under a GCC-mediated agreement. The new government took over, led by President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Saleh's former deputy. However, it was unable to tackle Yemen's challenges, including al-Qaeda, unemployment and corruption.

Taking advantage of Hadi's lack of broad popular support, Houthis cemented their relationship with Saleh in late 2014. With his help and the support of much of Yemen's military, they took control of the capital and much of the north-west of Yemen. "Alarmed by the rise of a group they believed to be backed militarily by regional Shia power Iran, Saudi Arabia and eight other mostly Sunni Arab states began an air campaign aimed at restoring Mr Hadi's government."¹¹² In August 2015, the coalition also inserted land forces, including an armoured brigade from the UAE. The coalition receives logistical and intelligence support from the US, UK and France. Details of the military operations are hard to get, as the intervening states are generally very secretive about them.¹¹³

As a consequence of the ongoing conflict, the people of Yemen are suffering immensely: three million people have fled their home; at least ten thousand have been killed, and tens of thousands wounded.¹¹⁴ The conflict and a naval blockade imposed by the coalition (officially to prevent rebels from getting weapons) have triggered a humanitarian disaster, leaving 70 per cent of a population of 27.4 million in need of aid. An unprecedented cholera epidemic has been aggravating this dire situation since April 2017.

In the words of the UN humanitarian coordinator in Yemen, "Deliberate military tactics to shred the economy have moved an already weak and impoverished country towards social, economic, and institutional collapse. [...] The people of Yemen have suffered long enough and no humanitarian response can meet the increasing needs that the war is causing. Only peace can end the suffering. The time has come for the warring parties to place the very people they claim to be fighting for at the center of their concerns and end the fighting."¹¹⁵



Emirati gunner aboard Chinook military helicopter over Yemen, September 2015.

UAE ROLE

The UAE's military role in Yemen may be infrequently highlighted, but it is significant and wide-ranging. It includes counter-insurgency operations on the ground, naval and air operations, intelligence, mine clearance and humanitarian aid.¹¹⁶ The UN PoE on Yemen considers that “coalition military activities are under the control of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates”, with ground operations in Aden and around Mukalla under the operational control of the UAE.¹¹⁷ The UAE has also captured Al Anad airbase 500 km north of Aden.¹¹⁸ Aden itself was seized from the Houthis in July 2015, thanks partly to a UAE amphibious landing operation.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, the UAE has captured all key Yemeni seaports except for Hodeidah (see below), plus a string of strategic islands in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab strait.¹²⁰

The UAE describes its participation in the coalition as “supporting the legitimate government in response to a request by the President of Yemen to provide necessary support to efforts to confront terrorism and extremism”.¹²¹ It is also part of an effort to counter what is perceived as “Iranian hegemonic behavior”.¹²² While Iran indeed appears to be lending support, its influence over and material support to Yemen's Houthi rebels should not be overstated.¹²³

The war in Yemen has also revealed diverging interests between the UAE, Saudi Arabia and the Hadi government. In May 2017, Saudi King Salman reportedly interfered when Hadi accused the Emiratis of “meddling in sovereign affairs, especially in the southern city of Aden where they had allegedly encouraged some locals to reject government orders”.¹²⁴ The Emirates had supposedly offered patronage to southern Yemeni politicians campaigning for secession.

The UAE has been the most central coalition force in the ground war in Yemen, with numbers

of troops varying over time, from an estimated 2,500 to as many as 5,500. Hundreds of Latin American mercenaries are reportedly included in those troops.¹²⁵ More than one hundred UAE military personnel have been killed in Yemen as of early 2017.¹²⁶ In September 2015, the UAE suffered its largest ever loss of soldiers on one day, when 52 of its soldiers were killed after Houthi militia stormed their camp in Marib province.

The UAE has deployed a wide range of weapon systems, including French-built Leclerc tanks, South African G6 howitzers, South African/Emirati Agrab mortar carriers, Emirati NIMR Ajban armoured vehicles, US Lockheed Martin F-16s and French Dassault Mirage fighter jets, as well as dozens of Boeing Apache attack helicopters.¹²⁷ US-built AT-802 light strike aircraft are taking part in operations in Yemen, including from Jizan airbase in Saudi Arabia.¹²⁸ AT-802s are also being used to train Yemeni pilots operating from Al Anad.¹²⁹ Baynunah corvettes have been deployed to support the naval blockade. The UN PoE has stated that “the systematic and widespread blockade of commercial goods has directly contributed to the obstruction of deliveries of aid and humanitarian assistance”.¹³⁰

US SUPPORT

Hodeidah, the country’s most important port, is controlled by the Houthis. Therefore, it has been labelled by Hadi and the Saudi-led coalition as a key entry point for weapons and ammunition from abroad. In June 2017, the UN Security Council just managed to avert an attack by the Saudi-led coalition, which had dropped leaflets over the town warning residents of an impending offensive.¹³¹ The port had been bombed previously, rendering its infrastructure partly paralysed. In March 2017, The Washington Post reported that incoming US Defence Secretary Mattis had suggested “limited support” for an Emirati invasion of Hodeidah, with warships and fighter aircraft, “to combat a common threat”. A similar Emirati plan was rejected by the Obama administration in late 2016.¹³²

US military support to the UAE is more significant than generally thought. According to US air force data, which has been provided to The Intercept website, the US has provided 67 million pounds of special military-grade air fuel supplies to Yemen coalition aircraft, the equivalent of 9,000 refuelling operations. The average monthly total has increased during 2017 and, according to the Pentagon, “the Emirati air force are the primary air force that we help refuel”. However, it would not specify for which military operations the refuelling takes place.¹³³

ERITREA

Key to the UAE’s role in Yemen is its use of the east-African coast as a springboard for its operations. Initially, UAE forces were deployed to Djibouti, but they soon left due to a dispute between the two states. They were subsequently based (together with Saudi troops) in Assab, Eritrea, in exchange for upgrading local facilities. Under a 30-year lease contract “the UAE has rapidly developed [Assab] out of virtually nothing into an air, naval, and training center”. It is the UAE’s first permanent military base in a foreign country.¹³⁴ In its most recent report, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea concludes that the “terms of the arms embargo [on Eritrea] do not allow for such activities”.¹³⁵

The PoE on Yemen identified a UAE navy Baynunah corvette in Assab; satellite imagery has also shown two 64m landing ships, and vessels from the UAE’s National Marine Dredging Company that have been building a port facility.¹³⁶ Mirage fighter jets, Apache and Black Hawk attack helicopters and a range of other UAE aircraft are known to have used Assab airport—

equipped with at least 12 new aircraft shelters—for operations in Yemen.¹³⁷ The use of both air and naval facilities in Eritrea enables the transport of personnel and supplies via aircraft and naval vessels to Yemen.

The UAE shuttle service came under the spotlight when a ship was hit by Houthi missiles in October 2016. The UAE claimed that the ship was carrying out humanitarian operations. However, UN experts concluded that the “*SWIFT-1* was operating in direct support of military operations by the United Arab Emirates in Yemen, making regular deliveries of supplies, troops and equipment from Assab, Eritrea, to Aden. It was not engaged in the routine delivery of humanitarian aid. The vessel was a legitimate military objective under international humanitarian law”.¹³⁸

Troop deployments from Assab to Aden have reportedly included three Sudanese mechanised battalions of 450 men each.¹³⁹ It is also reported that some 400 Eritrean troops have been contracted to serve embedded with UAE troops in Yemen, which, if confirmed, would constitute a clear violation of the Eritrean embargo, according to the UN monitors.¹⁴⁰

AL-QAEDA

On another front in Yemen, the UAE is also fighting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP, also known as Ansar al-Sharia), often in tandem with US forces.¹⁴¹ In April 2016, a force of 11,000 Yemenis, trained by the UAE, launched an assault on al-Mukalla, AQAP’s most populous stronghold and capital of Hadramout province, which contains most of Yemen’s oil reserves. Backed by UAE planes and warships, the town was quickly defeated. It was a similar story for other Qaeda-held coastal places in the following weeks.¹⁴² Even though Emirati commanders credit themselves for having forced AQAP to pull back, the group has certainly not been defeated.

A much-publicised raid carried out by US special forces and Emirati troops in inland al-Ghayil in January 2017 killed some 35 people, including women and at least ten children under the age of thirteen.¹⁴³ Another US-UAE coordinated attack in nearby al-Adhlan in May 2017 killed at least five civilians, including a child. Such attacks, as well as US drone strikes, which are purported to wipe out AQAP, have infuriated local populations.

The Associated Press, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and Human Rights Watch have extensively reported on clandestine prisons run either by the UAE or by Yemeni forces created and trained by the UAE. US officials have questioned some of these detainees and have regular access to their testimony. “Hundreds of men swept up in the hunt for al-Qaeda militants have disappeared into the prisons, where abuse is routine and torture extreme”.¹⁴⁴ The Emirates have flatly denied the allegations, whereas US officials have denied any participation in or knowledge of human rights abuses.

Aden, in Yemen’s southwest, has always been known as “a unique model for coexistence and tolerance”, being the only city in the country “housing citizens from all regions, religions and races”.¹⁴⁵ Islamic extremists have now destroyed that image. Several secular activists have been assassinated over the past two years, while others have fled Aden out of fear. Extremists have blended into the Security Belt Forces, officially affiliated with Yemen’s Ministry of Interior, but their funding and command come from the UAE.¹⁴⁶



The entrance of Aden Central Prison, known as Mansoura, where one wing is run by Yemeni allies of the UAE to detain al-Qaida suspects; May 2017.

Libya

Libya descended into chaos following the 2011 popular uprising and subsequent international military intervention, which toppled and killed its long-time leader Moammar Qaddafi. The oil-producing nation is currently split between three rival governments and dozens of warring militias.¹⁴⁷

The UN's Security Council Resolution 1973 authorised "all necessary measures" to "protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack" in Libya.¹⁴⁸ Under the auspices of the GCC, the UAE took the lead in lobbying the Arab League to endorse an air campaign against one of its members. The move was not only unprecedented but also instrumental in preventing a veto from Russia and China. Also unprecedented were the military contributions of both the UAE and Qatar. The UAE deployed special operations forces on the ground to arm and train rebel fighters, and it sent six Mirage and six F-16 fighter jets to Italy to participate in the NATO-led operations; it was the only Arab state to participate in bombing raids.¹⁴⁹ The "embedded advisory teams" from the UAE and Qatar worked with the main Libyan brigades battling Qaddafi loyalists and were the main link between rebel ground units and NATO air forces.¹⁵⁰

UAE pilots flying out of Egyptian airbases reportedly twice targeted Islamist fighters vying for control of the Libyan capital of Tripoli in August 2014. The raids, said to target militias supported by Qatar, appear to have been coordinated independently from the US, which disapproved of the airstrikes.¹⁵¹ The strikes came in two waves, according to the Guardian newspaper. It reported that "the first arrived on 17 August and hit more than a dozen targets in Tripoli held by Operation Dawn, a coalition of Islamist militias and their allies from the city of Misrata battling

against nationalists for control of the city. [...] A second wave hit in the early hours of 23 August, killing 17 Misratans and hitting ammunition dumps and the interior ministry building, captured by the Misratans the day before. Evidence of foreign involvement in the strikes continued to pile up through the weekend when fragments said to be from a US-made Mark 82 bomb were found amid the wreckage.”¹⁵² The Guardian also mentioned that “the strikes’ alleged origins are a watershed moment. [...] The move could turn Libya into a proxy war between the country’s elected government, backed by UAE and Egypt, and Islamists backed by Qatar”.

Emirati, Libyan and Egyptian officials have either declined to comment or squarely denied the Emirati strikes.¹⁵³ Other airstrikes over the past few years have also been attributed to either Egypt or the UAE, but most of these reports remain unconfirmed by the two countries and other independent sources.

ILLEGAL ARMS TRANSFERS

The UAE has been involved in numerous arms transfers to Libya, for both rebel and Emirati forces based in Libya, in violation of the UN arms embargo, under UNSC resolution 1973.¹⁵⁴ According to an extensive account in The New York Times in 2012, “the United Arab Emirates first approached the Obama administration during the early months of the Libyan uprising, asking for permission to ship American-built weapons that the United States had supplied for the Emirates’ use. The administration rejected that request, but instead urged the Emirates to ship weapons to Libya that could not be traced to the United States.”¹⁵⁵

Over the years, numerous cases of arms transfers from the UAE to Libya have been documented by the UN PoE, which is monitoring the embargo. A few examples illustrate the breaches committed, not just by unscrupulous arms dealers but co-organised by member states.

In September 2011, 800,000 Chinese-origin rounds of heavy machine gun ammunition from Albanian surplus stocks were transported by plane from Tirana to Benghazi. The deal was brokered by an Armenian agent and Ukrainian state-owned UKRINMASH on behalf of the armed forces of the UAE. Flight permits were issued for Abu Dhabi International Airport, but the flight route was changed and three subsequent flights delivered the cargo to Benghazi in breach of the arms embargo.

The transports were “part of a larger deal between UKRINMASH and the Government of the United Arab Emirates (through the Armenian agent), including 2 million 12.7 x 108 mm rounds and 1,000 AK-47 assault rifles”, according to the PoE. The experts discovered that the three flights received deconfliction numbers from NATO, despite the arms embargo, with clearance transmitted by the UAE military. The experts contacted the UAE regarding this transfer on several occasions, but they received no response.¹⁵⁶

This case clearly illustrates how the UAE, with or without tacit permission from NATO allies, has played a key role in providing relevant weapons and ammunition to Libyan rebels despite the arms embargo. A serious consequence of the numerous breaches of the Libyan arms embargo has been the further erosion of the credibility and effectiveness of international arms embargoes.

Since 2012 STREIT, the Russian-Canadian-owned company that has most of its manufacturing base in the UAE, has exported hundreds of armoured vehicles (Cougar, Spartan and Cobra) to the “Libyan Ministry of Interior”, authorised by “various UAE administrative offices including

the *UAE Committee for Goods and Materials Subjected to Import and Export Control Executive Office*".¹⁵⁷ While STREIT rejects any suggestion that it "could knowingly or otherwise break national or international law", this would assume it had no knowledge of the embargo—an unlikely and poor excuse for a major international arms trading company. Meanwhile, Canadian authorities are investigating STREIT's sales to Libya and Sudan in relation to UN embargoes.¹⁵⁸

The PoE has also documented UAE transfers of military equipment to the Sawa'iq brigade from Zintan, southwest of Tripoli, in 2013. These included armoured personnel carriers from UAE company NIMR, Bulgarian-origin AR-M9F assault rifles as well as uniforms.¹⁵⁹

The 2017 PoE report mentions the case of an Mi-24p attack helicopter delivered to Haftar's LNA in eastern Libya in April 2015. "Belarus has confirmed to the Panel that an Mi-24p helicopter with such markings had been transferred to the United Arab Emirates in 2014 as part of a delivery of four Mi-24p. Belarus had issued an end-user certificate and registered the transfer in the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms of 2015. [...] The Committee did not receive an exemption request for the transfer of this helicopter, nor has Belarus received any request by the United Arab Emirates for authorization of re-export of helicopters. The Panel has sent a letter to the United Arab Emirates asking for detailed information on the transfer of the attack helicopter to Libya but has not received a response".¹⁶⁰

In 2015, Defense News reported that talks between Libyan National Army chief General Haftar and Arab leaders resulted in arms purchases by the Libyan Army, including helicopters that were delivered in April 2015 by the UAE. "Five Mi-35 Hind upgraded helicopters were delivered last month ahead of more Russian equipment, which include anti-tank and armor-piercing weapons and munitions," the source said."¹⁶¹

Since 2016, a number of aircraft have been transferred to Khadim airport, a hundred kilometres from Benghazi, which has been extensively developed. The base's inventory of UAE air assets was revealed in October 2016 by Jane's Defence Weekly, showing six AT-802 light attack aircraft, two UH-60 'Black Hawk' helicopters, two Wing Loong drones capable of carrying guided weapons, as well as one IL-76 transport aircraft.¹⁶² According to Jane's, the combination of aircraft "matches that of an expeditionary deployment by the UAE". The AT-802 were originally agricultural/fire aircraft modified by US company IOMAX for counter-insurgency and border protection. IOMAX later started supplying Archangel aircraft instead. Both types can be equipped with several types of guns, rocket launchers and missiles. As at February 2017, IOMAX had sold 24 AT-802s and 24 Archangels to the UAE, which has since donated its AT-802s to Egypt (12), Jordan and Libya (six each).¹⁶³

The aircraft is crucial to Haftar's forces, which—like other factions—have few or no air weapons. Haftar is undoubtedly one of the most powerful figures in Libya. Initially, he had domestic and international support, partly because of his fight against Islamists. More recently, he is being viewed as a spoiler and would-be dictator, unwilling to recognise the UN-brokered unity government. Support from the UAE, Egypt and Russia, however, could embolden him further.

In its 2016 report, the UN experts included a leaked email from the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitting that "the fact of the matter is that the UAE violated the Security Council resolution on Libya and continues to do so", but would not submit written requests to the UNSC risking denial and exposing "how deeply we are involved in Libya. And will also hinder our

interests in Libya”.¹⁶⁴ Regardless, the numerous documented violations of the arms embargo will have little or no consequence, as legal steps are considered the responsibility of the national authorities of those entities or persons involved.

Recently, the UAE appears to be more supportive of UN negotiations and less engaged in Libya militarily—possibly because of its intervention in Yemen.¹⁶⁵ In May 2017, Abu Dhabi hosted talks between General Haftar and Prime Minister Serraj. The UAE said this has led to a “significant breakthrough” in efforts to end years of chaos.¹⁶⁶ ♦

Conclusions and recommendations

Until the Arab Spring in 2011, arms transfers to the Gulf region were largely seen as 'toys for boys': military bling-bling in exchange for black gold—a win-win situation for oil sheiks, arms producers and the economy at large. The weapons spree was also serving Western political interests: having the Arab Gulf states as well-equipped frontline states against a perceived Iranian threat. The development and use of military bases in the Arab peninsula by the US and other states since the 1990s has certainly raised their profile.

A paradigm shift has taken place since 2011, however. States such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have engaged in military interventions outside their national borders, also independently of NATO or the US. The UAE is rapidly emerging as a regional power with an increasingly muscular foreign policy, despite its small size, and it has been involved in military operations in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and, most recently, Yemen.

Arms transfers to Saudi Arabia have received significant attention and condemnation in light of their use in Yemen. Yet similar transfers to the UAE have taken place largely unquestioned. Part of the reason may be that the 'Saudi-led coalition' has been very secretive about operations carried out by individual coalition members.

A point in case is an attack in the Red Sea in March 2017, which killed more than 40 of around 145 people fleeing Yemen by boat. In all likelihood, the fatal shots came from a machine gun on a helicopter "most likely operating from a naval vessel", according to The New York Times, which had seen a copy of a confidential UN report about the case.¹⁶⁷ The UAE "is singled out in the report. In state media, the Emirates had said it knew the boat was a civilian vessel. If Emirates naval forces were in the area, the panel said, they could have helped the wounded or seen who attacked them. They did not help, nor did they cooperate with the panel when it requested information."

Earlier the UN PoE on Yemen concluded that "the conflict has seen widespread violations of international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict. The Panel has undertaken detailed investigations into some of these incidents and has sufficient grounds to believe that the coalition led by Saudi Arabia did not comply with international humanitarian law in at least 10 air strikes that targeted houses, markets, factories and a hospital."

In 2016, the UN Panel also noted that "the systematic blockade of a city or country, as a form of military siege, to prevent goods from entering and people from leaving, raises serious implications from the perspective of international humanitarian law." Moreover, UAE forces have been linked

to secret prisons in Yemen, where inmates are reportedly being tortured routinely.

Despite obvious concerns, most arms supplying countries continue exporting weapons to the Saudi-led coalition, including the UAE. Similarly, the UAE's reported breaches of embargoes and its diversion of weapons to unauthorised destinations generally do not seem to have major consequences. That the UAE can justify receiving arms transfers because of its role in enforcing a UN embargo on the Houthis and, at the same time, disregard UN resolutions banning unauthorised military support to countries such as Eritrea, Somalia and Libya is deeply hypocritical.

The continuing flow of weapons to the UAE raises serious questions when one considers its crucial role in the conflicts in Yemen and Libya, the diversion of weapons and the breaches of arms embargoes. Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) state parties (e.g. EU states) and signatories (such as the US) have committed themselves to the conditions of the treaty, which stipulates among other things that that state parties “assess the potential that the conventional arms or items:

- a. would contribute to or undermine peace and security;
- b. could be used to:
 - i. commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law;
 - ii. commit or facilitate a serious violation of international human rights law;
 - [...]

If, after conducting this assessment and considering available mitigating measures, the exporting State Party determines that there is an overriding risk of any of the negative consequences in paragraph 1, the exporting State Party shall not authorize the export.”¹⁶⁸

Similarly, the EU Common Position on arms export includes eight criteria that states should assess when deciding on arms export licences. EU states should, for example, “deny an export licence for military technology or equipment which would provoke or prolong armed conflicts or aggravate existing tensions or conflicts in the country of final destination”.¹⁶⁹

In connection with these observations, many civil society organisations, politicians and others have called upon their governments to restrict arms transfers to parties involved in the war in Yemen. As SIPRI notes: “Despite [...] the fact that allegations of serious violations of international law by members of the coalition intervening in Yemen were raised in exporting states in 2015, the flow of weapons continued unchecked. Indeed, exporting states agreed many new deals in 2015 to supply large numbers of advanced arms to members of the coalition. [...] Some governments justified the exports and new deals by pointing to the benefits they would bring to their economies and, in particular, their arms industries”.¹⁷⁰

This phenomenon is inherent to the global arms trade: under the cloak of fostering regional security and at the same time invoking national security and economic concerns, states often justify arms exports to destinations involved in regional conflict. Obviously, these issues also raise questions on how the enormous weapon flows to the UAE and the wider Middle East affect regional stability in the near future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce the harm to civilians in conflicts in Yemen and elsewhere in the MENA region, the following recommendations are proposed:

- ◆ The UAE should stop its military intervention in Yemen and work towards a peaceful solution through UN-led diplomacy. Two-and-a-half years of war has resulted only in more instability, more violence, less security and a disastrous humanitarian situation.
- ◆ The UAE should stop violating UN resolutions banning arms transfers and providing military support to states under embargo.
- ◆ The UN should work towards strengthening the enforcement of arms embargoes by criminalising violations.
- ◆ The UN should establish an international independent inquiry to monitor the use of all weapons in the conflict in Yemen.
- ◆ Exporting states must stop supplying arms to the UAE. These arms are at risk of being used in the conflicts in Yemen and Libya, and may be used in violating human rights in general. ◆

Notes

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- 11 The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://mofa.gov.ae/EN/TheMinistry/Pages/UAE-Foreign-Policy.aspx>
- 12 Leah Sherwood, 'Risk diversification and the United Arab Emirates' foreign policy', in: Khalid Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (eds.), 'The Small Gulf States', Routledge, 2017. See also: Kenneth Katzman, 'The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy', Congressional Research Service, 28 February 2017.
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