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The UAE as a security partner in Africa

The Emirati government appears to have three main goals in increasing its level of security assistance to partner countries in Africa: fighting Islamist and extremist groups, securing and preserving a regional economic advantage and, to a lesser extent, preserving its interests vis-à-vis geopolitical rivals.

Until recently, Emirati arms transfers consisted predominantly of armoured vehicles and second-hand equipment; but given the country's expanding domestic production capacity for UAVs and loitering munitions, these could potentially be transferred in greater numbers to the UAE's African partners, altering existing equilibriums.

In the past decade, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has become a prominent extra-continental economic actor in Africa. In 2022 and 2023, for example, it pledged US$97 billion in investments there, reportedly three times more than China. Meanwhile, the pace of Emirati defence engagement in the region has also accelerated. The UAE is now a security partner of over two dozen African countries, particularly in East Africa, North Africa and the Sahel.

For most of the 2010s, Emirati security cooperation and arms sales to Africa were limited, with the major exceptions being Libya and Somalia. By the end of the decade, however, defence interactions increased in tandem with diplomatic and economic involvement. Greater regional activism to contain potential security threats, and rising trade and investment linkages, have prompted the UAE to reassess its role and pay more attention to security cooperation. The rise in Emirati arms sales and transfers in the late 2010s can also be partly attributed to an expansion in the UAE's production capacity for armoured vehicles as new manufacturers came online and existing ones upgraded their facilities.

Ideological and geo-economic motivations

Typically, the Emirati government itself takes the lead on security cooperation with African partner countries, rather than private industry. This includes the provision of funding and training arrangements, establishing military-related outposts and airlifts, and signing security-cooperation agreements. The major exception is equipment deliveries, which are generally spearheaded by ostensibly private entities. The government appears to have three main goals: fighting Islamist and extremist groups; securing and preserving a regional economic advantage; and, to a lesser extent, preserving its interests vis-à-vis geopolitical rivals. At times, the Emirati approach to security cooperation is determined by two or three of these factors at once, such as fighting a terrorist group while securing economic benefits.

Fighting Islamist, jihadist and terrorist groups

The UAE has delivered security assistance to help countries address perceived ideological threats such as Islamist, jihadist and terrorist groups. Examples include numerous subsidiaries of the Islamic State (ISIS) spread throughout the continent, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which operates across the Sahel, and al-Shabaab, which is active in Somalia, with some spillover into neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya.

In the Sahel, the UAE has helped countries face threats from Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates. For example, it supplied transport aircraft and MCAV-20 armoured vehicles to Mauritania, and it also helped fund the construction of a military college adjacent to Nouakchott University. In Mali, it delivered dozens of armoured vehicles to combat Islamist groups shortly after signing a military-cooperation agreement. The UAE also supplied armoured vehicles to Burkina Faso and Nigeria, with the latter using them to fight Boko Haram. Abu Dhabi also collaborated directly with the G5 Sahel Force, pledging €30 million (US$31.5m) and conducting logistical flights to support the efforts of the international community, led by France, to combat terrorism in the Sahel.

In the Horn of Africa, Somalia has been battling al-Shabaab, a major Islamist insurgency, for almost two decades. In February 2024, al-Shabaab claimed an attack that killed four Emirati soldiers deployed at the General Gordon military base. To help Somalia combat the group, Abu Dhabi funded a military training centre in Mogadishu that opened in 2015, and has been providing financial support

Table 1: **Emirati security cooperation with partner countries in Africa, 2019–24**

Region	Country	Equipment delivery	Training	Funding	Cooperation agreement	Other
North Africa	Morocco	L				Security-cooperation discussions held
	Algeria	C				
	Tunisia	C				
	Libya	C				Airlift (2020)
	Egypt	C				Former military and logistical outpost
West Africa	Nigeria	C				
	Burkina Faso	C				
	Guinea	L				
	Senegal	C			C	
	Mauritania	C		C		Security-cooperation discussions held
	Mali	C			C	
	Côte d'Ivoire	C				
Central Africa	Chad	C	L		C	Airlift (2023) and military and logistical outpost
	Cameroon	C				
	Democratic Republic of the Congo	C	L	L	L	
East Africa	Uganda					Streit Group opens a factory (2023)
	Rwanda	C				
	Sudan	C				
	South Sudan	C				
	Eritrea		C			Former military and logistical outpost
	Ethiopia	C	L		C	Airlift (2021)
	Somalia	C	C	C	C	Military and logistical outpost
	Kenya	C				
	Tanzania				C	
	Seychelles	C				
	Malawi	C				
	Mozambique	C			C	
Southern Africa	Angola	C				

C Confirmed L Likely but unconfirmed
Source: IISS analysis

for several Somali National Army brigades in the fight against al-Shabaab for over a decade. The UAE has also trained soldiers, special-operations forces and Jubaland forces in Somalia. In 2023, it signed a cooperation agreement to enhance the institutional capacity-building of Somalia's security forces and support ongoing efforts to eradicate al-Shabaab. Unverified reports claim the UAE is interested in establishing a military base in Kismayo, a port city in southern Somalia. This would likely further help Somalia fight against al-Shabaab.

In addition to fighting this al-Qaeda subsidiary, Islamic State activity and piracy have also been significant drivers behind the Emirati decision to provide security assistance in Somalia. The UAE has provided salaries and arranged training for the Puntland Maritime Police Force, which was established to combat piracy but whose focus shifted toward counter-terrorism. In Puntland, the UAE reportedly has a small deployment of special forces near Bosaso airport to support the area's maritime police force.

Further south, Mozambique has faced an Islamist insurgency in the province of Cabo Delgado since 2017. Abu Dhabi has provided military assistance in the form of MCAV-20 armoured vehicles and reportedly between 100 and 150 military trucks to help transport troops. Additionally, the UAE and Mozambique signed a memorandum of understanding in 2022 to cooperate more closely in the fight against terrorism. There are other examples of Emirati security assistance driven by this ideological motivation, including in Libya (ISIS–Libya), Kenya (al-Shabaab), Chad (Boko Haram and Islamic State

in West Africa Province–ISWAP) and Sudan (Islamist-leaning sections of the Sudanese Armed Forces).

Securing economic advantages

The UAE also supports strategic partners in Africa to secure its access to resources and capitalise on economic and investment opportunities. Strengthening friendly governments fighting against insurgencies and preserving a stable status quo where its companies have substantial investments is also critical.

Ethiopia presents a clear example. The UAE supported the Ethiopian government significantly during the Tigray War (2020–22), with around 120 Il-76 airlifts in 2021. Ethiopia received precision-guided missiles and assault rifles, amongst other things. Most recently, Ethiopia received dozens of MCAV-20 armoured vehicles, shipped from the UAE to Djibouti and sent on to Ethiopia via the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway. In addition to delivering equipment, the UAE has trained members of Ethiopia's Republican Guard. The UAE also launched strikes via uninhabited aerial vehicles (UAVs) that destroyed Tigrayan artillery and weapons depots, according to a Western official and a former Ethiopian official.

In August 2023, a few months after the end of the Tigray War, UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan undertook a state visit to Addis Ababa and signed 17 agreements pertaining to critical sectors of the Ethiopian economy. Emirati logistics giants DP World and AD Ports Group, oil company ADNOC, renewable-energy champion Masdar, agriculture conglomerate Al Dahra, and other Emirati entities are poised to benefit from these agreements.

Further south, the UAE has assisted the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in its fight against the March 23 Movement (M23) and other armed rebel groups. Emirati companies Calidus and Streit Group have supplied armoured vehicles to Kinshasa, with unconfirmed reports of deliveries of assault rifles and multi-role helicopters. The UAE has also reportedly funded the Kinshasa police academy and training for counter-terrorism units of the Légion Nationale d'Intervention, and has allegedly provided training to members of the DRC's Police Nationale Congolaise at Abu Dhabi Police College and the Dubai Police Academy.

Emirati security assistance to the DRC is neither competitive, ideological nor counter-Islamist (although ISIS does have a branch in the DRC). Instead, the main goal is to secure access to valuable mineral resources, as the country boasts some of the highest quality copper reserves globally, and abundant and untapped gold, cobalt and diamond reserves. This fits the UAE's ambition to become one of the world's top trading hubs for gold and diamonds – gold already accounts for around one-third of its non-oil exports. Cobalt, copper and other critical minerals play a central role in strategic sectors the UAE is focusing on, including defence systems, electronics and renewable energies (solar panels and batteries).

Against this backdrop, the Emirati firm Primera Group signed a 25-year contract in December 2022 with the DRC that would give it preferential export rates for artisanal gold, coltan, tin, tantalum and tungsten. This was ultimately unsuccessful. In July 2023, however, a delegation led by Sheikh Shakhboot Nahyan Al Nahyan – who has acted as Abu Dhabi's de facto Africa minister – signed a US$1.9bn deal with state-owned mining company Sakima to develop at least four mines in the DRC.

In neighbouring Angola, the UAE is selling warships while its companies develop the country's maritime infrastructure. Emirati defence conglomerate EDGE Group recently agreed a US$1.05bn deal with the Angolan Navy for three corvettes, six uncrewed helicopters and other smaller vessels. In parallel, Emirati port operators DP World and AD Ports Group have pledged to invest hundreds of millions of US dollars in two terminals they operate in the Port of Luanda, Angola's main maritime gateway and an important regional hub. AD Ports Group also signed an agreement with Angola's Ministry of Transport in 2023 to develop the country's maritime services and infrastructure. Possible future developments include logistics platforms, passenger terminals, ferry and cabotage services, and plans to develop the Caio Deepwater Terminal at Cabinda Port in Angola's oil-rich northwest exclave of Cabinda.

In Sudan, the UAE hopes to preserve its access to gold, much of which is controlled by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The UAE is also interested in Sudanese farmland and ports, as reflected by the US$6bn agreement signed between AD Ports Group and Invictus Investment. Abu Dhabi appears to think all these will be better secured by the RSF than the Sudanese Armed Forces, so it has supported the former since the civil war began in April 2023. According to open-source analysts, between May and September 2023, the UAE conducted a large airlift of at least 109 flights from Abu Dhabi into Amdjarass airport in Chad, where the UAE built temporary aircraft shelters and a hangar. The exact contents of the airlift are unknown. While the UAE stated it is providing humanitarian support, there is mounting evidence that Amdjarass is being used as a logistics hub to support the RSF in Sudan,

with the UN Panel of Experts finding such allegations credible. In the case of Sudan, geo-economic motivations appear to be linked to ideological ones, as thousands of men fighting alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces worked under former president Omar al-Bashir and have ties to his Islamist movement.

Inter-state competition

Inter-state competition, the least relevant of the three drivers, has seldom determined Emirati security cooperation with African countries. During the Western Libya campaign (2019–20), the UAE supported the Libyan National Army led by the anti-Islamist Khalifa Haftar, which fought the Turkiye-backed Government of National Accord based in Tripoli. Although this aimed in part at countering Islamist militias, it later became a struggle for influence against Turkiye. After the Turkish Grand National Assembly voted in January 2020 to send troops to help Tripoli, the UAE began a major airlift. Between January and May 2020, there were at least 160 flights from Emirati air bases into Libya and the Egyptian base of Sidi Barrani, close to the Libyan border. The UAE also deployed at least six *Mirage* 2000 fighter aircraft in Sidi Barrani in 2020.

In other cases, the UAE avoided resorting to security assistance to erode the influence of foreign competitors in Africa. For instance, during the Gulf diplomatic crisis (2017–21), it practically halted its security cooperation with the Federal Government of Somalia during the tenure of Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmaajo' Mohamed (2017–22), who was known to be close to Qatar, until a new Somali president came to power.

Evolving approaches

Emirati security cooperation with African partners reflects the transformation of the UAE's approach to military intervention. Initially, the UAE focused on deploying together with US- and NATO-led military coalition operations to gain operational experience, an approach Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan himself emphasised over two decades ago.

As Emirati forces gained more experience in expeditionary deployments, they transitioned onto operations outside the NATO framework – but still part of a broader coalition – as was the case with the intervention in Yemen. The UAE learned numerous lessons from that campaign, and while it saved Aden from falling to Ansarullah (Houthis) and subsequently pushed the group back to the north, it paid a high reputational cost and suffered over 100 casualties.

Emirati security cooperation with Africa in recent years exemplifies the third phase of this approach, which aims to reduce risk while still retaining a degree of influence in conflict theatres. Instead of deploying high-end capabilities and getting directly involved, the UAE prefers to strengthen partners by providing training, financing and equipment. This is reminiscent of the 'by, with and through' operational approach the US developed to fight the Islamic State.

This approach helps the UAE avoid quagmires and provides it with a degree of plausible deniability, shielding it from reputational damage – albeit not completely. Since, in most cases, it is unrealistic to provide expensive fighter jets and main battle tanks – which are also complex to operate – the UAE is choosing to supply cheaper and lower-end equipment instead. This is in high demand in many of Africa's low-tech conflict theatres, and the UAE can often produce it domestically, thereby reducing foreign oversight.

The equipment and weapons delivered are sometimes manufactured outside the UAE. In some cases, the UAE transferred older equipment it had bought elsewhere, presumably after receiving modern replacements. For instance, the UAE bought large quantities of Soviet weapons and ammunition from Bulgaria in the early 2010s, an unlikely purchase for a military accustomed to procuring advanced equipment. Some Bulgarian rifles seem to have later appeared in the hands of Libyan, Yemeni and Sudanese forces, transferred to local actors with an added layer of plausible deniability.

Commercial goals and strategic advantage

Equipment sales by Emirati defence companies in Africa are driven not just by commercial motivations but often by strategic rationales, especially for those companies closely related to the country's key decision-makers.

The personal nature of politics in the UAE creates a degree of overlap between official state levers and commercial players, which often plays out in the form of informal relationships that are not always obvious or public. For example, Faris Mohammed Al Mazrouei, the chairman of Calidus, is an adviser to the UAE's Presidential Court (the diwan) with the rank of minister. In the case of Streit Group, a recent expansion of its facilities was inaugurated in 2022 by the Ruler of Ras al-Khaimah. Meanwhile, Faisal Al Bannai, chairman of the board of directors of EDGE Group, is an adviser to the UAE president with the rank of minister.

These ties allow the government to provide some guidance for defence companies, and to retain some control over these companies' activities abroad while preserving a degree of plausible deniability.

Outlook

With Europe's and Russia's attention consumed by the war in Ukraine and the US focused on containing Russia, China and Iran, middle powers like the UAE are emerging as alternative security partners in Africa. Emirati security assistance is even more attractive, as countries do not need to get entangled in US–China competition.

Until recently, Emirati arms transfers consisted predominantly of armoured vehicles and second-hand equipment; but given the country's expanding domestic production capacity for UAVs and loitering munitions, these could potentially be transferred in greater numbers to the UAE's African partners, altering existing equilibriums. The acquisition of UAVs would yield significant new capabilities for countries lacking traditional airpower assets. They can also have an oversized impact in low-tech conflicts on the continent without air defences, electronic warfare or other air assets fielded on the battlefield. In Ethiopia, for example, the deployment of UAVs appeared to play a significant role in turning the tide of the conflict in favour of the Ethiopian Army and against Tigrayan rebels. Similarly, EDGE's recent acquisition of Etimad Holding and Condor Non-Lethal Technologies may position the UAE as an increasingly attractive provider of internal security solutions, strengthening partners in the face of protests and internal instability.

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