

# The UAE's Quiet Militarization of the Red Sea

by Ronan Wordsworth - November 4, 2025

The Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary group that comprises one side of the civil war in Sudan, recently took el-Fasher, the last important stronghold of the country's military in western Sudan. The victory – and the massacre that followed – would have been impossible without foreign support. Multiple intelligence assessments suggest that that support came from the United Arab Emirates. And though Abu Dhabi has repeatedly denied its involvement, satellite imagery, flight patterns and arms tracking networks have repeatedly indicated Emirati involvement in Sudan through direct shipments and proxy channels.

Recent satellite analysis adds to the intrigue. On three small uninhabited Red Sea islets, monitoring agencies have detected the covert construction of runways capable of handling medium-sized cargo aircraft. No country has claimed responsibility for them, but experts believe the construction methods, materials, procurement routes and logistics all point to Emirati involvement. Moreover, the construction projects resemble known Emirati military projects in Eritrea, the island of Socotra and Libya.

Beyond Africa, similar patterns emerge in Abu Dhabi's approach to military partnerships. The Financial Times recently reported that U.S. intelligence concluded in 2022 that the UAE had transferred dual-use technologies to China through a company tied to its national security adviser. The systems allegedly enhance range and targeting capacities in Chinese missile programs, potentially allowing Chinese hardware to outclass their U.S. counterparts.

It's tempting to interpret Emirati activity here as little more than a regional power hedging its bets across conflict zones. But the truth is that this is a much more considered military-economic project spanning the Red Sea corridor, a crucial maritime chokepoint through which roughly 10 percent of global maritime trade passes. From a purely strategic perspective, Emirati infrastructure here is less about outright power projection and more about logistics, surveillance and deniability. For Abu Dhabi, securing strategic resources and becoming a central geopolitical player is driving a different kind of power projection – one that balances Western alliances with its own ambitions of securing long-term technological and economic independence.

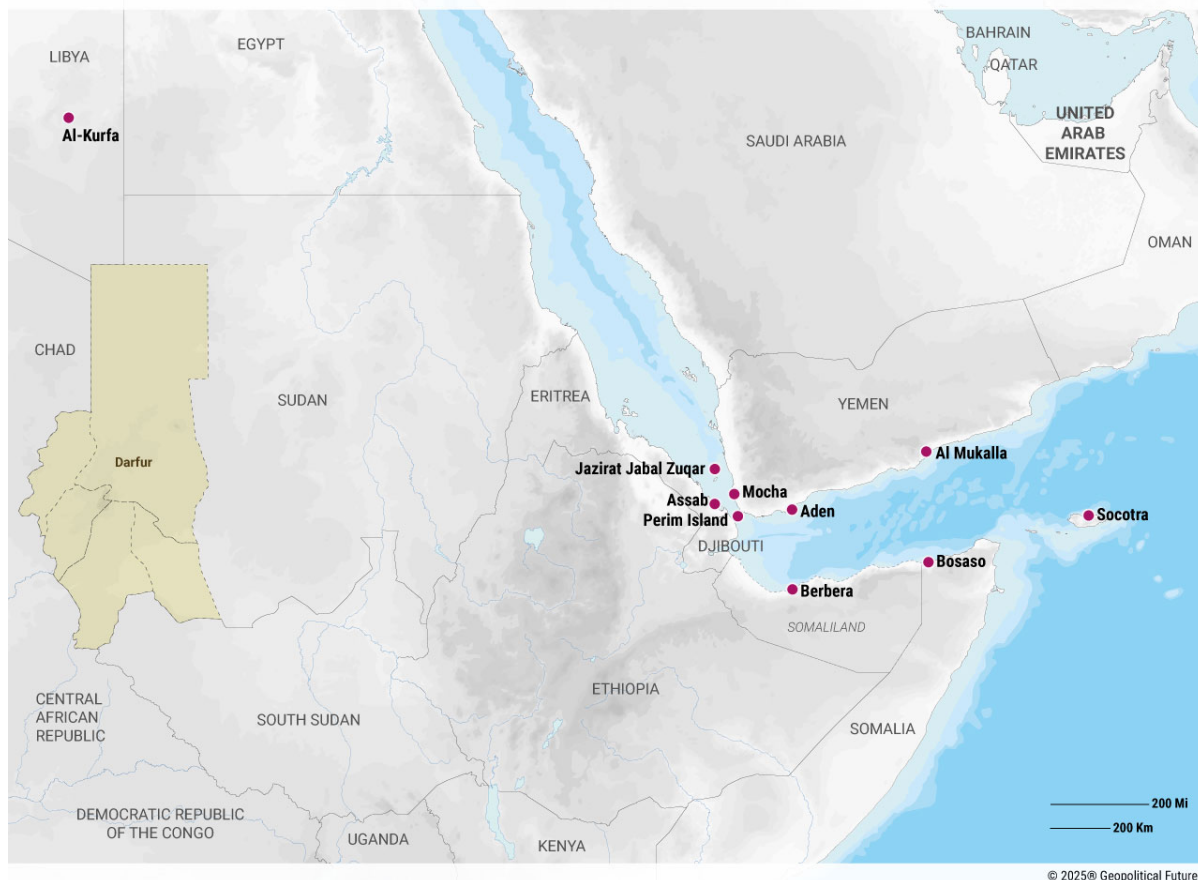
Over the past decade, Emirati business networks and security contractors have expanded financing channels throughout Africa. Investments have been funneled to mining operations in Sudan and Congo, port developments including in Somaliland and Puntland, logistics hubs from Eritrea to Mozambique, and land acquisition and agricultural activities in Zambia and Zimbabwe. From these engagements, a pattern emerges: Abu Dhabi is blending commercial activity with paramilitary facilitation in a form of grey zone operations – that is, operations that fall between economic diplomacy and direct military intervention.

In Sudan, the UAE has essentially built a patron-client relationship with the Rapid Support Forces. In fact, their partnership predates the 2023 civil war. Since 2017, the RSF has sent thousands of Sudanese fighters to serve as mercenaries in Yemen on behalf of the UAE. The group controls most of Sudan's artisanal gold mining in Darfur, feeding gold exports routed through Chad and Libya to the UAE, which has become a global gold refining hub. By sustaining this economic pipeline, the UAE profits from and secures leverage over Sudan's political future.

The arrangement has the UAE sending arms and ammunition from its bases in Chad, in Libya and across land corridors from Somalia to Darfur. It has also paid the salaries of Colombian mercenaries fighting for the RSF after being recruited under the guise of guarding oil facilities in the UAE. These mercenaries were heavily involved in the siege of el-Fasher and the training of the troops they assisted. For Abu Dhabi, the calculation is simple: secure access to the billions of dollars' worth of Sudanese gold and create a loyal paramilitary force that can safeguard its interests – all while minimizing exposure or direct involvement.

Abu Dhabi officially withdrew troops from Yemen in 2019, but it maintains de facto control over strategic ports and islands including Aden, Mukalla, Socotra and Perim. During Yemen's civil war, the UAE initially aligned with Saudi Arabia as part of the anti-Houthi coalition but later broke rank, redirecting support to southern separatists to secure access to coastal zones and ports. The new island runways serve a dual purpose of being logistical hubs to support both southern separatists and other proxies in Africa. They have the added benefit of securing maritime corridors through the Red Sea and maintaining influence over the Bab el-Mandeb strait.

## United Arab Emirates' Presence in the Horn of Africa



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Through its two mega companies, DP World and AD Ports Group, the UAE has significantly expanded port operations throughout Africa, winning concessions in places like Angola, the Republic of Congo and the breakaway region of Somaliland. Bilateral ties are especially pronounced in Somalia and Somaliland; activity has expanded through port management and airstrip construction to direct military cooperation, including training troops, paying salaries and supplying equipment. In Somaliland, the UAE has secured operational control over the port of Berbera and is developing a military airbase capable of hosting Emirati aircraft and naval deployments.

In Puntland – another breakaway region of Somalia – Emirati officers have trained and financed elements of the Puntland Maritime Police Force, a coastal security unit nominally under local control but effectively reliant on Emirati funding, equipment and operational oversight. The Colombian mercenaries present in Sudan mobilize in Bosaso, a port and airstrip developed with a 30-year concession by Dubai-based P&O Ports. The strategic location of the breakaway region and its

relative independence make it another ideal operational base for the UAE.

Relations with the government in Mogadishu, however, have been rockier. The UAE previously maintained direct training programs for the Somali National Army and police units, even paying salaries to an estimated 2,000 soldiers until tensions led to a breakdown in cooperation following the seizure of UAE funds at the airport. There has since been only limited reengagement. Abu Dhabi has thus chosen to reposition itself, deepening ties with the autonomous regions of Puntland and Somaliland, where its support encounters fewer federal restrictions. Collectively, this distributed network of patronage enables the UAE to sustain influence over fragmented political authorities and maintain logistical access to the Gulf of Aden and the broader Red Sea corridor, reinforcing commercial interests and covert military posture. (That UAE-backed forces have control over the islands of Zuqar, Abd al Kuri and Perim comes in handy too.)

For the UAE, the intensification of shadow military operations is driven by a few underlying imperatives. First and most important, it wants its economy to be more than simply an oil economy. To help the transition, Abu Dhabi is looking to use its foreign sovereign funds to aggressively diversify into foreign markets, especially those in Africa. Its focus has been on critical resources (rare earths, gold and other mining operations), port infrastructure networks, logistics corridors and food security projects. Military entrenchments in and around the Red Sea help support and protect these investments.

The UAE is also trying to position itself as a Gulf power, reducing dependence on the U.S. as Washington withdraws somewhat from the Middle East. Regionally, competition with Saudi Arabia increasingly looks to be a motivating factor. Though their interests sometimes align, the two are increasingly supporting rival actors. Their methods for doing so underscore this division; Riyadh prefers formal coalitions and mega-projects, while Abu Dhabi operates in targeted areas using disciplined financial and security arrangements that can secure disproportionate returns. In Yemen and Sudan, the UAE's support for non-Saudi factions is meant to undermine, and even curb, further Saudi expansion and influence.

Last, the UAE wants to become a sovereign technological and defense innovation hub. Through cooperation with China on dual-use systems and aerospace technologies, it has become one of the world's fastest-growing exporters of drones, even as it develops indigenous capabilities in cyber operations and missile systems, and the conflicts in Africa give Abu Dhabi the opportunity to battle-test its equipment. These ventures align with Abu Dhabi's Vision 2031 agenda, which aspires to position the UAE as a center for advanced manufacturing and defense innovation.

Put simply, the UAE cannot become a conventional military power in a conventional way – not with a mere 1 million citizens. It is therefore trying to become a regional power using its unique strengths: financial support for mercenaries, ports, drones, contractors, “dual-use” humanitarian logistics and, crucially, plausible deniability.

The UAE has built logistical corridors linking its investments and military proxies across Africa and the Red Sea, partnering with local armed actors to shield its economic projects from scrutiny. The massacre in el-Fasher shows that its strategy is not without risks. Still, its forays into Africa and the Red Sea are not impulsive gambles; they constitute a deliberate effort to operate in the grey zone, wielding asymmetric capabilities to safeguard resources, test new technologies and assert geopolitical centrality in an era of declining Western preeminence and rising multipolar competition.

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