

UAE drones have given rise to a new arms economy

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*An intricate arms supply network with the United Arab Emirates as its hub has been balancing the power between state and non-state actors in Africa and the Middle East. The estimated overall value of the global drone industry is around \$45 billion. However, as **Andreas Krieg** writes, Abu Dhabi is not alone.*



In the deserts of Sudan, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group once known for its brutality on horseback, now wages war with precision-guided drones. Embroiled in a devastating conflict with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under the command of the UN-backed government, the RSF have managed to all but erase the gap between an infantry-based militia and a conventional state military. Their secret? A modular, unmanned air force quietly exported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) through a vast regional network of arms suppliers and logisticians.

The rise of UAE drone exports

Over the past five years, the UAE has emerged as a prolific, albeit unofficial, exporter of drone warfare, supplying unmanned aerial systems not to allies in uniform, but to armed non-state actors across Africa and the Middle East. From the RSF in Sudan to Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and forces aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen, Abu Dhabi has learned how to outsource airpower and recalibrate battlefields, while insulating itself from direct entanglement. All of this while generating strategic depth in areas deemed of high value to Emirati national interests.

Surrogate warfare

This is not the familiar story of great powers supplying tanks and jets to client regimes. Rather, the UAE is pioneering a surrogate model where drones are shipped in parts, reassembled in the field, and operated by secessionist militias who in the past would have been an infantry force mounted on pickup trucks at best. It is practicing drone statecraft to generate strategic reach—discreet, deniable, yet devastatingly effective.

Although the estimated overall value of the global drone industry, around \$45 billion, is still dwarfed by the \$100s of billions spent by militaries on conventional air power each year, the impact of drones becomes ever more transformational. For the UAE, the strategic advantage their drone statecraft delivers their surrogates is far greater than the relatively small amounts of money they spent on them.

Levelling the playing field

Nowhere is this shift more visible than in Sudan. The RSF, a force evolved from Darfur's Janjaweed militias, lacks jets, helicopters or the institutional backbone of a national military. Yet thanks to Emirati support, it now fields an improvised air force composed of Chinese Wing Loong II and CH-95 drones, Serbian VTOL platforms modified for low-altitude bombing, and commercial quadcopters turned into deadly delivery systems.

Through covert airlifts and logistics routes snaking through Chad, Uganda and Libya, these systems were transferred to the RSF and have been used to drop mortar rounds, conduct precision strikes, and disrupt supply lines deep behind enemy lines. The RSF now has the ability to challenge Sudan's army not through mass or might, but through silicon, GPS and altitude.

Drones have given the RSF deep strike capability with considerable fire power against an enemy who once used to have a monopoly over fire power. They have provided game-changing means of surveillance and reconnaissance against units and bases of Sudan's conventional army and have become means of terror, striking fear into the hearts of SAF operatives who are not beyond reach even in their capital in Port Sudan hundreds of kilometres behind the front line.

Not only the UAE

The UAE is not alone in reshaping warfare from the skies. Iran has stepped into the Sudanese conflict as well, supplying the Sudanese government with Mohajer-6 and Ababil-series drones. These Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have been used in a counter-drone capacity and for guided airstrikes on RSF positions.

Meanwhile, Turkey, already active in Libya and northern Syria, has exported its Bayraktar TB2 drones to a growing list of state and non-state clients, from Ethiopia to the Tripoli-based government in Libya and all the way to the SAF in Sudan.

The result is a regional drone arms race, where the battlegrounds of Africa have become proxy testing grounds for a new type of decentralised war where loose networks of militias multiply their force through networks of unmanned platforms.

Stealth exports

What makes drones uniquely suited to this model of warfare is that they can be exported in stealth. Unlike conventional jets or helicopters, drones can be disassembled, stacked in crates and flown as component parts in the back of civilian aircrafts disguised as delivering humanitarian aid. Operators and logisticians tend to be commercial. Attribution to the government in Abu Dhabi is vague. And should things go wrong, plausible deniability is built into the flight plan.

This gives the UAE what every small power craves: influence without exposure. It can back winners without owning their losses. It can play peacemaker in public, while shaping the balance of power in private.

But the true power of drones lies in how they shift the geometry of war. They do not necessarily help a surrogate win; instead, they ensure it does not lose. This creates frozen conflicts of attrition, like in Sudan, where neither side can dominate but both sides can keep the war going. In the long game of regional influence, that suits Abu Dhabi just fine. The longer the war drags on, the more dependent these actors become on their patron.

New arms economy

What we are witnessing is the rise of modular forces, often non-state actors equipped with deep strike, airborne reconnaissance and target acquisition capability once reserved for governments. Over the past decade, drones have given rise to a new arms economy where platforms are cheap, scalable, and untraceable. Drone battlefields are now found in the Middle East, where non-state actors like Hezbollah or the Houthis have become strategic drone operatives; in the war in Ukraine, where Kiev's networked armada of drones has been able to cause serious blows to Russia's military; and in Latin America, where drug cartels use them for reconnaissance, surveillance and narcotic trade.

In these regions, the drone has become a versatile force multiplier providing a broad spectrum of capabilities. Even drones designed for civilian use can be easily and cheaply augmented into dual use platforms. The line between war and peacetime drones is being blurred. Practically anyone can order, assemble and deploy drone capability today.

Since drones can be supplied to both sides in a conflict, they create stalemates. Patrons and surrogates with the longer breadth will ultimately shape the trajectory of conflict. And regional powers like the UAE, Iran and Turkey will no longer need formal alliances or foreign bases to project power. They can do it by shipping drones one component part at a time.

Wars without winners

From the skies above Khartoum to the port cities of Aden and Tripoli, the wars of Africa and the Middle East are mostly fought by actors without uniforms, using drones without markings, guided by alliances without treaties. The UAE's drone statecraft is not about decisive victories. It is about equalising or possibly shifting the balance – strategic, operational, and tactical.

In this new era, the side with the better drone supply does not always win. But it never fades. And for patrons like Abu Dhabi, Tehran and Ankara, that may be victory enough.

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