Summary

- The UAE is one of the closest U.S. military allies in the Middle East and has participated in a long series of U.S. interventions, including those in Somalia, Iraq (1991), Kosovo, Libya, and Syria. The UAE military is highly regarded by U.S. military leaders such as Gen. James Mattis, who has described UAE personnel as “great warriors” and referred to the UAE as “Little Sparta.” U.S. forces have used the UAE’s Al Dhafra air base to launch U.S. missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

- Some UAE military activities have been controversial, including its involvement in helping to put down the democracy movement in Bahrain and its central role in the Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen. The Yemen war has had devastating humanitarian consequences. Thousands of civilians have been killed by coalition air strikes, more than three-quarters of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance, and basic supplies of food, clean water, and medical supplies are scarce.

- The UAE is the biggest contributor of troops to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Its forces have operated primarily in the southern portion of the country. Early in the war the UAE was involved in the bombing campaign in the north of Yemen, but it has reportedly been less involved recently. In addition, ships from the UAE have been part of the naval blockade of Yemen. The UAE’s central role in the Yemen war demands that it play a central role in efforts to bring the war to an end.

- According to statistics compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the United States has been far and away the largest arms supplier to the UAE, providing 63% of all major weaponry delivered to that nation since 2009.

- The United States has also taken the lead in new arms sales agreements with the UAE. According to a December 2016 report by the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. was responsible for over 70% of arms transfer agreements entered into by the UAE from 2008 to 2015.

- The UAE has sharply increased its military spending over the past decade, more than doubling its military budget from $9.7 billion in 2005 to over $22 billion in 2014, the most recent year for which full statistics are available. Among the most important systems acquired with this funding are the UAE Air Force’s three squadrons of F-16 combat aircraft. The UAE’s version of the plane is more advanced than the F-16s possessed by the U.S. Air Force.

- The Obama administration has made new offers of over $25 billion worth of weaponry to the UAE under the Pentagon’s Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program since 2009, in 30 different deals. The offers have included 97 Apache attack helicopters, over 30,000 bombs, 4,569 Mine Resistant Armor Protected (MRAP) vehicles, 16 Chinook transport helicopters, and a Theater High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system.

- More than one-quarter of the FMS offers to the UAE – valued at $7.2 billion – were for bombs such as the Paveway and the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) and tactical missiles such as the Hellfire that have been used in the war against ISIS and in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.

- More than half of the combat aircraft in the UAE’s inventory – 78 of 138 – are of U.S.-origin.

Introduction

Despite the fact that it involves billions of dollars worth of weaponry, the U.S./UAE arms transfer relationship receives relatively little attention among the public, in the media, or in Congress. In part this is because the UAE connection is overshadowed by the U.S. role as the primary arms supplier to Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia’s use of U.S. arms in its brutal bombing campaign in Yemen. But the UAE’s increasingly effective military capabilities and growing regional security role deserve closer scrutiny, both because of their impact on the future of the region and their implications for the future of U.S. arms transfer policy.

The UAE in Yemen

The UAE has played a central role in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the UAE has had as many as 4,000 troops in Yemen, more than twice as many ground troops as any other member of the coalition. More recent reports have focused more on the role of UAE Special Forces in Yemen, with numbers estimated at 1,500 or more. The
UAE has also facilitated the involvement of other countries in the war, by, for example, providing funding and logistical support for the deployment of over 1,000 troops from Sudan to Yemen. There have also been reports of the UAE working with a private military contractor to recruit and train mercenaries from Colombia, Chile, and other Latin American countries for deployment to Yemen as part of the Saudi-led coalition.

The UAE has contributed ships to the naval blockade of Yemen. The blockade has made it difficult to get civilian aid into the country. As a result, the naval blockade has been a major contributor to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, in which shortages of food, medical supplies, and clean water have contributed to widespread malnutrition and preventable deaths. As a January 2016 report by the United Nations Security Council noted, “the systematic and widespread blockade of commercial goods has directly contributed to the obstruction of deliveries of aid and humanitarian assistance.”

The UAE’s role in the blockade includes the deployment of Bayunah class corvettes. The Bayunah class corvettes are built by Abu Dhabi Shipbuilding (ADSB) with assistance from Constructions Mecaniques de Normandie (CMN) of Cherbourg, France. Raytheon has provided missiles and missile launchers that are deployed on the ship.

The UAE is also building up a capability for power projection in the region by establishing a military facility in Eritrea that has been used as a launching point for the deployment of Sudanese troops to Yemen and a base of operations for UAE combat ships that are involved in ferrying troops and enforcing the naval blockade on Yemen.

The UAE’s role in Yemen has primarily involved fighting that has occurred in the southern portion of the country. Unlike other members of the coalition, UAE troops have directly confronted the forces of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), playing a central role in driving AQAP forces from the port city of Mukalla in the spring of 2016. The UAE also took the lead role in recapturing the southern city of Aden from the Houthi coalition.

The UAE has lost over 50 troops in the fighting in Yemen, including an incident in September 2015 in which 45 UAE military personnel were killed in a Houthi missile strike. The 45 dead represented the highest number of casualties ever suffered by the UAE military.

An important aspect of the UAE’s modus operandi in southern Yemen has been to train, arm, and finance local actors while providing direction and support via its Special Forces. Training has occurred both in Yemen and the UAE.

The UAE as “Little Sparta”

The UAE is considered to have one of the most capable militaries in the Middle East. As Gen. James Mattis, the former head of the U.S. Central Command and current nominee to serve as the Trump administration’s secretary of defense, has put it, “They’re not just willing to fight — they’re great warriors.” Mattis has also noted that the UAE is well regarded by the U.S. military: “there’s a mutual respect, an admiration, for what they’ve done — and what they can do.”

The UAE’s growing military activism and ambitions have led Mattis and other U.S. generals to refer to it as “Little Sparta,” with the implication that it is playing a disproportionately large military role in the region relative to its size.
For the past two decades, the UAE has consciously set out to hone its military capabilities so that it can play a significant military role in the Persian Gulf and beyond. As part of this strategy, UAE forces have participated in a series of military interventions, including Somalia, the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. The UAE also joined Saudi Arabia in its 2011 intervention in Bahrain to help the regime put down the democracy movement there. As a result of its military activism, the UAE now has one of the most effective fighting forces in the region. The wisdom of each of these military ventures is another matter. This is particularly true in the case of its intervention as part of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, in which it has contributed to a humanitarian emergency while opening space for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to make political gains.

The UAE’s role in Afghanistan provides a good example of how it has used its military in coalition operations. UAE ground troops were in Afghanistan for 11 years, conducting raids and training elite Afghan troops in cooperation with U.S. Special Forces. And the UAE deployed F-16s to engage in bombing and close-air support from 2012 to 2014, at the same time that many European allies were reducing their presence in Afghanistan. UAE aircraft flew hundreds of air support operations in support of U.S. troops in southern Afghanistan, bombing Taliban positions to interfere with their ability to continue attacking U.S. forces.

After a long period in which it only allowed the U.S. to station refueling aircraft at its Al Dhafra air base, the facility is now being used as a launching point for U.S. missions to Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. It is also one of the most active bases in the world for U.S. surveillance aircraft, including everything from U-2s to Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). In all, the United States has over 3,500 military personnel and 60 aircraft stationed at Al Dhafra. The base hosts a squadron of F-15s, as well as four current generation F-22 combat aircraft.

The UAE has sharply increased its military spending over the past decade, more than doubling its military budget from $9.7 billion in 2005 to over $22 billion in 2014, the most recent year for which full statistics are available. On a per capita basis, the UAE’s budget is higher than that of the United States. It should be noted, however, that the per capita figures may be less relevant given that U.S. military spending is over 27 times what the UAE spends on its military on an annual basis. Among the most important systems acquired with this funding are 70 F-16 combat aircraft. The UAE’s version of the plane is more advanced than the F-16s possessed by the U.S. Air Force. Superior features of the UAE’s F-16 included increased range and fuel capacity, and more advanced radar systems. An analysis by Inside Defense describes the UAE’s F-16s as being “a half a generation ahead” of U.S. Air Force models.

The primary stated rationale for the UAE’s cultivation of greater military capabilities is as a counterbalance to Iran. Yet some of its actions don’t clearly align with that goal. For example, while the intervention in Yemen is often described as a response to Iranian influence, most experts on the region point out that the Houthis forces that are the primary target of the intervention have longstanding grievances that have nothing to do with Iran. As Thomas Juneau, the author of a 2015 study on Iranian foreign policy, has noted, “Tehran’s support for the Houthis is limited, and its influence in Yemen is marginal. It is simply inaccurate to claim that the Houthis are Iranian proxies.”

**The UAE and the War on ISIS**

The UAE has been one of the most important participants in the U.S.-led bombing campaign in Syria. According to an account by Rajiv Chandrakaran of the Washington Post, “After the U.S. military, Emirati fighters have conducted more missions against the Islamic State than any other member of the multinational coalition, often striking targets that are as difficult and dangerous as those attacked by the
Since that time, the UAE has continued to play a central role in the bombing campaigns in Syria and Iraq. This is in sharp contrast to Saudi Arabia, which has pledged to participate in anti-ISIS missions but has spent far more time, energy and resources on its intervention in Yemen.

**U.S. Arms Supplies to the UAE During the Obama Years**

According to statistics compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the United States has been far and away the largest arms supplier to the UAE, providing 63% of all major weaponry delivered to that nation since 2009. Next on the list was Russia, at 9% of total deliveries to the UAE.[23]

The United States has also taken the lead in new arms sales agreements with the UAE. According to a December 2016 report by the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. was responsible for over 70% of arms transfer agreements entered into by the UAE from 2008 to 2015.[24]

The U.S. is poised to be a major supplier to the UAE for years to come. The U.S. has offered the UAE $25.1 billion in weaponry under the Pentagon’s Foreign Military Sales since 2009, which ranks it fourth among U.S. recipients in the region after Saudi Arabia ($115 billion), Qatar ($41 billion), and Iraq ($33.3 billion). These figures represent only offers under the Pentagon’s Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program, which is by far the largest channel for the transfer of major defense equipment like combat aircraft, tanks, helicopters, combat ships, and bombs and missiles. It is important to note that not all FMS offers result in final sales; but they are a good gauge of the U.S. intent to arm a given nation.

There is also a deal pending to provide 30 F-16 E/F Block 61 aircraft to the UAE via a commercial sale outside of the Pentagon’s FMS program. But the deal was first announced in 2014 and it is not clear whether it will move forward in its current form.[25]

The largest offers to the UAE under the FMS program since 2009 include a $5 billion deal for 60 Apache attack helicopters; a $4 billion deal for “various munitions and support” (including 1,600 bombs); a second, $3.5 billion deal for 37 Apache attack helicopters; a $2.5 billion deal for 4,569 Mine Resistant Armor Protected (MRAP) vehicles; a $2 billion deal for 16 Chinook transport helicopters; and a $1.1 billion deal for a Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system.

It should be noted that virtually all of the FMS offers to the UAE involved substantial amounts of support equipment, so that it would not be correct to calculate the unit cost of each item by simply dividing the value of the deal by the number of major systems included in that deal. Total values fluctuate widely depending upon the amount and types of support equipment included in a given deal.

More than one-quarter of the items offered to the UAE under the FMS program since 2009 -- $7.2 billion worth -- involved bombs and missiles of the type being used in the war in Yemen and in the campaign against ISIS. The munitions included over 4,800 Hellfire air-to-surface missiles and over 30,000 bombs such as the Paveway and the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM). The JDAM is a tail kit that can be used to make existing general-purpose bombs (known colloquially as “dumb” bombs) more accurate. These substantial offers of bombs and missiles are consistent with the scale of the UAE’s operations in Yemen and in the fight against ISIS. A May 2015 offer of guided bombs notes that they can be used “to provide the UAE with additional precision guided munitions capability to meet the current threat represented by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and Houthi aggression in Yemen.” These rationales no doubt apply to all of the offers of bombs from the U.S. to the UAE.
The UAE is also investing heavily in transport aircraft, from the Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters to the C-17 and C-130J transport planes. According to the descriptions of the offers provided to Congress by the Pentagon’s Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), the aircraft “will provide the UAE the capability to transport equipment and troops in the region, as well as to support U.S. and NATO airlift requirements in Afghanistan.” In addition to Afghanistan, the only area “in the region” where the UAE has deployed large numbers of ground troops is Yemen. The Black Hawk helicopters are described as being for “intra-country transportation of UAE officials to militarily critical training and operations sites.”[27] Although the Pentagon’s description of the deal focuses on use of the aircraft within the UAE, they are also capable of transporting troops within Yemen should the UAE leadership choose to utilize them in that fashion.

Other U.S.-supplied systems that can be utilized in either Afghanistan or Yemen are the 60 Apache attack helicopters, which can provide close-air support to troops on the ground; and the 4,659 Mine Resistant Armor Protected (MRAP) vehicles, which are specially designed to deal with the threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

**U.S.-supplied Weaponry Already in the UAE’s Arsenal**

The UAE’s arsenal is more diversified than Saudi Arabia’s and less dependent on U.S. equipment. [28]

The UAE land forces possess no U.S.-supplied tanks or armored personnel carriers. The main fighting vehicles in the UAE Army are 340 French Leclerc tanks, 370 French Panhard armored personnel carriers, and 390 Russian BMP-3 armored infantry fighting vehicles. The only major U.S.-supplied ground equipment consists of 85 M-109 howitzers and 20 HIMARs multiple-launch rocket systems. But the role of U.S. ground equipment in the UAE’s arsenal should increase dramatically as the deliveries of 4,569 Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles proceed.

The UAE Air Force is the prime beneficiary of U.S weapons transfers to that nation. Of its 138 fighter planes, 78 are U.S.-supplied F-16s and 60 are French Mirage-2000s. In keeping with its reliance on U.S. combat aircraft, the UAE uses the Sidewinder, AMRAAM, and Maverick tactical missiles. The UAE relies heavily on U.S. equipment for airlift, with 6 C-17s and 4 C-130H’s.

**The Corporate Connection**

The biggest beneficiaries of U.S. arms sales to the UAE are Lockheed Martin (F-16s and C-130J transport aircraft, Black Hawk transport helicopters and Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense systems); Boeing (C-17 transport aircraft, Apache helicopters, and Joint Direct Attack Munitions); and Raytheon (THAAD, as well as missiles deployed on the UAE’s Bayunah Class corvettes).[29] These are just the prime contractors for the largest arms deals between the U.S. and the UAE. Including contractors on smaller systems and subcontractors would extend the list substantially.

**U.S. Policy Toward the UAE Going Forward**

The net impact of the UAE’s military activities in the region is mixed. The UAE has clearly been an asset in the fight against ISIS. Yet as many military officials and experts have noted, ISIS will not be bombed out of existence. Additionally, the role of the UAE in the Yemen war, a war that has resulted in widespread hunger and greatly diminished access to clean water and basic health care, is troubling. In all, nearly three-quarters of Yemenis are in need of humanitarian aid.[30] The naval blockade is a major reason
The UAE has supplied ships in support of the blockade, although it is not the lead nation in that effort.

Of all the conflicts now underway in the Middle East, the Yemen war is the one where a shift in U.S. policy could make the greatest difference. While Saudi Arabia is the most influential member of the coalition that has intervened in Yemen, the UAE is an important player as well. The United States should attempt to use the leverage it possesses as a major arms supplier to the UAE to get its ally to use whatever influence it has within the Saudi-led coalition to press for a durable ceasefire followed by a peace agreement among the parties to the war. The UAE’s central role in the Yemen war demands that it play a central role in efforts to bring the war to an end.

But the underlying question is whether the United States is willing to invest political and diplomatic capital in an effort to end the war in Yemen. As Jean Marie Guéhenno of the International Crisis Group noted in October 2016, any resolution to the Yemen conflict would require “immediate and consistent diplomatic follow-up and pressure on U.S. allies.” Guéhenno predicted that absent such pressure towards a settlement, “the next administration will inherit another unwinnable war in the Middle East – one that is making Gulf allies less secure, expanding opportunities for al-Qaeda and cultivating anti-American sentiment in generations to come.” It remains to be seen whether the Trump administration will understand what’s at stake in the conflict and press for a resolution, or if it will fall into the trap of seeing it as a Saudi/Iranian proxy war and continue to provide arms and logistical assistance to the Saudi-led coalition.


[13] Ibid.


[15] Ibid.


[18] Ibid.


[20] Ibid.


[22] Chandresekaran, op. cit.
[23] Figure compiled by the author from the SIPRI arm transfer data base, available at http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php


[26] The quote is from the DSCA’s May 29, 2015 notification to Congress regarding the offer of bombs to the UAE, available here: http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/united-arab-emirates-uae-guided-bomb-units-gbu-31s-and-gbu-12s

[27] Quotes regarding U.S. transport planes and Black Hawk helicopters offered to the UAE are from official Pentagon notifications to Congress involving support equipment for these sales, available at http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/united-arab-emirates-logistics-support-c-17-globemaster-aircraft-0 and http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/united-arab-emirates-uh-60m-blackhawk-helicopters


[31] For a recent account of the humanitarian situation in Yemen, see Mohammed Huwais, “When the Heart Bleeds,” AFP, December 2, 2016, available at https://correspondent.afp.com/when-heart-bleeds


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**Appendix: U.S. Arms Offers to the UAE, 2009 to Present**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Initial estimated cost</th>
<th>Transfer details with links</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Dec. 8, 2016</td>
<td>$3,500,000,000</td>
<td>Apache A-64E helicopters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 24, 2016</td>
<td>$75,000,000</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates (UAE) Exercise Participation Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 19, 2016</td>
<td>$785,000,000</td>
<td>Munitions, Sustainment, and Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 13, 2016</td>
<td>$476,000,000</td>
<td>AGM-114 R/K Hellfire Category III Missiles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb. 24, 2016 (LAIRCM)</td>
<td>$225,000,000</td>
<td>AN/AAQ-24(V)N Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov. 5, 2016</td>
<td>$380,000,000</td>
<td>Joint Direct Attack Munitions, Sustainment and Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 29, 2015 (DIRCM) Systems</td>
<td>$335,000,000</td>
<td>AN/AAQ 24(V) Directional Infrared Countermeasures</td>
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<td>May 29, 2015</td>
<td>$130,000,000</td>
<td>Guided Bomb Units (GBU-31s and GBU-12s)</td>
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<td>Sept. 29, 2014</td>
<td>$900,000,000</td>
<td>High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS)</td>
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<td>Sept. 26, 2014</td>
<td>$2,500,000,000</td>
<td>Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) Vehicles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan. 24, 2014 16 Block 61 Aircraft</td>
<td>$270,000,000</td>
<td>Equipment in Support of a Direct Commercial Sale of F-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 8, 2014</td>
<td>$150,000,000</td>
<td>Blanket Order Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct. 15, 2013</td>
<td>$4,000,000,000</td>
<td>Various Munitions and Support</td>
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<td>$1,135,000,000</td>
<td>Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System Missiles</td>
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<td>August 1, 2012</td>
<td>$35,000,000</td>
<td>F117-PW-100 Engines</td>
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<td>Dec. 16, 2011</td>
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<td>JAVELIN Anti-Tank Missiles</td>
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<td>Joint Direct Attack Munitions</td>
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<td>Sept. 22, 2011</td>
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<td>MIDS/LVT LINK 16 Terminals</td>
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<td>Sept. 22, 2011</td>
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<td>AGM-114R3 HELLFIRE Missiles</td>
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<td>June 24, 2011</td>
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<td>May 25, 2011</td>
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<td>April 19, 2011</td>
<td>$251,000,000</td>
<td>AIM-9X-2 SIDEWINDER Missiles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov. 4, 2010</td>
<td>$140,000,000</td>
<td>Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) T2K Unitary Missiles/</td>
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</table>
Low Cost Reduced-Range Practice Rockets

24) Nov. 4, 2010  $5,000,000,000  AH-64D Block III APACHE Helicopters
25) May 26, 2010  $250,000,000  Logistics Support for C-17 Globemaster Aircraft
26) Dec. 28, 2009  $119,000,000.00  Logistics Support and Training for 12 C-130J-30 Aircraft
77) Dec. 28, 2009  $290,000,000  Enhanced Guided Bomb Units
28) Dec. 18, 2009  $501,000,000  Logistics Support for C-17 Globemaster Aircraft
29) Dec. 3, 2009  $2,000,000,000  CH-47F CHINOOK Helicopters
30) August 4, 2009  $526,000,000  HELLFIRE Missiles, Aircraft Survivability Equipment

**TOTAL COST**  $25,120,000,000

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