

Emirates is Top US Military Customer

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Two UAE orders for military helicopters and guided bombs capped a remarkable year for procurement in which the Emirates became the largest foreign purchaser of US defence equipment, a Pentagon agency said.

The UAE, which has peacekeepers in Afghanistan, awarded Sikorsky Aircraft a US\$171 million (Dh628m) contract for 14 UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, which are used for tactical transport.

Separately, the US defence security co-operation agency, a unit of the Pentagon, said last week it had notified Congress of a potential sale of enhanced guided bomb units, parts, training and support to the UAE for about \$290m.

The same agency said in November that in the last fiscal year the UAE became the largest foreign purchaser of US defence equipment with sales of \$7.9bn, ahead of Afghanistan (\$5.4bn), Saudi Arabia (\$3.3bn) and Taiwan (\$3.2bn).

The spending included orders for munitions for the UAE's F-16 fighter jets as well as a new Patriot defensive missile system and a fleet of corvettes for the navy.

"The Emirates is building the best air defence in the region and enhancing its naval capability, and all this costs money," said Riad Kahwaji, the chief executive of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis. "They have made it clear from the start that they want only the best."

The UAE purchases have been fuelled by a quadrupling of oil prices in the past decade and by continuing regional tensions, including those involving Iran, the US and Israel over the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.

The helicopter deal will require Sikorsky to configure the aircraft to UAE specifications and should be completed by the end of 2012.

The main contractors for the second deal announced last week are Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, the Pentagon agency said.

A number of deals could be announced this year as the UAE fills gaps in its defence system.

"The Government is still very active and there are a few things it needs to close here," Mr Kahwaji said. Those include contracts for C-17 and C-130 military transport aeroplanes, advanced trainer jets and the French Rafale fighter jet.

The advanced trainer jet contract with Alenia Aermacchi of Italy was expected to be announced at the Dubai Airshow in November but was postponed because of unresolved issues surrounding the production of parts in the UAE, Mr Kahwaji said. "There are a lot of technical issues that go into these contracts and they can get very complicated," he said.

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