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Sizing Up Little Sparta

UNDERSTANDING UAE
MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS

KENNETH M. POLLACK

OCTOBER 2020

A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

Executive Summary

In recent years, the armed forces of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have earned the reputation as the best in the Arab world. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis went so far as to bestow on them the sobriquet “Little Sparta.” Two questions linger, however: How good are the Emirati armed forces, and why are they more competent than other Arab militaries?

Emirati Military Effectiveness. Taken as a whole, the UAE’s military is unquestionably the most capable among the Arab states, probably by a considerable margin. The best Emirati units are the best in the Arab world, and the overall average appears superior to that of other Arab armies. Indeed, the best and most experienced Emirati soldiers, officers, and units are excellent by regional standards and appear equivalent or possibly even more capable than those of some NATO members.

However, there is considerable variance across the force, and only a small percentage falls into the highest-quality categories. The bulk of the Emirati armed forces are less competent, and too many of their soldiers, officers, and units evince only modestly greater effectiveness than their Arab brethren do. The UAE’s armed forces have a sharp, strong spear point, but the shaft still needs work.

The UAE’s Presidential Guard (PG), and particularly its Special Operations Command (SOC), are probably the most capable of the Emirati combat arms. These are professional, picked, and highly trained troops, who have a close mentorship program with the US Marine Corps. They are commanded by an expatriate Australian general. Several dozen key instructors, planners, administrators, and other senior officers are Westerners, particularly Australians. The PG provided many of the forces that fought in Afghanistan and Yemen. They performed quite well

there, and they now benefit from having numerous combat veterans in their ranks.

Close behind the PG, and arguably even more formidable, is the UAE’s Joint Aviation Command (JAC), which controls most of its helicopters. Until recently, the JAC was commanded by a former American military officer. It possesses some of the most advanced American systems, and its pilots are impressive. The JAC has demonstrated first-rate capabilities, providing rotary-wing fire support, air mobility, combat search and rescue, and maritime patrol operations.

The Emirati air force also has an outstanding reputation, but the validity of that reputation is harder to judge. Emirati pilots, weaponeers, targeteers, planners, and logisticians are generally high caliber, professional, and well trained. At least some of the rear echelon personnel are expatriates with extensive service in their home militaries, but the pilots themselves and most ground crew are overwhelmingly Emirati.

The air force has done well in Afghanistan, Operation Inherent Resolve, Yemen, and now Libya. However, the air force has never engaged in air-to-air combat, and only in Yemen and Libya has it conducted *dynamic* air-to-ground missions. In these, the air force received more mixed reviews from both American and Emirati ground forces. Moreover, the latest generation of precision guided munitions (PGM) now do much of the hard work that once was required of pilots. Because the UAE can afford plenty of cutting-edge PGMs, it is harder to evaluate the quality of their pilots based on the generally successful results of their strike missions, especially deliberate strike missions.

The UAE Land Forces run the gamut to a much greater extent. Small numbers of the best soldiers, officers, and units from the Land Forces fought—and fought well—in Yemen, demonstrating some real capability in combined arms warfare. But personnel

selection, training, promotions, and retention policies in the Land Forces are inconsistent and hampered by favoritism toward key tribes and families, among other things. As a result, significant segments of the Land Forces have considerably less capability. The Emirati leadership has greatly emphasized improving the Land Forces, and the leadership is putting in place new procedures that should improve the forces over time.

Until the Yemen war, the UAE navy had been largely neglected, receiving less money, attention, or high-quality personnel. Some sources claim that this results from the navy having had no clear mission for many years because the coast guard handled counter-smuggling and protection of offshore oil facilities. However, the need to lift and support a force in Yemen, enforce a blockade of the Yemeni coast, and defend against repeated Iranian attacks on Emirati and Saudi oil exports in the Gulf in 2019 have forced Abu Dhabi to reconsider. A highly regarded senior officer from the royal family was recently named commander of naval forces, some better officers are being transferred to the navy from other services, and the UAE is now trying to purchase larger and more capable ships and aircraft.

Emirati forces have demonstrated some remarkable logistical capabilities, particularly the UAE air force. Their combat-proven lift and aerial refueling capabilities exceed that of most countries. Abu Dhabi deployed and sustained a brigade-sized force in combat in Yemen for roughly five years and supported armored advances of up to 100 kilometers in that war. The Emiratis have mounted long-range strike missions against targets in Libya employing their own refueling assets. They have learned to integrate commercial and military aircraft into large-scale air bridges to Yemen and the Horn of Africa, supplemented by major sealift operations by the navy.

The UAE still uses small numbers of non-Emiratis as part of its military machine. However, these increasingly occupy niche capabilities that Emiratis cannot yet handle, and they help flesh out a small force that cannot provide the numbers needed for some of the military tasks Abu Dhabi has chosen to tackle. However, with only a few exceptions—such

as Sudanese troops in Yemen—Emiratis themselves now do the fighting.

Emirati Force Generation. The greater military effectiveness of the Emirati armed forces derives from their force-generation practices. Across the board, the UAE has transformed its premilitary education, recruitment, training, promotion, and professional military education practices over the past two decades. While there is still much work to be done and even the earliest reforms are only beginning to have an impact, the superior performance of elite Emirati forces in Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, and elsewhere represents the first fruits of these changes.

In 2014, the UAE instituted compulsory national service for men and voluntary national service for women. At present, the main purpose of national service is political and cultural. It is meant to instill a sense of Emirati identity and patriotism and foster greater critical thinking, innovation, discipline, and physical fitness. Nevertheless, national service does provide a secondary benefit to the military by allowing the armed forces to scour the conscript ranks for high-quality personnel and then try to convince them to enlist in the armed services themselves.

Emirati training tends to reflect the same range as the military's effectiveness. Units led by competent commanders typically benefit from the best training: tough, frequent, and designed to produce real combat capability through unstructured exercises and regimens that demand flexibility, adaptability, and the internalization of skills. In contrast, units led by the indolent or incompetent receive less frequent training, and what they do get is typically delivered by rote memorization, demonstration rather than participation, and the absence of any effort to assess mistakes let alone try to correct them.

One of the Emirati armed forces' highest aspirations is to be a learning military. Too few armies can make such a claim, fewer still in the Arab world. Yet, from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) on down, the UAE's chain of command encourages and tries to promote learning. This is one reason the UAE is building a large, multifaceted set of professional military education institutions. Still, across

the board, Emirati training and military educational programs rely on Western expats to teach and evaluate personnel and even integrate lessons from the UAE's combat experiences into doctrine, training, and other procedures.

The Emirati officer corps is essentially divided between a meritocratic cutting edge and a larger number of average or below-average officers who have been promoted automatically after serving the required time—in many cases, because they come from trusted tribes and families. The former are the key to the significant capabilities of Emirati elite forces. However, the small size of those forces, even compared to the overall citizen population of the state, reflects the relative scarcity of these high-quality personnel and the challenge of recruiting them into the military, retaining them, and promoting them to the levels in which they can have real impact.

Building an Even Better Emirati Military. The great limiting factor on further improvement in Emirati military effectiveness is the same set of problems derived from economic underdevelopment and behavior patterns emphasized by the dominant Arab culture that have bedeviled all Arab armed forces during the modern era. The UAE's military simply suffers from them less.

The reason is that, for the past two decades, MbZ and his chief lieutenants have employed every workaround devised by other Arab states to mask or diminish the impact of the culturally derived liabilities. Thus, the UAE has focused on building a small, elite force of officers and soldiers selected precisely because they possess these militarily desirable but culturally denigrated traits. Leaders have shaped military operations to ensure that Emirati armed forces have massive advantages in technology, firepower, intelligence, logistics, and American support. They have employed foreigners to handle many demanding tasks such as planning, training, education, and

helping the leadership identify its best soldiers and officers. Finally, they have done what they could to build a separate Emirati military subculture, one different from that of the larger society by emphasizing those militarily desirable skills disparaged by the wider culture.

All of this has been made possible by the “benevolent politicization” of the UAE's military. The political leadership, driven by MbZ himself, has taken an extremely active role in the Emirati military—a role that would have caused other professional officer corps to scream about excessive political interference in military affairs. The difference is that MbZ's constant attention to the military has been extremely beneficial, designed to help the military overcome these societal limitations and increase its effectiveness in every way. So far, this “benevolent politicization” has allowed the UAE to shelter a part of the force from the worst effects of culturally derived limitations on military effectiveness.

However, even employing all the workarounds as diligently and forcefully as it has, has only taken the Emirati military so far. The military could take it somewhat further by refining organizational efficiency and personnel selection, but only at considerably higher cost. It is difficult to continue to generate greater military effectiveness in these ways. Ultimately, the only way to effect a truly comprehensive and profound increase in Emirati military power would be to transform the nation's culture.

Not surprisingly, that is exactly what MbZ is trying to do. It is one of the principal reasons the UAE's leadership is trying to reform Emirati society and turn it into a culture that fosters tolerance, respect, self-sacrifice, devotion to country, innovation, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, knowledge creation, and honesty—the last half of which are the traits needed for success on the modern battlefield as much as they are in the global economy.

Sizing Up Little Sparta

UNDERSTANDING UAE MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS

Kenneth M. Pollack

In recent years, the armed forces of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have earned the reputation as the most capable military in the Arab world. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis went so far as to bestow on them the sobriquet “Little Sparta.” Two questions linger, however: Just how good are the Emirati armed forces, and why are they more competent than other Arab militaries?

Taken as a whole, the UAE’s military is unquestionably the most capable among the Arab states. Many of those I interviewed for this report echoed the judgment of a Western military expert with considerable experience in the UAE that the “very best Emirati officers could fit into any Western military, no problem.”¹ Another Western military officer with extensive experience with the UAE military noted simply that “the Emiratis are professionally a cut above” most other partner military officers he has worked with in US-led coalitions.²

However, there is considerable variance across the military.³ Former US Central Command Commander Gen. Joseph Votel summed it up: “You see pockets of excellence in places like the Presidential Guard and the Air Force, but it is not as evident uniformly across the force.”⁴ The best Emirati soldiers, officers, and units are good by regional standards and appear equivalent or possibly even more skillful than those of some NATO members. However, few Emirati forces have demonstrated skill levels comparable to their American, French, British, or Israeli counterparts. As another US general who commanded Emirati forces in combat remarked, their best units generally “were

as good as the Dutch or the Belgians.”⁵ Moreover, the bulk of the force is less competent, with many other soldiers, officers, and units evincing little more effectiveness than their Arab brethren. In short, the UAE armed forces have a sharp, strong spearpoint, but the shaft remains a work in progress.

Of far greater importance and interest, however, is *why* part of the Emirati military has developed considerably greater combat skills. The answer to that appears to begin with determined and perceptive leadership, particularly the UAE’s de facto ruler: Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed an-Nahyan (MbZ). MbZ’s drive, and everything that has flowed from it, has produced a small, quite capable elite that has given Abu Dhabi some military muscle to support its foreign policy and created a model for the future development of the rest of the force. The great unknown is whether that leadership’s more ambitious programs to remake Emirati society itself will succeed. If they do, then over time the entire Emirati military should develop significantly greater capabilities, resulting in an even sharper point and a shaft that is finally as strong as the spearhead.

The Military Effectiveness of the UAE Armed Forces

The wide variance in the effectiveness of the Emirati armed forces exists both from service to service and within each service. While the Emirati air force, Joint Aviation Command (JAC), and Presidential

Figure 1. The United Arab Emirates and Its Neighborhood

Source: Author.

Guard (PG) generally perform best and the navy is the least capable, there are better and worse personnel and units within each, in many cases creating greater or lesser capability to execute different kinds of missions.

Air Operations. Many observers will contend that the Emirati air force is the most capable of Abu Dhabi's armed services.⁶ It is also indisputably the most capable Arab air force. It is a highly professional organization; in the words of one Western military officer with extensive experience with the UAE military, "They are not a flying club."⁷ However, it still has shortcomings that prevent it from taking a place among the best air forces in the world.

As with all UAE services, the Emirati air force has done a superb job identifying its material needs and buys the best equipment to satisfy those needs. The F-16 Block 60 is a magnificent fourth-generation jet fighter, and Abu Dhabi has nearly 80 of them. The UAE is one of only a handful of countries that possesses the C-17 Globemaster. The Emirates were

smart enough to buy several dozen of both the AT-802i and Archangel Close Air Support aircraft, converted crop dusters that are ideal strike platforms for low-intensity conflict missions.⁸ Likewise, the US Patriot and Russian Pantsir S1 are both outstanding air defense systems.

Unlike so many other Arab militaries, the UAE does not buy expensive planes for other people to fly or just to show them off. They identify the planes they need for the missions they intend to perform, and they fly them themselves.

The UAE air force has demonstrated a remarkable regional power projection capability. With varying degrees of American support, Emirati aircraft have participated in sustained air operations in Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Kosovo, Syria, and Yemen. Without American air sup-

port, they have conducted strikes from Egyptian bases against Libyan targets.⁹ No other Arab state possesses this kind of a power projection capability—including the planning, logistical support, and command and control required for it. Indeed, few air forces in the world could undertake such operations, and the UAE air force performed them quite well, even if against minimal enemy resistance.

The residual deficiencies of the UAE air force tend to lie in the human factor, in terms of personnel capabilities and organization. Many Emirati combat pilots are said to be "unimaginative" and "very instrument driven." They are considered "action-oriented" pilots who obey orders and want "templates" for their activities.¹⁰ They do not always show up for training, which is compounded by the UAE's liberal leave policy, creating issues with pilots not getting the requisite numbers of flight hours to retain an appropriate combat edge.¹¹

Western military personnel familiar with Emirati pilots often observed that the pilots would get good at various skills in certain prescribed situations but

then have difficulty applying those skills to changed circumstances. Moreover, some

individual aircrew and “squadron leader” capabilities are often good, and training programs set a high standard. As is the case with all UAE training, [sic] and promotion, however, nepotism, favoritism, and a failure to enforce training standards and requirements for personnel with good family contacts is an occasional problem.¹²

Air-to-Ground Missions. The Emirati air force has the greatest experience and has demonstrated the greatest skill flying strike missions against ground targets. One former commander of a coalition military campaign in which UAE forces participated remarked that he would not allow any non-NATO aviation to operate autonomously except for Emirati fighter bombers on strike sorties. He also observed that whereas other Gulf air forces “could barely hit the earth” with PGMs, the Emiratis demonstrated excellent accuracy with their ordnance.¹³

Likewise, during the air campaign supporting Khalifa Haftar’s military operations against western Libya in 2014, the difference in accuracy between Egyptian and Emirati air strikes was obvious: The Emiratis typically hit their targets; the Egyptians typically did not.¹⁴ Others have noted that because Emirati pilots were more capable than their Saudi counterparts were, the UAE jets flew lower and so achieved higher hit rates than the Saudis did.¹⁵ Various Western military experts and military officers opined that it was more about the competence of Emirati pilots in handling their air frames and munitions than it was about the altitude of their weapons release.¹⁶ In fact, when the United States decided to stop providing air support to the Afghan military in 2014, the US military pushed to ask the Emirati air force to remain and continue to provide air support in their stead.¹⁷

Of course, in the modern era, conducting ground attack missions against deliberate targets with PGMs in permissive air defense environments is not nearly as demanding a task as it was in decades past. With

GPS-guided PGMs able to adjust for wind and other atmospheric conditions, it often requires human error to miss. In that sense, it is probably more noteworthy that other Arab air forces had so many problems than that the Emiratis could get the job done. A range of Western commanders, operators, and experts believed that the Emiratis never dropped a dumb bomb in Afghanistan and stated categorically that the UAE never employed a dumb bomb as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. At least one source familiar with Emirati air operations felt that UAE pilots were “overreliant” on the technology to do the work.¹⁸ Even if that is an exaggeration, it is still an important caveat regarding the skills of Emirati pilots conducting ground attack missions.

Moreover, there is other evidence that bears on the effectiveness of Emirati air support. Multiple Western military personnel who fought alongside Emirati ground forces in Afghanistan and Yemen report they generally would not rely on Emirati air support *themselves* in combat missions. In particular, when US ground forces were going into combat, they insisted on American air support and would not accept Emirati air support.¹⁹ Likewise, a Western military officer who fought alongside UAE forces and a serving Emirati soldier both reported that the UAE PG was also reluctant to trust its fire support to the UAE air force. This was why the JAC was created originally as part of the PG and why the PG preferred to rely on the JAC for close air support even after the JAC was spun off as a separate force.²⁰

Of course, American ground troops are famously skittish about relying on anything but US air support, and rotary-wing assets are often more responsive to calls for ground support than fixed-wing units are. Consequently, we should not draw too many inferences from these preferences.

During Operation Inherent Resolve, Emirati pilots were only ever assigned deliberate strike missions—meaning that the target was known beforehand and a strike plan had been prepared, typically against a fixed or immobile target. In general, Emirati air forces were only willing to conduct strike sorties against fixed targets in Syria. UAE pilots did not fly any dynamic sorties, and one reason that the Emirati (and other Arab)

Figure 2. Emirati F-16 Fighting Falcon

Source: US Air Force.

air forces were eventually withdrawn from the campaign was that they had effectively exhausted the list of deliberate targets and the air war had shifted largely to dynamic targeting.²¹ A Western military expert deeply knowledgeable about the Operation Inherent Resolve air campaign stated bluntly that the UAE air force “could not be trusted with dynamic targets and they did not want to do it.”²² Finally, these same sources noted a tendency among Emirati air force personnel to blame equipment malfunctions whenever there were problems rather than admit human error.

Of course, in Yemen, there was no US Air Force to provide close air support (CAS) for Emirati forces in combat, and while the JAC was the preferred CAS provider for the PG, there were plenty of times when helicopters were not available or were not optimal to provide on-call fire support. Indeed, by one count, 80 percent of Emirati and Saudi strike missions in Yemen were dynamic. Again, it is hard to know just how accurate or effective the Emirati strikes were, and accounts vary. However, Western forces monitoring

the air campaign in Yemen generally found that, especially after the systems were put in place to minimize civilian casualties, the UAE air force generally caused less collateral damage, which probably reflects some degree of greater accuracy, at least greater than the UAE’s Saudi counterparts.²³

Air-to-Air Missions. Emirati air-to-air combat capabilities are harder to assess. Emirati-manned aircraft do not appear to have ever participated in air-to-air combat. (Although, Emirati and Turkish drones have fought air-to-air battles over Libya.) Consequently, we only have reports from training exercises in which Emirati and Western pilots participated. The Emiratis have sent numerous pilots to participate in the Red Flag training exercises at Nellis Air Force Base; they exercise frequently with American pilots at the Air Force Central Command Air Warfare Center (AAWC) at their own world-class facility at al Dhafra, and they participate in other joint air exercises in Europe and the Middle East.²⁴

Once again, reports from Westerners familiar with Emirati performance in these training exercises are mixed. Some Westerners described the Emirati pilots they observed and trained against as being “pretty good.” Another felt that they were “not peers,” not the British or Israelis, but “probably near peers.”²⁵ Others described them as good at certain aspects of air warfare but not others. All felt the Emirati pilots were certainly better than those from the other Gulf countries.²⁶

As one Western expert who had debriefed many American pilots and instructors at Red Flag and the AAWC explained, they are good at doing things they have done before, “but when things aren’t as scripted and practiced, they go badly.” In particular, at least some Red Flag instructors felt that the Emirati pilots showed “no critical thinking, no adaptation, no thinking on their feet.”²⁷

This pattern came up frequently in interviews about the Emirati air force. For instance, some Western military personnel noted that the UAE air force had large numbers of state-of-the-art simulators that they used to train their pilots on numerous set scenarios. The Emirati pilots evinced considerable

familiarity and comfort with their machines (itself a noteworthy step up from that of the vast majority of Arab air forces) and learned how to cope with the demands of those scenarios.

However, they did less unstructured, “free play” exercises—the bread-and-butter of training in the best air forces—so they had difficulty with them when they participated in such exercises with American or other topflight Western air forces.²⁸ Zoltan Barany has found the same issues in his own conversations with American military personnel who have trained with the Emiratis and other Gulf air forces: “Where Gulf pilots come up short, according to their American instructors, is often rooted in their cultural background: lacking initiative, shunning even calculated risks, and not departing from what is routine and anticipated.”²⁹

Nevertheless, unlike many other Arab air forces, the Emiratis would not refuse to participate in unstructured exercises, and while they were “not good” in these situations, they were also “not bad” in the words of one Western military officer who trained with them.³⁰

Forward Air Controllers. One of the more remarkable achievements of the UAE armed forces has been their handling of joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs), personnel who direct close air support strikes from the ground. This is an extremely important and demanding mission. Few militaries do it well, and many American allies leave it to US personnel. The UAE has insisted that it have its own JTACs certified to NATO standards, and it has even established its own JTAC school manned by American, Australian, and European instructors. In NATO Europe, there is only one JTAC school, yet the UAE has its own. The Emirati JTACs are NATO-certified and by all accounts excellent. Indeed, many Western military officers ascribed the impact of their air support in Yemen more to the skill of their JTACs than that of their pilots.³¹

Of course, it takes more than just good JTACs and PGMs to put bombs on targets. Before the Yemen war, the Emiratis largely relied on the United States to provide them with effectively everything else required

for that process. During the Yemen war, the Emiratis realized they had to do it themselves and become their own targeteers and weaponeers. They also built an impressive system (with numerous expatriates on the staff) to generate and validate targets for their air strikes, both deliberate and dynamic.³²

Logistics. Aerial logistics have proved to be a significant strength of the UAE air force. The UAE has moved combat forces and supplies quickly and reasonably efficiently around the Arabian Peninsula, including a sustained air bridge to its forces in Yemen and the Horn of Africa. Some initial flights into these destinations became confused and problematic, but after a few misfires, the Emiratis settled down and demonstrated a real ability to employ their airlift.³³

The Emirates possess a small fleet of C-130s and C-17s that are the workhorses of their airlift capacity. They have used these to considerable effect in support of combat operations. Of note, UAE military transports employ short and improvised landing strips in operations, not just in theory or training, another unusual capability. However, because they only have about eight of the C-130s and C-17s each, Abu Dhabi has relied heavily on commercial airlift to supplement the transports’ military flights. Adding commercial aircraft and pilots further complicates the kinds of large, sustained airlift campaigns the Emiratis have conducted, yet those operations were generally quite impressive, especially after the initial kinks were worked out.³⁴

Similarly, the Emiratis have demonstrated an impressive—and similarly unusual—ability with aerial refueling, tanking their own strike aircraft on missions to Yemen and Libya. Moreover, when the initial transport flights to Eritrea and Somalia encountered problems, the Emirati tanker aircraft pulled their chestnuts out of the fire. Finally, the Emirati air force integrated intelligence both pre and poststrike, developed its own operational plans (especially for missions in Yemen and Libya), and handled targeting and weaponeering effectively and efficiently.³⁵

Another underappreciated sign of Emirati air logistical competence lies in its ability to move its

own aircraft to Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada annually for both the Red Flag and Green Flag exercises since 2012. To do so, the Emiratis manage to transport their own airframes and personnel across the globe with nothing but tanker support from the US over the Atlantic and continental United States. No other Arab military can do so.³⁶

While combat arms always get the headlines, the UAE air force's logistical efforts deserve real recognition. Effectively no other Arab air force can perform the kind of lift, planning, and refueling operations that the UAE has executed repeatedly. No other regional air force, other than the Israelis, would try the kind of aerial refueling of long-range strikes that the UAE has. The others would have to rely on the United States to provide that capacity. Moreover, many first-line mechanics in the UAE air force are Emiratis, something else that few Gulf Cooperation Council air forces can boast, or even the Emirati ground forces.³⁷

Of course, there are some counterclaims worth noting. First, according to knowledgeable Western sources, Western expatriates largely handle the UAE air force's planning and direction of the logistical operations. There are also claims that at least some tanker and lift aircraft have actually been flown and manned by expatriates.³⁸

However, Michael Knights reports that in his extensive experience with Emirati forces in Yemen, the only non-Emirati personnel he ever encountered while wandering around UAE bases were Sudanese troops (discussed below) and a handful of Russian technicians working on sophisticated machinery such as the Pantsir S1 air defense system.³⁹ Consequently, at least the ground operations, and quite possibly the air operations themselves (but not necessarily the planning and direction), are handled by Emiratis. Even if Westerners do most of the planning and direction, this is still a dramatic demonstration of both willingness and ability to handle air logistics far beyond that of any other Arab air force since the Libyans in the 1980s.⁴⁰

Air Defense. Finally, most Western sources ascribe a high degree of competence to the Emirati air defense

forces. In the words of Ken Katzman of the Congressional Research Service, "U.S. military officers say that UAE operators of Hawk surface-to-air missile batteries are on par with U.S. operators of that system."⁴¹ Without question, the Houthi Tochka missile strike against a UAE base at Safir in Ma'rib province, Yemen in 2015, that killed 52 Emirati personnel, was a major embarrassment for the UAE's air defense forces. However, since then, Abu Dhabi has put time, money, and energy into improving its air defenses, and most Western experts and military personnel believe they are quite capable, at least on a unit-for-unit basis.⁴²

The JAC. One of the UAE military's unmitigated strengths appears to be the JAC, part of which had once been subordinated to the PG but was then split off and became the nucleus for the new force—reportedly in part because of differences between Gen. Hindmarsh of the Special Operations Command (SOC) and Maj. Gen. Stephen Toumajan, the American then commanding the JAC. The JAC provides direct air support to both the PG and the UAE Land Forces through lift, fire support, and combat search and rescue. It also provides various forms of support to the Emirati navy and coast guard, the Critical Infrastructure and Coastal Protection Agency.⁴³

Across the board, the JAC received excellent marks from both Emiratis and Westerners. Starting in Kosovo, the UAE's Apache pilots were said to be excellent: able to fly and fight their helicopters extremely well.⁴⁴ One senior Western military officer noted that when JAC units were put through their paces at the US National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, they "performed as well as any American unit."⁴⁵

Indeed, on at least one deployment to the NTC, the JAC force performed *better* than an American unit there at the same time did.⁴⁶ Another senior Western military officer who commanded UAE forces in combat as part of a coalition effort remarked that the JAC personnel could be counted on to plan their missions comprehensively and effectively and would be forthright about their actual capabilities and limitations—something he noted that was highly unusual among the many Arab partner forces he had worked

with over the years.⁴⁷ About the only weakness any source could point to in the JAC was its lack of air-to-air refueling capabilities.

Special Operations Forces (SOF). In the UAE, special operations are the purview of the PG-SOC. As its name denotes, the Presidential Guard is responsible for defense of the crown and the government and includes the former Emiri Guard. For this reason, the PG-SOC still has a regime protection and internal security role, even though it has increasingly taken the lead in the UAE's expeditionary operations.⁴⁸

The SOC is the elite of the elite in the Emirati armed forces and numbers no more than about 2,000 personnel. In 2010, Mike Hindmarsh—former commander of both the Australian special forces and Australian forces in the Middle East—took over as the SOC commander. In 2011, the SOC was incorporated into the PG, and Hindmarsh became commander of the whole PG. A number of Australians and other expatriates also serve as advisers and instructors to the SOC.⁴⁹ Like the US Special Operations Command, the PG-SOC has its own procurement budget, acquisitions process, and professional development program.

Western military officers and experts uniformly consider the SOC the best soldiers in the UAE and often the most capable element of the Emirati armed forces. Virtually all regard it as the most capable ground force in the Arab world, ahead even of the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service. They also tend to rate the SOC reasonably well against other non-Arab forces. The SOC is said to have many high-quality personnel, although this is not consistent across even this small, elite force. They performed well on their own in operations in Yemen and jointly with US and other coalition forces in Afghanistan and Yemen, although they had their limitations as well.

Direct-action SOF missions are uniformly regarded as a strength of the SOC. Emirati SOC personnel are said to be competent at planning such missions. Their combat teams have repeatedly demonstrated the capability to conduct an opposed entry, take down a site, kill or capture the target, and make their escape quickly and efficiently. Similarly, they conducted numerous small but effective amphibious

operations in Yemen for reconnaissance, raiding, disruption of enemy positions, and as flanking maneuvers to enable conventional ground assaults by Emirati land force units driving up the coast. UAE SOC personnel do not shy from contact and will stand and fight when things do not go as intended.

They are also serious about their missions, country, and professionalism. They consider themselves elite soldiers, aspire to the highest standards, and work hard to live up to those aspirations. Again, these are not the kinds of traits normally found among Arab militaries, even other SOF formations.

Yet even the SOC has its limits. As one Western general who had commanded Emirati troops in combat as part of coalition operations mused, “‘Near peer’ was a little bit generous. The Brits are near peer. But they (the Emirati SOC) are pretty good and very reliable.”⁵⁰ A senior Western SOF officer who had fought alongside the UAE SOC rated them a 7.5 out of 10. Planning is typically cited as a real strength of the SOC, while execution is said to vary more based on the individual operation commander. One senior Western SOF officer who had commanded Emirati SOC in combat as part of a coalition effort pointed to both sustainment and operational security as weak spots. A Western defense expert highly familiar with the UAE military felt that SOC junior officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) suffered from limited creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability.⁵¹

Three Western SOF personnel who had conducted combat missions in Yemen and Afghanistan with their Emirati SOC counterparts described the Emiratis as gung ho, uninterested in anything but kinetic operations, unwilling to serve as anything but the assault force in a mission, and consequently prone to cause collateral damage. They were “uninterested in hearts and minds.” Two of these officers indicated they would not bring the Emiratis along for an operation if it required more finesse than firepower because of their propensity toward violence.⁵²

This issue was also echoed by two highly knowledgeable Western defense experts on the UAE armed forces, one of whom observed that while only about 1 percent of SOF operations *should be* direct action,

Figure 3. Emirati Special Operations Forces on Maneuvers

Source: Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, photo by Sgt Alexis Flores.

it is what the UAE SOC *likes* to do and therefore they overemphasize it; some Emirati SOC units would not participate in anything other than direct action operations. These same sources described the SOC as more like highly conditioned assault troops than true SOF—more like US Army Rangers than Green Berets.⁵³

These contentions require further discussion. First, there are several possible reasons why some Emirati SOC personnel may have overly relied on kinetic solutions. To start with, the UAE tends to keep its combat tours short, and for those slated for longer assignments abroad, leave is frequent. Second, Abu Dhabi wanted as many of its elite troops and best officers to get combat experience—to “get blooded,” as one senior Emirati official put it to his Western counterpart—in both Afghanistan and Yemen.⁵⁴ As a result, there has been a constant turnover of SOC personnel in both wars, especially in Afghanistan.

Throughout its decade-plus commitment in Afghanistan, the UAE never had more than about 250 SOC troops there, and often fewer. Even well-trained troops can have difficulty controlling their own violence when they are new to combat, and these frequent rotations meant there were lots of green Emirati troops going on combat missions, an obvious recipe for nervous troops too quick to respond with a hail of gunfire to anything unexpected.

However, there is also evidence that this is changing and that, in recent years, the SOC has begun to acquire a much wider range of SOF skills. Two other Western SOF operators who fought alongside UAE troops in Afghanistan argued that it was useful to have the SOC troops involved in operations because the Emiratis were Muslims who could sometimes appeal to the Afghans through the language of Islam and because the Emiratis often had cash available to lubricate civil-military relations in the field.⁵⁵ Many

reports, including from journalists, have described the Emirati SOC as dedicated, disciplined, kind, and courteous in both Afghanistan and Yemen.⁵⁶ Indeed, a British Special Air Service (SAS) veteran wrote,

On a patrol a week earlier I had watched Emirati forces use possibly the most effective weapon I have seen in 10 years of observing the conflict in Afghanistan. Namely, a modest invitation extended by the senior Emirati on patrol to village elders to join them at mid-day prayer. Significantly, the Afghans did not refuse.⁵⁷

Two Western generals who had commanded SOC elements as part of coalition operations both commented on how the Emirati troops did well patrolling and protecting civilian populations and training indigenous security forces.⁵⁸

In particular, starting in late 2015 and certainly by about 2017, the SOC had clearly become far more comfortable with and proficient at the less-kinetic aspects of SOF warfare in Yemen. After the September 2015 Tochka strike in Ma'rib province, the UAE started shifting away from conducting conventional operations with its own forces and instead began to build up large, indigenous militias. It has mostly been the SOC that has recruited, organized, armed, and trained these militias the way that American special forces would, and they have had considerable success at it. By 2019, the Emiratis had stood up roughly 90,000 Yemeni fighters in dozens of militias.⁵⁹ The effort went well, in part because, as military analyst Nick Heras described it, the Emiratis adopted “a province-by-province and area-by-area approach to recruiting and mobilizing tribal militias, allowing these forces to operate where they fight best—in their local areas.”⁶⁰ Moreover, these militias demonstrated a certain degree of competence, especially when operating with Emirati conventional formations as at Mukalla in 2016 and the drive to Hudaydah in 2018.⁶¹

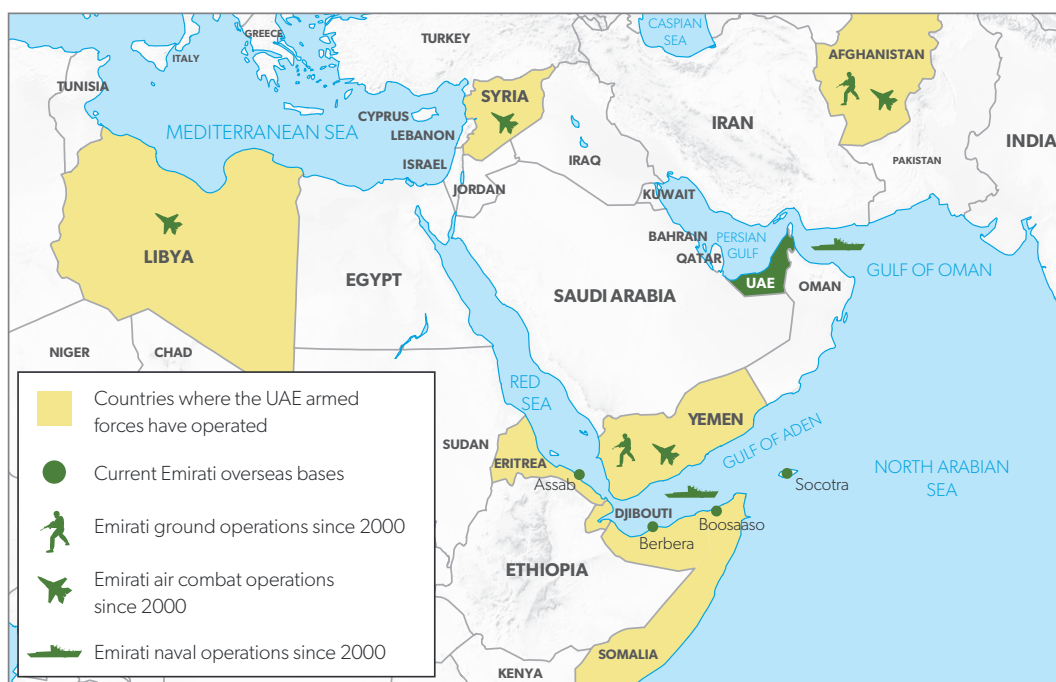
As part of the Emirati takedown of Mukalla, then held by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the SOC made contact with various local Yemeni tribes, developed clandestine relationships with them, and eventually paid many not to fight against the UAE-led coalition, or even to turn against AQAP. In the

words of Michael Knights, the foremost authority on Emirati operations in Yemen, “The UAE defeated AQAP on the battlefield and splintered its support base by giving reconcilable tribal auxiliaries an alternative to al-Qaeda.”⁶² They also worked through local clerics to convince some of the AQAP fighters to abandon their defense of the city. These are two of several reasons Mukalla fell in 36 hours with minimal casualties.⁶³

While some have claimed that this is evidence that the UAE has to buy its victories rather than fight for them, a more accurate appreciation is that this reflected the growing sophistication of the Emirati military in learning to use all the tools in the SOF tool kit, and not just always reaching for the hammer.⁶⁴ Indeed, after taking down Mukalla, the Emiratis superbly reconstructed, stabilized, and restored basic services there, clearly demonstrating an understanding of the importance of winning hearts and minds.⁶⁵

Thus, as many others have observed, the Emiratis have adopted their own “by, with, and through” campaigns. They recognized that they lacked sufficient capable conventional ground forces of their own to win the Yemeni civil war. Moreover, in such a tiny, affluent population (there are less than one million actual UAE citizens with a 2017 per capita gross domestic product of \$68,800, 13th in the world),⁶⁶ combat deaths are hard to bear. Thus, the Emiratis took a page from the US playbook and began applying the American strategy of building indigenous ground forces backed by their own training, advising, and fire support, first in Yemen and then in Libya. By all accounts, they have learned to do it quite well.⁶⁷

Emirati Conventional Ground Forces. Conventional ground combat operations have been waged by two different elements of the UAE Armed Forces: the UAE Land Forces and a pair of formations from the PG: the PG's 2nd Khalifa bin Zayid Mechanized Brigade and its Reconnaissance Group.⁶⁸ In this area, Emirati forces have evinced a far greater range of capabilities, with some performing reasonably well and others poorly. As one Western general familiar with the UAE armed forces said of Emirati operations

Figure 4. The Regional Reach of the UAE Armed Forces

Source: Author.

in Aden in 2015, “Did they do them as well as we would have done them? No. They had some fits and starts. But they did end up holding the city.”⁶⁹

Once again, it is important to start with the big picture to place Emirati ground force capabilities into a proper context. While there is wide variation across and even within units—and seemingly more mediocre personnel and units than good—the best Emirati conventional ground forces performed quite well in Yemen. In general, they were aggressive in their strategy and plans and in the leadership and conduct of their operations. As a bellwether example, in 2015 they did not just reinforce the Hadi government’s toehold in Aden and then plead for rescue by the US or the international community. Instead, they built up their strength, broke out of their bridgeheads, overran the city, and then developed that into a wider offensive that captured al-Anad airbase, then Mukalla, and eventually mounted impressive drives against both Ta’izz and Hudaydah. They conducted a small amphibious assault at Mukalla with a multi-axis ground offensive against the city and had hoped to mount a much larger amphibious operation

against Hudaydah until the United States convinced them not to.⁷⁰ Once again, these were extremely impressive operations beyond the capacity of many NATO militaries.

The Emiratis planned these operations themselves and frequently surprised both the Houthis and the US with their boldness and ability to break through fixed defenses and pursue a defeated enemy. Emirati mechanized forces were able to contribute to urban combat and then transition immediately to armored pursuit operations. They achieved rates of advance of 20–25 kilometers per day in the drive up the Red Sea coast from Mokha to Hudaydah.⁷¹ On the defensive, they were resolute, able to parry (admittedly, crude) enemy thrusts, mass fire against enemy attacks, and repeatedly halt Houthi offensives that had previously bested Yemeni government (and Saudi) ground forces. It is rare to be able to describe an Arab conventional force in those terms, and only the Jordanians in 1948 and Hezbollah in 2006–19 are even roughly comparable.

Nevertheless, Emirati ground forces still face significant challenges and limitations. Although Emirati

forces are provided with pre-deployment training (itself a rarity in the Arab world), they are still instituting a defined training and deployment cycle whereby a unit regularly trains for a deployment, deploys, and then cycles back to regroup and regenerate. Reportedly, Gen. Salah, commander of the Land Forces, now insists on personally approving the deployment readiness of any Land Forces formation to ensure they have mastered the training cycle. Salah is said to be extremely demanding.⁷²

Of course, Abu Dhabi prefers to send only its best on these combat missions, and many personnel are recognized as “not up to snuff” and left behind. More often, the good ones are simply plucked from whatever units or billets they happen to occupy and formed into composite units for combat deployments. In addition, because of liberal leave policies and the relative shortage of high-quality personnel, the Emiratis are “constantly cannibalizing” their own units for various missions. Personnel frequently take leave, are absent for family “emergencies,” are simply not interested in training, or absent themselves to take care of other tasks required for promotion. As an example of the latter, the decision to make ever-greater proficiency in jiu-jitsu a requirement for promotion prompted large numbers of officers to skip training and other key tasks to instead work on their martial arts skills. A leading Western expert on the Emirati military estimates that because of these factors, UAE Land Forces units often can only assemble about half their establishment strength for a normal training activity.⁷³

Moreover, because combat rotations may be as brief as four to six weeks and because of how uneven personnel quality is across both the Land Forces and the PG (albeit generally higher in the PG than the Land Forces), Abu Dhabi rarely deploys cohesive ground force units. This was absolutely the case throughout the Yemen intervention, but it also appears to have been true in Afghanistan.⁷⁴

Instead, every Emirati force deployed to Yemen (and probably Afghanistan), including every tranche of replacements, was a “pick-up team” consisting of personnel, vehicles, fire teams, squads, platoons, and sometimes companies from across the force. Perhaps a more accurate way to think of them was as “all-star

teams,” brought together, given some pre-deployment training, and then sent off to Afghanistan or Yemen.⁷⁵ As one Western expert in Abu Dhabi put it, the leadership will identify soldiers, officers, and groups they consider “combat ready” and “due” for a combat deployment and will send as many as needed to fill out the force requirement.⁷⁶

As a result, it is extremely difficult to tell whether a particular combat operation was conducted purely by PG conventional forces, purely by Land Forces, or a mix of the two. Knights reported personnel and equipment from both the PG and Land Forces present, cooperating, and seemingly integrated in many battles he witnessed in Yemen.⁷⁷ Likewise, analysis of unclassified sources by one defense analyst also found Emirati armored vehicles from both the PG and the Land Forces operating together at platoon level in the assault on al-Anad airbase outside Aden.⁷⁸ Later on, however, it appears that the PG increasingly had primary responsibility for the operations in the east and north (around Mukalla and Ta’izz), while the Land Forces had greater responsibility for the drive up the Red Sea coast to Hudaydah; although, even there, the PG-SOC mounted several flanking amphibious assaults in support of their offensives.⁷⁹

When considering Emirati ground forces, it is always important to keep in mind how small they are, particularly the forces deployed to Afghanistan and Yemen. In Afghanistan, the Emirates never had more than about 250 personnel, overwhelmingly from the SOC. In Yemen, the entire force never topped 4,000 Emiratis at its peak, and no more than about 2,000 were combat troops—likely fewer.⁸⁰ The UAE operated a pair of mechanized battalion task forces and probably a similar number of light infantry or SOF formations.⁸¹

These tiny forces consisted of the best the UAE had to offer in the pick-up or all-star teams described above. These elite Emirati ground forces, in both the PG and the Land Forces, have demonstrated a reasonably good ability to integrate fire and maneuver; they are often aggressive and responsive to battlefield developments, and they mostly understand combined arms operations. Their fire support from both artillery and mortars, particularly from their superb G6

self-propelled guns and Agrab mortar carriers, is often good and can provide timely, on-call fire missions with reasonable accuracy. Air support from the JAC is very good.⁸² Moreover, as with the Emirati air force, these small forces give Abu Dhabi a ground-power projection capability unmatched by any other Arab state. The only possible rival is Hezbollah, which projected a similar degree of power—albeit requiring far larger numbers of troops—into neighboring Syria as the UAE did in Yemen but has not been able to match Emirati expeditionary capabilities overseas.⁸³

However, because the Emirati armed forces generally, and the numbers of its best troops specifically, are so small, Abu Dhabi cannot yet sustain a major war beyond its borders. In truth, it would probably have considerable difficulty doing so even at home. It was this realization that led the UAE to shift to a much greater emphasis on building and enabling local militias in Yemen, since they lacked the capacity to prevail in the vast, grueling fight that would be required to crush the Houthis and drive them back to their traditional homeland. Here as well, credit the Emiratis for recognizing their own limitations.

Combat Operations. In Yemen, these small, properly trained, and generally elite Emirati ground forces were reasonably good at integrating fire and maneuver. The better units understood how to advance to contact and, once contact was made, sometimes employed maneuver in conjunction with direct fire to overcome the adversary. However, more often, their tendency was to rely largely—or entirely—on firepower to overcome enemy resistance. Knights found that “fire support did a lot of the job” of breaking Houthi positions, rather than maneuver.⁸⁴ Especially given the amount of firepower Emirati armored and mechanized formations could bring to bear against poorly armed Houthi adversaries, this was typically adequate to win the battle.⁸⁵

American units have also evinced a similar tendency to rely on firepower over maneuver in recent decades as a way of keeping casualties down. The Emiratis may be doing the same because of their extensive partnering with (and emulation of) American forces, coupled with a similar desire to avoid casualties. Moreover,

as Knights has observed, Emirati ground forces have repeatedly demonstrated an aggressive willingness to attack the enemy and then pursue afterward.⁸⁶

UAE ground forces have also done reasonably well with combined arms operations, although as always, there are caveats. Knights describes Emirati ground forces in Yemen successfully employing tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, other armored vehicles (such as Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles and Nimr armored personnel carriers), and crew-served or shoulder-launched weapons such as the Kornet and Javelin anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs). He also witnessed Emirati G6 howitzers providing effective fire support to armor operations—and conducting daring mechanized raids to enable brief artillery strikes against high-value Houthi targets located in depth.⁸⁷ Indeed, other sources also confirm that the Emiratis have put great emphasis on their artillery operations and have gotten quite good at them.⁸⁸

In contrast, several Western military officers who fought alongside Emirati forces in Afghanistan and Yemen found that the UAE formations they worked with were quite poor at combined arms operations.⁸⁹ In the words of one, “combined arms coordination” consisted of little more than an infantry company commander telling a tank battalion commander, “We are going to be here at X hours, and we need you to be there too at the same time.”⁹⁰ Again, there appears to be a range of capabilities, largely determined by the commanding officer’s competence and dedication.

Western military officers who had been in combat with the Emiratis in Yemen and Afghanistan felt that joint operations were a particular weakness. “Badly stovepiped” was a constant refrain—something that was also part of the Emiratis’ problems with combined arms operations where they occurred. As noted earlier, the PG was said to have distrusted the air force to provide close air support and so preferred to undertake operations with either the US or the JAC providing top cover. Early on, the Emirati navy and air force both did such a poor job providing fire support to the PG-SOC units that were rushed in to hold the last defensive pockets in Aden in 2015 that the Emirati ground troops expended nearly one-third of the country’s entire stock of ATGMs holding the line. These weapons were the

only effective fire support they had until a battery of G6s were finally landed on the Little Aden peninsula.⁹¹ However, one of the primary reasons for making Gen. Hindmarsh the theater commander in Yemen was to eliminate these problems, and they did reportedly diminish considerably thereafter.⁹²

Emirati tactical planning seemed to be an equally mixed bag. Some Emirati formations seem to do it well, others not so much. For instance, Knights found that Emirati brigade, battalion, and even company-level officers understood their combat plans, could brief them well, could explain the concepts behind them, and had thought through contingency plans. He noted that while he could not rule out that the plans were written by Westerners back in Abu Dhabi, the Emiratis in the field who had to execute them knew the plans and understood them well enough either to have formulated them themselves or, at the very least, to be able to execute them competently—which Knights generally found that they did. In contrast, several Western military officers who fought alongside Emirati forces in Afghanistan and Yemen reported that Emirati planning was often slapdash and perfunctory. They seemed impatient to get into the fight and uninterested in planning support, coordination, and contingency operations the way a US formation typically would.⁹³

Equipment is also an area where Emirati ground forces are surprisingly mixed. On the one hand, the PG and Land Forces boast Leclerc tanks, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, Finnish Patria armored vehicles, G6 and M-109 artillery pieces, Kornet and Javelin ATGMs, and SA-16 Igla man-portable air defense systems. These are all top-of-the-line, even state-of-the-art, combat systems.

But other equipment is rudimentary or nonexistent. For instance, one Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati troops was astonished to find how pathetic their communications equipment was. As a result, the unit “was trying to run combat operations with cell phones and WhatsApp.”⁹⁴ Similarly, while Emirati drones have been active in Libya, none were available in Yemen at the height of the Emirati combat operations, leaving

the Emiratis reliant on manned aerial reconnaissance—and coalition assets.

Logistics. Ground force logistics in Yemen showed the same pattern as those of the UAE air force—and of the vast majority of modern Arab militaries. Emirati quartermasters did a terrific job keeping their own forces and allied militias supplied. Despite the difficult desert-mountain terrain of Yemen, Emirati combat formations and the Yemeni militias they trained and directed rarely, if ever, ran out of food, fuel, ammunition, or other combat consumables. In most cases, they were amply supplied. Like the air force, it does seem that at least some and possibly much of the planning and other logistical work outside Yemen was conducted by Western expatriates, but within Yemen, it was handled largely if not entirely by Emiratis. Indeed, some Emirati conscripts have been sent to Yemen, and many of them appear to have been employed in logistics.⁹⁵

On the other hand, the Emiratis still struggle with maintenance of their equipment. As one senior Western military officer with considerable experience in the UAE noted, the Emiratis basically required expatriate contractors to do virtually all their maintenance. He observed that while even US forces have become more reliant on contractors for maintenance, “We do our own first line maintenance, [the Emiratis] won’t do even that.”⁹⁶ Another speculated that many Emirati soldiers may not even perform basic maintenance on their personal gear, including their weapon.⁹⁷

Command and Control Issues. One of the most interesting aspects of Emirati ground forces is their command and control performance. Like the vast majority of Arab militaries, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent, Emirati junior officers experience the same culturally driven difficulties with initiative, creativity, critical or interdisciplinary thinking, flexibility, and adaptability.⁹⁸ In the words of one Western junior officer who fought alongside Emirati forces,

Emiratis will not move unless the direction comes all the way from the top. “I wait to be told what to do and

Figure 5. Emirati BMP-3 Infantry Fighting Vehicles Disembark for Maneuvers at a Kuwaiti Port

Source: US Navy, photo by 1st Class Joseph Krypel.

then execute.” Giving commanders intent did not exist. But as soon as they were given an order, they went.⁹⁹

Or as another Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces in combat noted, “They are not good at building a foundation of good leadership in terms of NCOs and junior officers. Especially the junior officers. More senior officers have to lead everything.”¹⁰⁰ Still another Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati military forces commented that there is no “culture of bottom-up leadership” in UAE ground forces.¹⁰¹ And a Western military expert highly familiar with the Emirati military noted, “Any time there was a problem, any time something deviated from the script, it has to go way, way up the chain of command for new orders.”¹⁰²

Some Emirati personnel also had problems with information management similar to that of their

Arab peers, evincing problematic tendencies toward obfuscation and shame avoidance. As several Western military officers who had fought alongside Emirati forces put it, their counterparts were not always good at admitting when things went wrong. For the sake of honor, “when they speak to their commanders they are never going to admit when things don’t go right.” Some of these sources described angry exchanges with Americans “because [the Emiratis] would claim they did it right and the Americans would say they didn’t. They would refuse to admit that.”¹⁰³ In a similar vein, a leading Western expert on the Emirati military noted the

particularly horrible cultural trait where there is such a competition here for the ear of the leader, the highest leader, and not a lot of cooperation. So, if I have a good idea and I am a major, I want to get

that to the colonel or brigadier, and not let my boss steal it from me.¹⁰⁴

While these problems hamstring Emirati *junior* officers, they are not particularly apparent with strategic leadership.¹⁰⁵ As one senior Western military officer with considerable experience in the UAE put it, “Emirati colonels and brigadiers tend to be good to excellent.”¹⁰⁶ Or as Knights phrased it, their “good leadership cadre is not huge, but the more senior people are really quite good.”¹⁰⁷

Moreover, these senior officers try hard to delegate authority but consistently find that their subordinates—no matter how good or smart they are—are often unwilling to take it and exercise the kind of independent decision-making prized in modern combat and explicitly promoted by the Emirati military (and political) leadership.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, a Western military expert with extensive experience in the UAE noted that colonels and brigadiers were “workhorses of the UAE military, even in combat operations.” He noted several reasons for their superior performance, including that most now had combat experience in Afghanistan and Yemen, they have benefited from MbZ’s educational reforms, and, “within their system, they have the authority and ability to think for themselves and make decisions.”¹⁰⁹

Consequently, decision-making about the actions of a formation are largely concentrated at the colonel and brigadier general level. As one of the leading Western experts on the UAE armed forces put it, there is a “push-up of responsibilities to full colonel level.” It is still the case that the colonels and brigadier generals commanding Emirati units tend to be the determining factor in their quality: If the colonel or brigadier is good, and especially if he is willing to listen to his foreign advisers, then the unit will be good.

A good colonel or brigadier will demand rigorous, realistic training. He will ensure a proper, rigorous training process. He will lead his men well in battle. He will also often try to obtain and retain competent and trusted subordinates, which is one of the reasons the whole unit will function. However, without that good leader, the unit tends to break down rapidly. As a result, UAE ground force units in both the PG and

the Land Forces tend to wax and wane quickly in their overall quality and competence as senior unit commanders cycle in and out.¹¹⁰

Promotion in the Emirati officer corps, especially to the rank of colonel and higher, is far easier and more likely if the candidate comes from the right tribe or family, those with high *asil* (“authenticity,” or the best family pedigree). Too many are promoted for these reasons alone. However, many of the most important Emirati senior officers are promoted for merit, even though they too are often scions of the right tribes and families. These are overwhelmingly men identified and promoted by MbZ and his most trusted lieutenants—many of them expatriates—because they are the best.

The UAE’s senior leadership appears to recognize who the good commanders are and ensures that they are the ones entrusted with the most important missions, including most of the combat assignments. Those men are typically chosen to handle combat commands and are why Western military officers and experts so often rave about their Emirati counterparts. Knights relates that on numerous occasions in Yemen, he found that the UAE leadership would identify a senior commander who was not performing well, but because of his family or tribal status, he could not simply be relieved of his command. So instead, they would divide his area of responsibility in half, allow him to continue to command the rear or the quiet sector, and bring in a new commander to take over the front line or “hot” sector.¹¹¹

Unsurprisingly, when asked about the quality of Emirati officers, one senior Western military officer who had commanded Emirati forces as part of coalition operations noted that in 2016 and 2017 in Yemen, “They had a number of one-stars who were very good and highly regarded by our people.” He noted that the Emiratis had a brigade commander who was “pulling all the strings,” because they had “more problems” with junior leadership who merely “followed a fairly routine doctrinal approach.”¹¹² Another Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces noted that they “took very seriously” who was going to get promoted to colonel or brigadier and that those decisions were about “far more merit than loyalty or

[*asil*].”¹¹³ As a result of all this, Emirati command and control often demonstrates an interesting pattern of excellent strategic leadership, guidance, planning, and decision-making, which falls off precipitously among field-grade officers, let alone NCOs.

The Emirati liberation of Aden in 2015 evinced a remarkable display of this pattern of behavior. The UAE took from April until July 2015 to build up enough ground power in the Little Aden and Crater peninsulas, fighting off several Houthi assaults in the process.¹¹⁴ For the breakout, named Operation Golden Arrow, challenges with command and control led to what in effect became an offensive based on reinforced platoons—battlegroups of 40–50 men—each led personally by a senior officer, typically a colonel or brigadier general.

During the operation itself, these battlegroups generally did well, although the performance of each was heavily dependent on the abilities of the senior officer leading it. Since most turned out to be first-rate, the operation was a remarkable success, with most demonstrating good use of fire and maneuver and high aggressiveness, although cooperation *among* the battlegroups left much to be desired.¹¹⁵ Later, in the Yemen war, the Emiratis would not have to go to quite these lengths to make up for the shortcomings of their junior officers, but the issue persists.

A final, problematic aspect of Emirati command and control derives from its somewhat schizophrenic promotional system. In practice—but not by design or acknowledgment—Emirati command and control can allow those with the right networks to bypass the formal chain of command. Those marked by MbZ and his senior subordinates as the best and brightest can often call on others higher in the chain of command, even up to MbZ himself, to solve a problem or have a bad order countermanded. Those with the right *asil* and family connections can use their own prestige or connections to do the same, albeit via different pathways, and often for different reasons.¹¹⁶

Considerations of prestige, *asil*, and *wasta* distort the chain of command in other ways. Family name and *asil* are often of greater importance than place of origin—or frequently even than rank. Frequently, a more senior officer will defer to a junior officer *or*

even an NCO from a more important family or tribe.¹¹⁷ Another Western expert with extensive experience in the UAE noted that many senior generals, largely those who secured their rank through these family connections,

act like little emperors. . . . People have to scurry around for them. You cannot disagree with them. They will never admit that they are wrong and will throw temper tantrums. Even brigadier generals won’t stand up to them.¹¹⁸

A highly regarded Western expert on the Emirati military pointed to a unit that had performed badly in Yemen. The commander was removed, and a first-rate brigadier was appointed in his place to get the unit into shape. The new commander wanted to get rid of numerous officers he considered part of its past problems. However, those officers appealed to their tribal *shaykhs*, who appealed to the political leadership, which then overturned the brigadier’s directive firing them. Not surprisingly, the brigadier was disenchanted and got himself transferred to another post.¹¹⁹

Expatriates and Mercenaries. The UAE still relies on non-Emiratis as part of its military machine. Their role needs to be kept in perspective, however, because they are not as numerous as they once were, nor do they handle the same responsibilities they once did. Excluding those involved in maintenance and sustainment, only about 1,000 Western expatriates are attached to the 64,000-strong Emirati armed forces.¹²⁰ Especially in the UAE’s ground forces, foreigners increasingly occupy certain niche capabilities that Emiratis cannot yet handle. Plus, mostly non-Western expatriates have been used to flesh out a small force that cannot (or chooses not to) provide the numbers needed for some military tasks Abu Dhabi has chosen to tackle.¹²¹ For instance, virtually all pilots in the UAE air force are Emirati nationals; only instructors and some maintenance personnel are non-Emiratis.

The UAE continues to engage Western expatriates, many of them former officers and NCOs in

Figure 6. A UAE Patriot Surface-to-Air Missile Launcher

Source: US Army.

their own militaries, to serve as trainers, instructors, advisers, planners, technicians, and “overseers” of the Emirati military. Certainly, much of the force generation, support, and supply of the UAE armed forces is provided by Westerners.¹²² As a highly regarded expert on the Emirati military puts it, the Western expatriates are

critical to the modernization of the military. They are the ones which drive rapid structural, organizational, strategic and system reform through bringing in “best practices.” They also help in embedding this and making it sustainable through advising and overseeing the systems until it gets taken over by locals or other expatriates.¹²³

In addition, the Emirati leadership uses the Western expatriates as “talent scouts,” helping identify Emirati soldiers and officers with the right

skills—intelligence, initiative, creativity, bravery, critical thinking, and charisma, among others—to serve as good leaders in the armed forces. In this way, they are a crucial element of the meritocratic aspects of the Emirati armed forces.

Moreover, these people generally do not deploy with Emirati expeditionary forces. “General Mike” Hindmarsh, as he is known, had to command the Yemen war from Abu Dhabi to ensure that the campaign was an Emirati fight and was not seen as a mercenary fight. Moreover, the vast majority of combat roles in the UAE military are assigned to Emiratis.¹²⁴ Again, in his extensive travels with the UAE military in Yemen, Knights never saw non-Emiratis leading planning or handling the logistics for Emirati combat operations..¹²⁵ In the words of a Western military officer with extensive experience in the UAE, “If it flies, shoots, or drives, it’s an Emirati.”¹²⁶

The other major foreign force the Emiratis have relied on are the 15,000 or so Sudanese troops they brought in to help fight the war in Yemen.¹²⁷ Others have reportedly been sent to Libya to fight alongside the UAE's ally there, Khalifa Haftar. In Yemen, Sudanese generally serve as security for Emirati combat forces and their militia allies, but at times, they are also thrown into battle as extra infantry.

Knights explains that Emirati convoys and bases in Yemen typically employed a triple screen of security: a distant perimeter comprising Yemeni militiamen trained and armed by the UAE, an outer perimeter of Sudanese, and an inner perimeter of Emiratis. (The US has done something similar for certain facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan.) When they have been employed as combat infantrymen in Yemen, the Sudanese generally acted as low-quality line-fillers or assault elements in support of a conventional attack in which Emirati mechanized formations and their Yemeni militia allies typically played the principal roles.¹²⁸

Finally and briefly, the media has made much of the Emirati attempt to recruit an 800-man battalion of Colombian (and other Latin American) veterans, possibly with the assistance of Erik Prince, former CEO of Blackwater.¹²⁹ Knowledgeable Western military experts on the UAE, including some who served in the UAE, argue that the real intent behind this unit was to act as regime protection forces in the Emirates against insurrection by the millions of South and Southeast Asian migrant laborers. Experts suggest that some Latin Americans were offered money to go to Yemen, but it is unclear how many—if any—went.¹³⁰ It may be that Abu Dhabi recruited them either to fill out or substitute for their own forces in Yemen *if those proved inadequate to the task*. However, given how generally well UAE forces performed in Yemen, it became unnecessary to send the Latin Americans.

The Emirati Navy. As rich as the UAE is, its financial assets are not limitless—more so for even scarcer resources such as high-quality manpower and the attention of its top leadership. Thus, someone has to make do with less, and in the Emirati armed forces, the navy has typically drawn the short straw.¹³¹

Until recently, the navy's mission was somewhat muddled because counter-smuggling and protection of offshore oil facilities were primarily handled by the coast guard. This has begun to change because of Abu Dhabi's need to blockade the Yemeni coast to prevent Iranian resupply of the Houthis in 2015–19 and because of the Iranian attacks on Saudi and Emirati shipping in the Gulf in 2019. The UAE leadership recognized that its navy had fallen behind and needed to be brought up to higher levels of capability and readiness to be able to address its strategic maritime interests.

The navy is still small, with only nine European-built corvettes (nothing bigger), about three dozen smaller fast attack craft, other littoral patrol boats, and small amphibious assault vessels. Recognizing that its current fleet is inadequate to its potential missions, Abu Dhabi is trying to acquire four larger French Gowind-class frigates. Likewise, it does have some amphibians and intends to buy more to enhance its power projection capability, but that is about it. The navy has only two minesweepers despite the threat from Iran's extensive mine arsenal, although some other ships can help with demining in a pinch. Several of the Western military officers I interviewed who had had extensive experience in the UAE noted that it has far too little maritime port (or beach) security, creating inviting targets for Iranian missile and SOF attacks.¹³²

In operation, the navy gets more mixed reviews than its air or ground combat forces do. One senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces as part of a coalition campaign noted several illuminating experiences. First, the Emiratis did fine as part of the coalition blockade of Yemen: They were embedded in an American command structure and had American naval forces nearby to do the heavy lifting, but they were still professional and eager to learn.

Second, when the US began to stand up a force to deal with aggressive Iranian behavior in the Gulf, the Emiratis readily volunteered. They started with almost no capability to help, but they underwent extensive training and exercises alongside US forces and, in the end, had significantly improved, to the

point that the US was confident the Emiratis could play a useful role.

Finally, and in contrast, the Emiratis were eager to conduct a large, complex amphibious assault against Hudaydah in 2018.¹³³ Gen. Joseph Votel, then the commander of US Central Command, remarked about this operation, “I would have been really concerned if the US Marines were trying to do this.”¹³⁴ Consequently, the Emiratis were convinced to cancel it and instead concentrate on a landward advance. Finally, Knights argues that while the (much smaller) Emirati amphibious assault against Mukalla in 2016 turned out to be a nonevent because AQAP had fled by the time it began, it nonetheless was a competently planned and executed operation that would have been challenging for most other militaries in the world, even under those permissive circumstances.¹³⁵

Of course, the Emirati navy still deserves credit for initiating and sustaining the five-year sealift operation supporting the UAE’s intervention in Yemen. The vast bulk of Emirati forces were moved by sea, including the various mechanized battalion task forces and artillery formations that were often the decisive element in the Saudi-Emirati-Hadi coalition’s military victories. Likewise, the vast majority of the UAE’s logistical support came by sea, including for the JAC and the Emirati air force. Because the Houthis lacked the capability to interfere and the Iranians chose not to do so, the sea bridge from the Gulf to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait operated in a pretty permissive environment, but keeping it open for five years and keeping the forces and supplies flowing were still impressive.

Emirati Force Generation

As the preceding discussion makes clear, the UAE’s armed forces have manifested a range of capabilities. The best Emirati personnel could take their place in many Western armies. Emirati elite forces are good by most standards and certainly the best in the Arab world. Other units and personnel are not nearly as capable, but many are still better than most of their Arab peers, and there seems to be relatively fewer

poor personnel and formations than is the case in most of the Arab armed forces. Moreover, the UAE has forged a number of limited, discrete mission skills that few nations in the world possess.

As important as this assessment of capabilities is, what is more important and interesting is how and why the Emiratis surpassed their Arab peers—and, to a certain extent, so many non-Arab militaries. Especially given the long, painful history of Arab underperformance in modern combat, this is the central mystery to unravel.¹³⁶ It is the key to understanding the sustainability of Emirati military effectiveness and predicting the likelihood of greater progress in the future. How the UAE has been building its military forces over the past two decades is the place to start.

Preservice Military Education. The UAE’s program to improve its military personnel, particularly its officer corps, increasingly begins even before joining the armed forces. In recent years, Abu Dhabi has made a determined push to establish institutions and programs designed to ingrain the ideal skills for military success in male teens and tweens before military service.

The UAE has already established three “pre-commissioning academies” in Abu Dhabi to better prepare—and identify—promising future candidates for military leadership positions. These institutions have their roots in an earlier generation of military boys’ schools established in the late 1960s and 1970s in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah, which in turn were based on the military boys’ schools created by the Trucial Oman Scouts in the 1950s. Their “aim was to generate a stream of literate and school-educated recruits who could be trained for technical roles such as signalers, and as a leadership cadre.” That earlier generation of schools had all closed by the early 2000s, but they are now being revived as part of MbZ’s comprehensive plan to reform, remake, and improve the Emirati armed forces.¹³⁷

Emirati boys are strongly encouraged to enroll in educational programs designed to prepare them for national service and—for some—a military career. These teach Emirati nationalism and identity and values such as work ethic, discipline, critical thinking,

creativity, and empowerment for citizens to take control of their own lives. Perhaps the best known of these is the Al Bayariq Student Citizenship Program, which teaches “life skills as well as police and military skills.” The

life skills area of the Al Bayariq civics program focuses on seven key values: leadership, loyalty, teamwork, discipline, tolerance, perseverance, and responsibility. To teach them, lessons involve short lectures and discussion, but stress ‘experiential learning’ through creativity challenges, puzzles, physical games, and problem-solving tasks . . . intended to build creativity, teamwork, and determination.¹³⁸

Many developers, administrators, and instructors are British and American and typically were members of their own militaries or police forces. Instruction in the Al Bayariq programs is largely in English, although Arabic translators can be provided. The program was begun at six Emirati schools in 2008. By 2012, it was teaching 28,000 students in 98 schools and the following year had expanded to 162 schools.¹³⁹ It eventually grew to serve 40,000 students annually.¹⁴⁰

In the past two decades, the UAE government has introduced large numbers of other programs intended for pre-military-age children to stimulate creativity, initiative, critical thinking, and entrepreneurship and attempt to instill these values before they enter national service or the formal armed forces.¹⁴¹ For instance, the Young Entrepreneur Competition, established in 2005, targets teens age 16–18, “offering them entrepreneurship training, product development support, and the chance to compete for prizes in creativity, innovation, marketing, and customer service.”¹⁴²

So far, the programs are having only limited success. However, they are still new, and Abu Dhabi’s hope is that, with time, they will expand both quantitatively and qualitatively. If they succeed in that goal, large numbers of boys will enter the military already having been socialized to the military culture of the armed forces, one that the UAE leadership intends will stress the qualities of duty, patriotism,

discipline, hard work, honesty, critical thinking, initiative, and creativity.

National Service: The Military as the School of the Nation. In 2014, the UAE introduced 12-month conscription for men with high school diplomas or better and 24-month conscription for men without. In 2018, the former was extended to 16 months. For women, national service is purely voluntary, but a small number do participate.

So far, national service has played only a limited role in enhancing the UAE’s military capabilities. As noted above, a small number of men on national service have been sent to Yemen to perform rear area duties such as base security and logistics. After the Tochka missile strike in Ma’rib, that number was drastically reduced, perhaps eliminated entirely, because of the political sensitivity of having ill-prepared conscripts killed in battle.

Of greater significance, national service is another opportunity to scout each annual cohort for potential recruits for the formal armed forces. Indeed, the UAE hired the former deputy chief of defense of Finland to advise them on conscription in part because the Finns do an excellent job identifying the best conscript personnel for the military. Using financial inducements, nationalism, appeals to MbZ’s favor, and other blandishments, Emirati recruiters will try to convince conscripts with the right skills to join the formal armed forces. As one senior Western officer with considerable service in the UAE observed, instituting conscription vastly expanded the potential pool of recruits and the military’s ability to pinpoint the kinds of people it wanted, especially for the officer corps.¹⁴³ Roughly 8 percent of conscripts transition to the regular military, although most of those are given only short military training courses and then returned to the conscript force as officers.¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, while 8 percent may not seem high, this still generates a useful number of high-quality recruits for the armed forces that they otherwise would not have. As a Western expert with considerable experience in the UAE put it, every year “national service throws up a couple of diamonds in the rough.” And “if that means that they can find a

dozen guys who weren't there before, who can move up to colonel, that is a qualitative improvement."¹⁴⁵

Ultimately, however, national service is less about having society strengthen the military in the short term and far more about having the military strengthen society over the long term.¹⁴⁶ In the words of a Western diplomat highly knowledgeable about the Emirati military and stationed in the UAE, "The military is serving the educational system, not the educational system serving the military—*yet*."¹⁴⁷

What is most important about national service is the three months of training the conscripts receive when they are first inducted, coupled with the sense of camaraderie, national pride, and identity it is hoped they take with them from national service. The initial training stresses Emirati nationalism and solidarity and the threats the UAE's leadership believes the country faces. There is also more emphasis on team building, critical thinking, taking action to serve the nation, physical fitness, work ethic, and service to a larger cause. Conscripts get

basic military training covering essential skills such as weapons handling, marksmanship, and fieldcraft. Recruits learn to assemble and disassemble their personal weapon, an M-16, and must pass a timed test. Arms training progresses from a simulator with electronic weapons to a live shooting range and finally to practice in various field positions. Military training culminates with courses in fieldcraft that put recruits' endurance and resourcefulness to the test. Conscripts learn survival skills on trips into the desert where they must dig their own sleeping trenches on overnight exercises, clear obstacle courses, and complete simulated missions.¹⁴⁸

After that, the recruits are assigned their specializations, provided several months of training related to it, and then sent to their units. There, any enthusiasm or benefit from national service peters out quickly because so few conscripts are employed in tasks that seem to require any skills their education and training were meant to stress. A good unit commander can ensure a more valuable experience, but at present the vast majority of recruits appear to do

little more than guard duty or other time-serving activities.¹⁴⁹

Of course, over time, the goal of conscription in the UAE is to build a new Emirati society and culture, which in turn will make possible a new Emirati military. Emirati officials talk openly about creating a snowballing process of using conscription to identify better people with the right skills and behaviors, bringing them into the military, and having them both identify still more such people and see them promoted to higher ranks. They are expected to employ and pass on those skills and behaviors such that, over time, the entire force will increasingly be filled with people with the right skills and behavioral patterns. Thus, the goal is explicitly to build the nation and reshape its culture to gradually improve the pool of potential recruits for the military.¹⁵⁰

Recruitment for the Armed Forces. The enlisted ranks of the UAE armed forces are manned by a mix of volunteers and a small but growing percentage of national service personnel assigned to regular military formations. The volunteers generally come from the northern Emirates—Sharjah, Fujairah, Umm al-Quwain, Ajman, and Ras al-Khaimah—which are less populous and far less wealthy than Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Thus, even though the northern Emirates account for about only 25–30 percent of the UAE's population, nearly 40 percent of all Emirati military deaths have been from the northern Emirates in the past decade.¹⁵¹

The officer corps, in contrast, is more heavily weighted toward personnel from Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Part of this has to do with education. The educational systems in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and al-Ayn (the tribal homeland of the an-Nahyan royal family) are the best in the country. Consequently, the overrepresentation of these areas in the officer corps can partially be justified by better educational preparation. However, family name and *asil* are often of greater importance than place of origin.

For a number of tribes and large middle-class families, service to the military is the "family business" and has been for generations. They seed their sons throughout the force structure, particularly the

officer corps. These brothers, cousins, and tribesmen then act as a network of support, protection, and promotion, encouraging others from the same tribes and families to follow in their footsteps.¹⁵²

One highly regarded Western expert on the UAE explained that the Emirati military uses a five-tier personnel system for promotion and assignments based on background: Tier 1, the least desirable, are Shi'a, especially those of Persian origin. Tiers 2–4 are from the seven Emirates, with Abu Dhabi and Dubai at the head of the pack. Tier 5, those on the fastest track, were those from the best families with the highest *asil*.

Moreover, this same expert stressed that *asil* and trust were generally more important than competence with advancement to the highest levels of the military services, particularly above brigadier general rank.¹⁵³ Thus, “Usually only [officers] with high *asil* can hold senior and sensitive posts, which means the pool of potential candidates from which these posts can draw is significantly reduced.”¹⁵⁴ In the words of Athol Yates, the great historian of the Emirati military, “Abu Dhabi rulers have a preference for filling sensitive posts with members of Abu Dhabi-linked *asil* tribes and other tribes historically loyal to the Abu Dhabi Rulers, many of which are *bedu*.”¹⁵⁵

Thus, the meritocratic track remains important for recruiting many officers and typically the UAE's *best* officers. It is also the segment of the Emirati officer corps dearest to MbZ and therefore most important to his chief lieutenants. In this area, limited though it may be, the Emirati system truly rewards achievement and competence. Many ministers and service chiefs, often chosen by MbZ from the right families, tend to be impressive and are tasked to seek and promote the best subordinates. Reflecting both sides of this phenomenon, a Western military officer with extensive experience in the UAE put it, “To make brigadier in the Emirati military, you have to be competent and capable; to make major general, you have to be competent, capable, and connected.”¹⁵⁶ Another Western military officer with extensive experience in the UAE, said of Lt. Gen. Saleh al-Amiri, the commander of the Emirati Land Forces, “He could be a division commander in our Army, no doubt.”¹⁵⁷

Thus, just because they were connected enough to get one of the top jobs in the armed forces does not mean that Emirati senior military leaders are incompetent. To the contrary, most Westerners describe the Emirati colonels and generals they work with as extremely intelligent, professional, and good at their jobs. Moreover, MbZ has ensured that the military is a respected and safe career, its pay is good, and there are real opportunities for advancement for sharp, hard-working individuals. All this increases the number of high-quality personnel interested in pursuing the military as a career. Employing significant numbers of foreigners (and foreign educational institutions, such as Royal Military Academy Sandhurst) to provide extensive evaluations of Emirati officers further ensures that at least some of the best personnel inducted each year are identified and advanced up the chain of command—and not merely swamped by those with the best connections.¹⁵⁸

Those identified as competent disproportionately man the small number of billets in the elite formations of the Emirati military (particularly the PG and air force). They are more likely to receive overseas combat assignments, and they tend to be those the leadership relies on to make these parts of the armed forces work and work notably well. Most of these officers speak English well, and many were educated in the West, in international schools, or in the best schools in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and al-Ayn.

Knights noted that in Yemen, he met people of all ranks who were educated, refined, and excellent English speakers. He felt that the small Emirati force in Yemen was something akin to an “army of lieutenants,” and he noted that even many of the privates showed signs of wealth and education.¹⁵⁹ A Western military expert with considerable experience in the UAE observed that Emirati majors, lieutenant colonels, colonels, and brigadiers were often intellectually curious and wanted to have wide-ranging conversations meant to test their critical thinking skills.¹⁶⁰ However, these best Emirati officers who made up most of the leadership of Emirati expeditionary forces “are not necessarily representative of Emirati society” to quote a Western diplomat with extensive experience with the UAE military.¹⁶¹

Training. It is difficult to fully gauge the quantity or quality of UAE training. The Emirates have only recently begun to employ a generated training “cycle” like the US military by which units regularly begin practicing basic skills and over time graduate to more complex activities until they are finally considered fully qualified for combat operations.

In the past, the Emirates followed the more typical (but less effective) approach of mandating that units receive certain amounts of designated types of training within a certain time frame. Thus, each year, air force pilots were required to have a certain number of hours in simulators, a certain number in actual flight, and a certain number of each dedicated to different kinds of missions (air to air, precision strike, air-to-air refueling, etc.). Similarly, ground force units had to have a certain amount of time or a certain number of visits to the gunnery range, squad-level tactics training, company-level tactics training, and battlefield medical training, among others.

However, this is now changing. Gen. Hindmarsh has created a PG institution cell with Western expatriates tasked to build a Western-style training and deployment cycle. Likewise, in 2014, the Emirati Land Forces hired several hundred expatriate military officers to create “Building the Land Forces Strategy,” which, among other things, is meant to create a similar force generation, training, and deployment cycle. This has also begun to standardize training across the infantry, armor, artillery, and engineering branches and their separate schools—and the creation of a Land Forces Institute and the training brigade to provide collective training and certify brigades for deployment. All this will entail heavy use of simulators and the creation of three combat training centers.¹⁶²

By all accounts, the type, quantities, organization, and administration of the UAE’s training regimens are first class. They were generally planned, organized, and designed by highly experienced Western expatriates for exactly that purpose. However, *performance* in training runs the same gamut as the military effectiveness of Emirati units and, unsurprisingly, is similarly dependent on the skills and

dedication of a unit’s senior commander. Thus, once again, the colonels and brigadiers who have proved so crucial in UAE combat operations are the key variables in the quantity and quality of the training their units receive.

The best commanders conduct what are reported to be excellent training programs: They employ American-style, unscripted, free-play exercises. They push their men. They try new combinations and regularly introduce new wrinkles into well-trod ground. The best units get angry when their Western instructors do it for them; they want to do it themselves. Although accounts are mixed, the US Marine training mission to the UAE PG generally reports high levels of esprit, enthusiasm, professionalism, dedication, and competence in their joint training activities.¹⁶³

The degree of foreign participation in training also appears to be important, even crucial. For instance, an American professional services firm employing US Army and Marine personnel set up an NTC-style opposing force brigade at the state-of-the-art Emirati training facility at al-Hamra. Al-Hamra was central to certifying the readiness of brigades and used as the site for the culminating mission readiness exercises. Several Emirati mechanized formations were run through the al-Hamra program before deploying to Yemen, and it greatly improved their abilities. In fact, these were the mechanized formations that conducted the drive up the Red Sea coast to Hudaydah, and their commendable performance was considered by many to be partly a product of the al-Hamra brigade certification training. However, there are reports that the use of the brigade certification process has been discontinued or changed from its original intent for reasons unclear.¹⁶⁴

As part of this, it is important to note how much the UAE seeks out and relies on training its personnel abroad. As many as 800 Emirati military personnel train and study in the US each year.¹⁶⁵ One Western military officer well-placed to know this information noted that the Emirati PG is “almost continuously sending folks to [the US Marines Air Ground Combat Center training facility at] Twentynine Palms.”¹⁶⁶ The Emiratis use it so much that they actually leave a

company of Leclerc tanks and BMP-3s there for their troops to use.¹⁶⁷

Abu Dhabi eagerly sends its people and units to train at Nellis Air Force Base (for Red Flag and Green Flag), NTC, Twentynine Palms, and other American facilities. They participate in training programs and joint exercises across the region and in Europe. While not every Emirati soldier, officer, or unit performs identically, those sent are mostly described as dedicated, humble, and eager to learn.

In particular, Emiratis indicated a desire to bring the training home and apply it in the UAE military. Many Western military personnel who had trained with them contrasted them favorably with other Arab personnel and formations that were portrayed as uninterested, just checking the box, or doing what they were told, and who viewed the training provided as alien to what (and how) they would be doing things when they got home.¹⁶⁸

Inevitably, but not universally, the PG and the PG-SOC units tend to demonstrate the best and the largest amount of this high-quality approach to training. This appears to be a function of the larger percentage of competent commanders and the deeper involvement of Western trainers. US military personnel who have trained with the PG regularly commented on how committed these forces were to training and improving. They had state-of-the-art training facilities, and they used them regularly.¹⁶⁹ One American military officer described being late for a joint training exercise with a PG unit only to show up and find that the Emiratis had not just sat around waiting for the Americans; they had gone ahead and started the exercise on their own. As this officer noted, he had never seen that before in the Arab world.¹⁷⁰

Of course, there is another side of the coin. There are also the bad commanders, many of whom are said to have been promoted to their positions for reasons of family, tribe, or other connections. The units they command typically have a different training experience, even some in the PG. Many seem able to avoid various training activities. Of greater importance still, their training tends to be poor. It is far more typical of other Arab armies in that it is overwhelmingly

just instruction (“show and tell”), without the trainees doing anything themselves, and often without the trainees even being able to examine the equipment they are supposedly being trained to employ. Exercises are often completely scripted because the “officers only want to please their boss and their boss said, ‘Have your men do this.’”¹⁷¹ As Jon Alterman and Margo Balboni wrote in their extensive study of the Emirati national service program, “Military instruction is ‘top-down,’ and teaching methods in the theoretical courses do not allow for discussion or debate.”¹⁷²

As noted earlier, large numbers of personnel will simply be absent—on leave, attending to “family emergencies,” pursuing higher priorities (such as jiu-jitsu), or just uninterested in giving the time and effort for training. To make matters worse, jiu-jitsu causes large numbers of injuries that further take personnel away from training. Because of all of this, too many Emirati units repeat the same simple training exercises constantly, never progressing beyond the most basic tasks because the personnel are different every time the unit is called on for that type of training. While the Emirates nominally uses a Western military “systems approach to training,” they have had considerable problems with it because it is so difficult to keep track of which personnel have actually completed training or qualified on various tasks. Finally, too much of the training in bad units is merely about hours spent at the training facility rather than actual mastery of skills.¹⁷³

An important problem with UAE training, especially for the worse units, is that Emirati personnel often will not assess the competence of their own units for fear of bringing shame on another Emirati. Consequently, the Emirati leadership from MbZ on down often rely on foreigners—instructors, advisers, training partners, and coalition allies—to do so. As another example of this, large numbers of UAE officers are sent to Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. There the Emirates requires—and receives—individual assessments of the strengths, weaknesses, and command potential for every Emirati cadet who attends. That is not something that Sandhurst normally does. But Abu Dhabi requires it because it allows the Emiratis to use the British military to provide an

Figure 7. Emirati Artillery Participating in a Joint Exercise in the UAE

Source: US Army.

accurate, objective assessment of their personnel, one they would not otherwise get, and that Abu Dhabi recognizes it needs to guide selection, promotion, and assignment decisions in the future.¹⁷⁴ While the latter is admirable, the former speaks to this significant, culturally driven, and persistent problem. It reflects the traditional approach to promotion that does not emphasize leadership, innovation, flexibility, and other militarily necessary traits.

Of course, all Emirati training—as it is intended from the highest levels and as it is conceived, planned, and organized by largely Western advisers—is *meant* to teach the right combat skills in the right way. Training in the UAE is meant to cultivate delegation of authority, individual initiative, innovation, flexibility, rapid reactions to combat events, combined arms operations, quick and accurate transmission of information, integrated fire and maneuver, and critical thinking.

The emphasis was on building a war-fighting culture, embedding a strategic culture (such as doctrine, mission sets, and capability-based planning), developing leadership and initiative across the ranks, and working in a joint context. Expatriates have played an important part in facilitating these changes. Initially they helped to develop incremental improvements in units and on localised [sic] issues; however, from 2010, they were facilitating systemic change across huge areas of the military.¹⁷⁵

Consequently, it is noteworthy that the training of so much of the force, comprising the less capable units, entails training that often fails to provide any of these things. This speaks to the fact that these problems are not deliberate by the leadership. They happen *despite* the orders and intent of the leadership, not because of it.

Becoming a Learning Military. One of the highest aspirations of the Emirati armed forces is to be a learning military. Too few militaries can make such a claim, fewer still in the Arab world. Yet, from MbZ on down, the UAE's chain of command encourages and tries to promote learning. More than any other Arab military, the UAE puts real resources into training and education—not merely money. In the words of a Western military expert on the Gulf militaries, “They know their human capital is the most important aspect of military effectiveness. That is fundamentally different from the rest of the Gulf, and to a great extent the rest of the Arab world.”¹⁷⁶

One of the highest aspirations of the Emirati armed forces is to be a learning military.

What's more, there is copious evidence of green shoots of learning across the force. Western officers with considerable experience with and in the UAE regularly comment on how willing senior Emirati officers are to admit they made mistakes in Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, and elsewhere. They are just as eager to discuss solutions to those problems, which often gravitate toward material fixes, but they are also open to considering solutions in the human element. This willingness to recognize gaps and flaws and then seek solutions from outsiders is highly commendable and rare in this part of the world.¹⁷⁷ A Western military expert with extensive experience with the UAE (and other Arab) armed forces noted,

Only the UAE asks these sorts of questions [among the Arab armies]. They are the only ones who want to know the real answers. And you can be very honest with them about the gaps [in their capabilities]. They are the only military I have worked with that has a genuine desire to increase effectiveness.¹⁷⁸

For instance, one lesson the Emiratis took from the Yemen experience was their lack of expertise in stabilization operations. In response, they have asked the US government for assistance in developing the personnel, procedures, and organizational structure needed to handle these missions in the future.¹⁷⁹

The Emiratis lean heavily on their foreign instructors and advisers to glean lessons from the combat experiences of their own militaries and work them into training and educational programs to improve the UAE force accordingly. That can be seen as a strength or a weakness. It is certainly a recognition that Emirati personnel cannot yet handle this process themselves, but it also reflects the leadership's determination to learn and improve the force overall however it has to, even if it means relying on foreign assistance.¹⁸⁰

Moreover, as one Western military officer who worked with Emirati forces in peacetime and fought alongside them in combat points out, another thing that differentiates the Emiratis from other Arab armed forces is that “they want to own it, incorporate it, and eventually do it themselves. They are not [like other Gulf states] who want you to just keep doing it for them.”¹⁸¹

They have also seeded combat veterans of Yemen throughout the armed forces, as best they can. Officers and NCOs from the PG in particular are being moved to key positions in the Land Forces, the JAC, and even the air force and navy to bring their experience and try to impart some of it to those who have not been in combat.¹⁸²

Moreover, the desirability of learning is evident among many Emirati military personnel, particularly those most likely to interact with Westerners. Numerous Western military officers and experts note that the UAE soldiers and officers they work with in training exercises, combat operations, planning sessions, staff functions, and coalition undertakings routinely demonstrate a strong interest in doing better. More than that, many of the officers and experts I interviewed for this report commented on the willingness of Emirati personnel to try doing things to achieve success and improve their own abilities—and that they did so *despite the risk of failing*. A great

many of them commented on how unusual it was for Arab military officers to act in this manner.¹⁸³ In the words of one Western military officer with extensive experience with the UAE military, “They are not afraid to look bad if they are taking a chance to try to get better.”¹⁸⁴

Inevitably given the limitations in wider Emirati society and the newness of this emphasis, the results are uneven and partial, and there is still much to be done. Many Western military officers and experts with extensive experience in the UAE all noted that Emirati personnel trained in the West are not necessarily eager to apply British, French, or American practices back in the UAE. Too many focus on acquiring the credential (which is vital for promotion), rather than acquiring the skills.¹⁸⁵ A highly respected Western expert on the UAE military used the analogy of a vaccination: Instead of seeing education as a lifelong process, too many officers and soldiers think of it as just something that inoculates you and allows you to move up.¹⁸⁶ There are many stories of Emirati officers attending various US war colleges and getting nothing from them, or at least applying nothing from them when they got home. There was too much of the “UAE approach of ‘let’s not embarrass anyone.’”¹⁸⁷

Many of these same sources observed that the UAE does not yet have a formal system for capturing and institutionalizing its invaluable combat experience. As noted earlier, to the extent that that happens at all, it happens because Western advisers and instructors do it for the Emiratis in a largely ad hoc fashion. The Western advisers formulate a set of procedures that are then taught and implemented by the Emiratis themselves. However, this leaves the Emiratis either forever dependent on foreigners or else liable to lose this key mechanism for institutional learning if they ever lost the Westerners.¹⁸⁸

Indeed, several Western instructors at various UAE military schools bemoaned that Emirati combat veterans almost never discussed their combat experiences nor were incidents involving Emirati forces in combat ever employed as case studies in any of their curricula. As a result, the other students in these programs never benefited from the experiences

and insights of those who had been in combat. Moreover, veteran NCOs and officers who fought in Yemen are not regularly assigned to training slots so they can pass on their knowledge to the rest of the force.¹⁸⁹

Professional Military Education. One manifestation of the far-reaching Emirati desire to learn and improve is the institutional architecture for professional military education (PME) that the Emiratis are building. It is in these organizations and within these frameworks that the UAE is seeking to improve both the skills of its personnel and the overall effectiveness of its armed forces.¹⁹⁰ Once again, and as part of the uneven progress in building a learning military so far, there is good and bad in Emirati PME, although the emphasis on it and the desire to improve are unmistakable.

As noted above, a large proportion, possibly a majority, of Emirati officers attend Sandhurst. Many others are sent to West Point, Duntroon, and Saint-Cyr Military Academy (in order of percentages). Later in their careers, they can attend the UAE’s Joint Command and Staff College and earn master’s degrees from its National Defense College (NDC), the Security Studies program of Khalifa University, or the Abu Dhabi Campus of American University. Others are sent to various American and British general staff and war colleges.

Most recently, the UAE opened the Rabdan academy to teach whole of government integration to military, security, emergency, and civilian ministry personnel. Rabdan, too, is entirely run by expatriates and was put under Gen. Hindmarsh and the PG to try to ensure its commitment to quality. Altogether this makes for what could be—and perhaps someday will be—a remarkable set of opportunities for PME.

The shining example of what the UAE hopes its PME system will someday become is NDC, an outstanding military educational institution and the gem of the UAE’s PME program. NDC is staffed entirely with expatriate professors, employs a Western curriculum, and uses a Socratic teaching method. The NDC strives—and by all accounts, succeeds—in teaching small numbers of the best Emirati personnel from across the UAE’s national security community,

including the uniformed armed services. About six members of each class are typically military officers.

NDC stresses strategic, critical, and interdisciplinary thinking. It pushes its students to devise creative and collaborative solutions to problems and “consider alternative ideas to their own, both in the classroom and through research projects.”¹⁹¹ There are endless accounts of the quality, success, and impact of the NDC program, small as it is.

Not surprisingly, the six or so officers chosen for the NDC each year tend to be first-rate. As Zoltan Barany has cogently described it,

The NDC does a thorough job selecting capable students many of whom secure choice assignments following graduation. Considered some of the best and brightest of their cohort, they still demonstrate major shortcomings in critical thinking, chiefly because their earlier education discouraged it.¹⁹²

Western instructors at the NDC felt that most of the military officers enrolled there possessed the intellectual abilities to do the work, while about 20–30 percent were seen as extremely capable.¹⁹³ Moreover, in studying its graduates, former NDC Professor Nathan Toronto found that its students improve their capacity of critical thinking because of the experience.

Evidence also suggests that participants’ thinking changes while they are at NDC. Faculty regularly comment on how participants’ analytical capabilities improve during their year at the College, especially on the capstone paper, a year-long policy analysis project that is required to receive the Master’s Degree. . . . As the year progresses, the participants’ ability to engage in critical analysis improves, as suggested by the across-the-board increase in grades over time.¹⁹⁴

Yet even the NDC’s contributions are uncertain because it is unclear how much the graduates take the new ways of thinking back to their “day jobs” and try to apply them to practical military work.¹⁹⁵

Moreover, most observers with real insight into the Emirati military see the NDC as the exception

rather than the rule so far. They generally rate the UAE’s overall PME structure as “OK,” “mediocre,” or “average for the Arab world.” Only NDC stands out as something qualitatively different.¹⁹⁶ For instance, the UAE’s Joint Command and Staff College is widely regarded as useless. All instruction is by Emiratis in Arabic, employing rote memorization, examining badly stovepiped subject areas, teaching only to the tests, and focusing on demonstration or description rather than student participation.

Many of the best Emirati officers, particularly if they have been educated in the West, try to avoid going to the Staff College if they can, even though it would help them with promotions. It churns out cookie-cutter officers with little more ability than they possessed when they entered.¹⁹⁷ As one Western military expert with considerable experience in the UAE described it, the Staff College is “very easy, but does not stretch your mind.”¹⁹⁸ Abu Dhabi is considering a complete overhaul of the Staff College’s curriculum, although how and whether that will happen is still up in the air as of this writing.

Officer Promotions. For most Emirati officers, promotion is based primarily on time in grade. Most will move up the ranks for some period through sheer inertia. Then, every six months, there is a mass culling of officers that is difficult for outsiders to understand. Large numbers of the timeservers will be forced out but so, too, will some highly competent officers.

The UAE has recently instituted a US-style command select board, at least for the Land Forces but presumably for the PG and other services as well. However, the system of requirements and assessments is said to be nascent and ambiguous—in part because of the problems with Emiratis evaluating their own—so decisions often come down to “he’s connected, better not fire him” or “he’s smart and knows what he is doing” so promote him. Inevitably, the ones who seem best able to survive these biennial purges are those with the right family names and those officers marked by MbZ or one of his top lieutenants as too good to be lost. Most observers of the Emirati military argue that the former remain more common than the latter.¹⁹⁹

As Barany described it in an excellent study of the issue,

Officers' fates in the UAE are decided every six months when they receive their new assignments (new assignment lists come out in June and December). Nobody knows in advance what one's new position is going to be, but generally the process of selection is utilized to reinforce loyalty and personal bonds. For this reason, cultivating, developing, and nurturing personal relationships is a critical component of a successful career. This should not be taken as a calculating, pragmatic, let alone manipulative nexus of the officer to his mentors—there is often a genuine closeness between the officer and his patron; they often share a tribal and religious background. A chummy relationship with one's boss may result in good assignments but can also reinforce the general tendency to cautiousness and restraint: "I'm only going to do what my superior wants" since the boss is unlikely to go out on the limb for his underling because he is also worried about not being reprimanded by his superior.²⁰⁰

As noted earlier, for the survivors of these culls, further promotion continues to operate in those two nearly distinct manners. The well-connected continue to rise based on their *asil* and connections to Emirati leadership. The competent do so if they can continue to demonstrate the skills and potential that first marked them out and so maintain the favor of MbZ's lieutenants, those specifically tasked with ensuring that the best survive. For the latter, combat experience in Afghanistan and Yemen has been important.

Nevertheless, as a highly regarded Western expert on the UAE military put it, "Don't confuse competence and the ability to get promoted."²⁰¹ Plenty of officers are brilliant but socially disadvantaged, and they find it extremely difficult to advance, especially beyond brigadier.²⁰² Yet, it is that relatively small number of capable officers who made it to the colonel and brigadier level that have become the backbone, the driving force, and the secret to the greater combat performance of Emirati elite forces in Yemen, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Understanding Emirati Military Effectiveness

The wide range of UAE force-generation experiences reflects the similar gamut of effectiveness among Emirati military formations. They are the key to understanding why the UAE's military has generally performed better than those of other Arab states and why there remains such a spectrum of capabilities in the Emirati armed forces. They also suggest what needs to happen for the UAE to achieve both a higher and more uniform degree of military competence, as well as the potential dangers that could crop up to derail the entire effort. Ultimately, this requires understanding the factors that have bedeviled other Arab armed forces, including earlier versions of the Emirati military, what the modern UAE has done to mitigate those factors, and what it hopes to do to erase them altogether.

The Traditional Problems Plaguing Modern Arab Military Effectiveness. The sources of Arab military ineffectiveness run deep. They are rooted in wider Arab society and how that society has fostered patterns of behavior that have not meshed well with the demands of modern combat.²⁰³

Politicization. The best known of these societal problems is the malignant politics of the Arab world. Too often, Arab armies have played too big a role in politics, and when they have not, Arab politicians have typically played too big a role in military affairs. Indeed, since World War II, the Arab states have often oscillated between military dictatorships and paranoid civilian autocracies that fettered their armed forces to defend themselves from a military takeover—real or imagined. *A key aspect of the impact of politicization on military effectiveness is that politicization is overwhelmingly a top-down phenomenon that has diminishing impact at lower levels of a chain of command and dramatically less influence below about the general officer level.* When politicization has been at its worst, it has hobbled Arab war-making, principally by saddling Arab armed forces with incompetent senior leaders laboring under bizarre command and control

arrangements. At times, it has also hurt the morale and cohesion of their forces.²⁰⁴

Underdevelopment. The underdeveloped state of most Arab economies has also played a role. Industrialization was late coming to the Muslim Middle East, and it never reached anything like what it would achieve in the West or East Asia. This meant that relatively few Arab personnel had the kind of basic understanding of machinery necessary to enable them to properly maintain or take full advantage of the capabilities of the equipment that was key to industrial-age war. In conflict after conflict, Arab armies, navies, and air forces just could not get their weaponry to perform to its full potential. Moreover, they often brought only a fraction of it to the battlefield because they so often failed to give it the care required.²⁰⁵

Cultural Patterns. Ultimately, however, the greatest problems that Arab armed forces suffered during the modern era (and continue to suffer to the present day) have been driven by patterns of behavior derived from the dominant Arab culture.²⁰⁶ Just as the Spartan, Macedonian, Roman, Mongol, British, German, and Israeli cultures produced large numbers of men with the requisite skills best suited to war-making in their times, so Arab culture did the opposite in the modern era, producing too few men with the skills needed to succeed in industrial-age warfare. That is not a condemnation of Arab society or its culture, which emerged from the specific geographic and historical situation of the Arab world at the time and worked for those circumstances.

Nevertheless, the behavioral patterns the dominant Arab culture accentuated were simply not those best suited for success on the modern battlefield. In particular, the dominant Arab culture emphasizes traits of centralization of authority, passivity, conformity, deference to authority, shame avoidance, manipulation of information, disdain for technical work, and atomization of knowledge, all of which run completely contrary to the behavioral patterns required for success in modern warfare.²⁰⁷ Like all cultures, these behavioral patterns were inculcated by traditional Arab educational methods from

child-rearing through military training that employed rote memorization, passive learning, test taking rather than comprehension, the ingestion of knowledge rather than its creation, and the separation of subjects. All of this came (deliberately) at the expense of initiative, creativity, critical thinking, individualism, interdisciplinary connectivity, entrepreneurship, and scientific and technical subjects.²⁰⁸

As a result of these patterns of culturally driven behavior, modern Arab armed forces consistently underperformed, and they underperformed in the same ways time and again, regardless of who they fought or where, the state of their politics, or the relative state of economic development between them and their foe. Arab militaries were consistently crippled by passive and unimaginative tactical leadership that made maneuver warfare virtually impossible, an inability to conduct effective air operations, and badly distorted flows of information across their chains of command, especially at tactical levels. Arab cultural preferences also hindered combined arms operations, weapons handling, and maintenance.

All of this reflects the emphases of the dominant culture—an impact that economists and social scientists have increasingly recognized as also having hindered industrial development and economic productivity during this era.

Arab Cultural Patterns and Emirati Military Effectiveness. As the previous sections made clear, the UAE is wrestling with all the same culturally derived limitations on military performance as the other Arab states are. At present, Emirati culture is still largely that of the wider Arab culture (with some subcultural differences). Naturally, it evinces the same patterns of passivity and conformity, overcentralization, deference to authority, shame avoidance, atomization of knowledge, information manipulation, and disdain for technical work as the wider, dominant Arab culture does. This has created the same military challenges for the UAE that other Arab armed forces have faced throughout their modern history—challenges repeatedly demonstrated by Emirati forces in combat and training. It is the primary set of challenges that the UAE political leadership is seeking

to overcome both for its military specifically, and for its society more generally.

Thus, even the tiny, picked forces the UAE deployed to Yemen and Afghanistan have suffered from similar problems as the other Arab armies have, *just not to the same extent*. The Emirati armed forces have their own frequent issues with junior officers and NCOs failing to take initiative, act flexibly, devise creative solutions to problems, integrate combined arms, take advantage of fleeting opportunities, and generally act without direct guidance from senior leadership. They have also experienced the same problems with information management and a ubiquitous unwillingness to perform maintenance.

The wider force, which has mostly been kept away from combat operations because it lacks the capabilities of the elite, suffer from these problems to a considerably greater degree. It is these second- and third-tier formations that experience too much of the instruction by rote memorization, presentational training, scripted exercises, seeking credentials over skills, and stovepiping that are driven by Arab cultural proclivities and routinely experienced by the other Arab militaries.²⁰⁹

Because the Emirati forces sent to Kosovo, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Libya *were* tiny teams of the best soldiers and officers, they had fewer problems in these areas than other Arab militaries did, so they did correspondingly better at integrating fire and maneuver, providing on-call fire support, and acting as combined arms teams, up to a point. Of course, some formations were more limited in their ability to demonstrate these capabilities than others were.

Moreover, these problems were most acute whenever Emirati units (even small formations) were not directly led by colonels or brigadiers with the skills and societal standing to exercise proper leadership and overcome the culturally driven limitations of their junior officers and NCOs. All this, of course, reflects the bottom-up impact of culture on military effectiveness more broadly and of Arab culture on Arab militaries especially.

The UAE air force has similarly struggled with these culturally driven problems. In the air force's case, however, careful pilot selection coupled with the ability of

modern PGMs to do so much of the work that had once been required of pilots has helped greatly. It is clearly an important element of their successes.

The UAE air force has similarly struggled with these culturally driven problems.

Yet despite all these measures, it is striking how frequently foreigners with firsthand experience of Emirati air force personnel claimed they lacked initiative, imagination, flexibility, and a motivation to excel. Likewise, part of the constant maintenance problems that plague Emirati forces—the same problems that dog every other Arab military—also derive from cultural patterns of behavior, but these have been masked by the political leadership's willingness (and ability) to pay vast amounts to have foreigners handle so much of the maintenance and repair responsibilities.

Time and again the difference between the most capable Emirati units and those that perform little better—and with the same problems—as other Arab militaries are colonels and brigadiers handpicked by MbZ and his chief lieutenants because of their exceptional abilities. In other words, these men (and occasionally women) had to regularly overcome the culturally driven limitations in tactical leadership by taking on the tasks that a Western army would delegate to its junior officers and NCOs. It worked in the conditions of their operations in Yemen and Afghanistan, but it is far from the ideal of how modern military forces should operate.

Ultimately, this speaks to the limits of the current UAE approach to fostering greater military effectiveness by overcoming these culturally derived problems in the short term. Abu Dhabi has found enough such men, promoted them through the ranks, and placed them in the right positions—mostly, but

not exclusively, as colonels and brigadiers—to get significantly better combat performance from a tiny force of elite, picked troops. But so far, that is about it.

The force employed in Yemen was never larger than about 4,000 troops, with less than half of them combat troops. In Afghanistan, the UAE complement was less than 10 percent of that. The best combat pilots seem to have numbered in the scores. Even if we generously assume that there were twice as many such capable personnel in the military (since not every capable soldier or officer was in combat at any one time, although this is still being generous since not every soldier or officer in those expeditionary forces showed the same levels of competence), we are still talking about a “competent tip of the Emirati spear” of about 5,000–6,000 troops. In other words, this is about two or maybe three brigades worth, out of a force of 64,000 from a population of almost one million Emirati citizens. That represents a slightly smaller proportion of the force than the Iraqi Republican Guard represented in 1986–91, although I would argue that the Emirati elite are considerably more capable on a man-for-man basis than the Guard was.²¹⁰

A harsher comparison is with Israel. In 1967, Israel’s Jewish population was a bit more than twice the size of the UAE’s current citizen population. Yet the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) mustered approximately 24 brigades, generally more effective than even the best UAE formations. In short, adjusting for population size, Israel could generate five to six times as many (higher) quality formations. While this comparison may seem somewhat unfair since the IDF has been one of the most capable armies in recent history, it is useful to illustrate how hard the UAE has worked to generate a significantly smaller force of reasonably competent troops.

The Emirati Socioeconomic Dimension. The Emirates must also contend with military problems derived from economic factors, some identical to those of other Arab states and others unique to the Gulf countries. Like the other Arab states, the UAE never really experienced anything like

industrialization, and its population never benefited from the same exposure to the machine age. The persistent difficulties with maintenance in the Emirati armed forces, common to all Arab militaries, is partly a manifestation of this gap, although cultural injunctions undoubtedly also played a role.

However, like most other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, the Emirati military also has another problem: the oil curse. As a rentier economy, several generations of Emiratis have grown up with little incentive for self-sacrifice, public mindedness, a strong work ethic, or even physical fitness. These problems have further limited the pool of both fit and high-military skill personnel available to the armed forces. This is also why these issues are—along with the culturally derived issues—primary targets of the UAE’s national service experience and the educational programs meant to support it.

Yet, the UAE also has some important *advantages* derived from its socioeconomic status. At the most obvious level, Abu Dhabi can afford to buy the best equipment and the best foreign military assistance available. As I noted with reference to the Emirati air force, the former is increasingly important as the information age supersedes the industrial age because the new generation of technology can do so much that once had to be done by skilled personnel.

Moreover, the tremendous wealth of the UAE has meant that large numbers of Emiratis could be sent abroad for Western schooling, enabling them to develop more critical thinking, initiative, creativity, proper information management, and other invaluable military skills that the dominant Arab culture has tended to select against. While relatively few of these Western-educated Emiratis go into the military, some certainly do—and often are among the highest performers. Moreover, the UAE does send large numbers of its officers for education in the West, including to Sandhurst, West Point, Duntroon, and St. Cyr, where these qualities are encouraged, and the Emiratis get further Western assistance in identifying their best people.

Finally, Emirati wealth has meant that the information age is coming faster to the UAE than it is even to other Arab states. Large numbers of Emirati citizens

are comfortable with information-age technology, which *increases* the pool of personnel available to the military who can comfortably and effectively operate the weapons of 21st-century warfare in ways their fathers and grandfathers simply could not master 20th-century war machines.

Benevolent Politicization. Thus, the Emirates are certainly not immune to the cultural problems that have afflicted Arab militaries. And the UAE actually suffers *less* from the problems related to underdevelopment that have hobbled Arab militaries. However, the UAE armed forces' saving grace—and what has benefited them most so far and potentially in the future—is the Emirati version of “politicization.”

The UAE's political leadership, especially MbZ himself, has taken an extremely active role in the Emirati military—a role that would have caused other professional officer corps to scream about excessive political interference in military affairs. The difference is that MbZ's constant attention to the military has been extremely beneficial, designed to help the military overcome these societal limitations and increase its effectiveness in every way. So far, the “benevolent politicization” of the UAE's leadership has allowed it to shelter a small part of the force from the worst effects of culturally derived limitations on military effectiveness. Over time, the leadership's efforts may wholly transform Emirati culture—that is its explicit, ultimate goal—which would eliminate the culturally derived limitations altogether.

Thus, MbZ and his closest aides regularly reach down into the officer corps to identify the most competent personnel—those with the right military skills, the same skills discouraged by traditional Arab cultural patterns—and ensure they are given the right education, training, assignments, combat experience, and authority to become the high-quality colonels and brigadiers who have proved so crucial to Emirati military effectiveness over the past decade or two. Again, in any other military, having a supreme political leader reach down and interfere in the careers of its officers is condemned as pernicious. It is typically viewed as the political leadership inserting itself into areas that should be left solely to the practices of the

military system itself. The difference is that in the UAE politicization is benevolent.

Solutions and Workarounds. Understanding how the UAE's benevolent politicization has produced the greater military effectiveness of the current Emirati military requires understanding how modern Arab armed forces have typically tried to overcome the limitations derived from their societies, particularly those derived from Arab culture, which are the most crippling and the most difficult to diminish. Ultimately, a handful of Arab militaries have employed four different approaches that have allowed them to mitigate, but not eliminate, these societal limitations on their military effectiveness.²¹¹

Rely on a Small, Elite Force of Picked Troops and Officers. This approach allowed Arab militaries to pick those personnel with the most militarily desirable skills—often the same skills denigrated by the dominant Arab culture—and concentrate them in a smaller force in which these more capable individuals comprised a much higher percentage than in the overall military. Because there tended to be fewer of these men, the smaller the force (especially as a percentage of the entire military and the wider society), the greater the proportion of the best soldiers and officers and, therefore, the more competent the force typically proved to be.

These units often did even better if they were provided with special forces-type training, which emphasizes independent operations by small units and reinforces the preexisting tendencies toward initiative, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving that these exceptional personnel already possessed to a greater extent. The Iraqi Republican Guard in 1987–91, Syria's commandos in 1973–82, and Jordanian special forces are all examples of how this effort can produce smaller forces of somewhat greater capability—and the smaller the force, the higher the quality.²¹²

Structure Military Operations to Play to Strengths and Away from Weaknesses. For most modern Arab militaries, this has meant relying on limited, set-piece

Figure 8. An Emirati Honor Guard

Source: US Department of Defense, photo by D. Myles Cullen.

offensive operations and static defensive operations. However, it also involved ensuring massive preponderance in firepower, manpower, technology, and even special weapons to compensate for the crippling shortfalls in maneuver, combined arms integration, accurate information flows, and flexible tactical leadership that plagued Arab formations. The Egyptians in 1973 and the Iraqis in 1988–90 employed this method to win a handful of important but limited and short-lived victories.²¹³

Create Separate Military Subcultures. Militaries are themselves powerful agents of socialization that can rewire the values and behaviors of individuals. Nevertheless, given how hard it is to do this, it is highly advantageous to begin the process of socialization into a different subculture as early as possible for future soldiers and officers. Ideally, this should start between age 7 and 13, when culture imprints many

key values and patterns of behavior on individuals.²¹⁴ Thus, having secondary and even primary schools that begin the socialization process is extremely helpful.

After that, the military must further teach and reward the same values and behavioral patterns while discouraging and punishing the opposite behavior at every step. Thus, subcultural socialization must be built into selection, training, PME, promotions, command assignments, and other rewards. Arab armed forces, such as Jordan's Arab Legion in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, did this to a significant degree, substituting its own (British-inspired) culture for that of the wider Arab culture and thereby generating the more effective Jordanian performance in Israel's War of Independence in 1948.²¹⁵

Rely on Foreigners. A final method that Arab armed forces have employed to limit or avoid the impact of these cultural factors on their military effectiveness

has been relying on expatriates, either as consultants, seconded personnel, or official members of their militaries. Foreigners, obviously, are not Arabs at all. They do not have Arab culture's built-in behavioral preferences. Instead, they have their own culture's behavioral preferences—some of which may also be problematic, but they will still not be the predilections of Arab culture that have proved to be arguably the most at variance with the demands of industrial-age warfare. Likewise, foreigners can also be hired from societies with much greater familiarity with machinery, eliminating the problems of maintenance created by underdevelopment.²¹⁶

One core benefit of the UAE's benevolent politicization has been that, over the past two decades, MbZ and his top lieutenants have employed every one of these workarounds to improve Emirati military effectiveness. Indeed, at present they represent the primary methods the UAE is using to improve the effectiveness of its armed forces.

Emirati Reliance on Small, Elite, and Picked Formations. As noted throughout this report, the UAE's leadership has worked assiduously to identify and foster their best personnel and then concentrate many of them in small elite formations, or all-star teams. Many of these then receive special forces training to enhance their innate proclivities—the skills that made them the most competent soldiers and officers to begin with. In particular, the PG can pluck high-quality officers from other services, notably the Land Forces, to ensure that they have the best.²¹⁷ Because there were relatively few of these personnel available, the formations themselves had to remain small to ensure a sufficient concentration of those skills. But those formations are now the most effective in the Arab world. They are the ones who did the lion's share of the fighting and winning in Afghanistan and Yemen. Now, the UAE leadership is trying to expand the size of this elite without diluting its quality.

Picking the best officers and soldiers—those with the most militarily desirable behavior traits—and then concentrating them in elite units also

undermines the rest of the force's capabilities. Because you are pulling the best personnel from your line formations, what remains in them tends to be worse, both on average and taken as a whole.²¹⁸ In effect, it creates a polarization of capabilities, with a small number of better formations at one end and a large spread of considerably less capable formations at the other. This, of course, is exactly what has happened in the UAE. Thus, one reason for the wide spectrum of capabilities of Emirati forces (and the large number of less capable formations) is that the UAE has chosen to employ this practice.

Emirati Efforts to Structure Military Operations to Emphasize Their Strengths. Similarly, the UAE's leadership has ensured that Emirati forces have every advantage in combat from numbers, firepower, technology, air power, intelligence, and the support of the US military. Of course, the small, elite Emirati forces employed in combat have proved capable enough of maneuver, combined arms integration, counterattack, and air-to-ground operations that they have not had to limit their operations to rigidly scripted set-piece attacks or static defenses like the Egyptians in 1973 and the Iraqis in 1988–91. In that sense, too, they represent one of the most effective Arab military forces ever fielded in the modern era.

Emirati Efforts to Build a Separate Military Subculture. Without question, MbZ's military reforms are designed first to build a separate Emirati military culture. As the UAE's ambassador to Washington, Yousef al-Otaiba, put it to me,

Building our military is not just about buying fancy equipment. It is about building a culture, building a national identity, building a bond between the leadership and the people, and building the kind of society where a soldier would be proud to die for his country.²¹⁹

MbZ and his senior lieutenants speak constantly and routinely about their goal of building a culture of critical thinking, problem-solving, innovation, cooperation, honesty, and discipline in the UAE's

armed forces. Moreover, they are doing everything they should to realize that goal: building premilitary schools and educational programs to begin socializing Emirati boys in their teens and tweens to the values and expected behavioral patterns of the Emirati military; trying to provide Western-style—*not* Arab-style—training and exercises; promoting Western-style PME experiences; and trying as best they can to promote and reward those soldiers and officers who behave in precisely this fashion.

Emirati Reliance on Foreigners. Likewise, this report has documented foreigners' continuing role throughout the Emirati military, particularly in roles that enable them to compensate for the culturally derived problems that have been most crippling to Arab militaries and that persist in the Emirati military. To attach some numbers to this effort, about 100 serving American military officers and NCOs are embedded with Emirati forces as a training and advisory team, and probably another 1,000 retired US officers and NCOs serve in the Emirati military in one capacity or another—primarily in maintenance and sustainment.²²⁰ Likewise, a number of former members of the Australian SAS and commandos now work in the UAE, and a large portion of these are attached to the PG.²²¹

Then there are also considerable numbers of British and a handful of French military trainers and advisers. Until recently, expatriates were the commanders in chief of two of the most important Emirati armed services, and Mike Hindmarsh still commands the PG.²²² Expatriates are still at times the strategic-level planners, organizers, and administrators of everything from logistical operations to training regimens. They are the principal trainers, teachers, instructors, and professors. They make up the lion's share of the maintenance and repair personnel. And perhaps of greatest importance, they are the talent scouts who assess Emirati military personnel, identify the best, and ensure that they are properly trained and prepared for command and combat.

That said, all this is a clear sign of the UAE's serious commitment to improving its capabilities and its willingness to do whatever it takes. Nevertheless,

while the remaining expats are important, they are not present in anything like the large numbers they once were. Moreover, those that remain are now key enablers; they are no longer the combat forces themselves. That is a big change, both from the UAE's own past and from some of its neighbors.

The Intersection of Benevolent Politicization and Arab Culture. In these various ways, "benevolent politicization" in the UAE has allowed its leadership to employ a composite of all the workarounds that other Arab armed forces have employed to mitigate the debilitating impact of the culturally derived factors that have crippled Arab military effectiveness throughout the modern era. This has produced the significant, but ultimately limited, increase in Emirati military capabilities seen so far: a sharp, strong-but-narrow spearpoint and a far less capable bulk of the force that is still probably somewhat more capable than many of its regional counterparts.

This, too, is part of a pattern that has persisted across the Arab world over time. No matter how hard leadership tries via depoliticization or, in this case, benevolent politicization, the deeper problems created by Arab cultural patterns endure and prove the ultimate limiting factor. They create a hard ceiling beyond which Arab military forces have not been able to rise in the modern era, *at least so far*.²²³

In the UAE, this problem is illustrated by the burden shouldered by the best senior officers, particularly the high-quality colonels and generals—an issue that comes up time and again in conversations about the Emirati military. Benevolent politicization, as exercised by MbZ and his chief lieutenants, allows the UAE to identify a small number of personnel with the right military skills, those who the dominant Arab culture denigrate but are ideal for modern warfare. A great deal of this process is done by foreigners because of the cultural proclivities against objective assessments that would be shaming.

While there are not huge numbers of these capable officers, they do exist at all ranks. I noted above that Knights felt that *most* of the personnel he met in Yemen fell into this category, while nearly all Westerners I interviewed who had experience in the UAE

insisted that such personnel still represented only a small minority of the total force. As one senior Western military officer with considerable experience in the UAE put it, “Their biggest problem is that they do not have a deep bench.”²²⁴

Despite a considerable number (as a percentage) of capable junior officers throughout the small, elite forces employed in Yemen and Afghanistan, far too often, colonels and brigadiers had to take direct control of quite small formations and provide battlefield leadership to enable them to perform as effectively as they did. The issue was less that there was no one beneath the rank of colonel who had the capacity to think critically and creatively, take initiative, respond quickly and flexibly, or formulate innovative solutions to battlefield problems. It was more that the junior officers generally would not do so because of the cultural injunctions against subordinates exercising such leadership in Arab hierarchies. Orders had to come from on high because, in Arab organizations, all direction must come from the top—even if, as in this case, the top *wants* its subordinates to exercise their judgment, make decisions, and act as they see fit. Indeed, from MbZ on down, the senior Emirati leadership routinely tries to delegate authority only to find that its junior officers, even its best junior officers, cannot or will not accept it until they too become colonels and brigadiers and are therefore senior enough to lead.

Thus, as in other Arab militaries, the O-6 or O-7 levels are where the top-down impact of politicization and the bottom-up impact of culture meet. Over time and across the globe, politicization—particularly coup-proofing/commissarism—has its greatest impact at the general officer level, with sharply diminishing impact below that. Arab cultural patterns, in contrast, display the opposite patterns, proving most debilitating at lower levels of command, essentially NCOs and junior officers, with dramatically less impact on the general officers who tend to be far more empowered within Arab hierarchies. Thus, the level of colonel or brigadier general is the nexus, the intersection point of the two phenomena. It is about as low as politicization can go.

In this case, that means about as low as MbZ can exercise benevolent politicization to improve the command and control of his army. But it is also about as high as Arab cultural issues related to military effectiveness go, meaning that colonels and brigadier generals (particularly in a military as small as the UAE’s) will be significantly less affected by these cultural limitations than those under their command would be.

It should not be at all surprising then how frequently in the dozens of interviews I conducted for this report, Western military officers and experts on the Emirati military focused on the crucial, outsized role of highly competent colonels and brigadiers in overcoming the culturally driven problems of junior officers and the political problems of more senior officers. In the Emirates, benevolent politicization enables a number of capable personnel to rise to this level (but for the most part, not higher because of the preponderance of major generals who rose through their connections).

The colonels and brigadiers are also high enough in the Emirati hierarchy—and many of them have the explicit backing of MbZ or his principal lieutenants—that they willingly exercise command in ways that their subordinates generally will not, even their highly competent subordinates. As Yates has described it, when MbZ appoints a trusted subordinate to a position, these have “referred” *wasta* that gives them power and influence to overcome other hurdles.²²⁵

The even smaller number of highly competent major generals and lieutenant generals also bear similarly onerous burdens. According to Western military officers with extensive experience in the UAE, these men work incredibly hard. For instance, in the US military, service chiefs are responsible for building forces, and combatant commanders are responsible for directing them in battle. Emirati service chiefs have to do both. The hours these senior generals put in to discharge all their responsibilities risks burning them out. But they are absolutely crucial elements of the Emirati system. It is because of their labors, and those of the cadre of high-quality brigadiers and colonels, that the UAE’s military works as well as it does.²²⁶

Overall, at essentially every level of the Emirati chain of command, more senior officers tend to have

to perform the tasks that would typically be handled by lower levels in Western armed forces. This is one reason the United States constantly pushes the UAE armed forces to improve their NCO corps. Doing so would relieve junior officers of the burden of having to perform what should be the tasks of the NCOs.²²⁷

Thus, this phenomenon illustrates both the accomplishments of benevolent politicization and its limits. It enables the UAE to field a small, quite capable elite force, but not much more so far. And even that small force was overly reliant on a small number of highly competent colonels, brigadiers, and more senior generals to bear responsibilities and act in ways that are not sustainable over the long term and far from the ideal of how a modern military should function.

Benevolent Politicization Illustrated. It is useful to highlight the differences between typical, malign politicization and the benevolent politicization of the UAE with an example from elsewhere. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) during the Vietnam War was a hideously politicized organization in terms of praetorianism and commissarism/coup-proofing. Following the historical pattern of politicized militaries, the vast majority of ARVN generals were awful—incompetent loyalists who climbed the ranks by politicking and lined their pockets along the way. A small number of generals were “decent,” and a handful were truly excellent.

In contrast, and reflecting that politicization tends to taper off markedly lower in the chain of command, ARVN junior officers largely followed a normal distribution: Some were excellent, some were terrible, and most were somewhere in between. Whenever an ARVN division or corps had a commander who was superb or even just decent, the junior officers typically did fine. Indeed, in some cases, they did better than fine. For instance, during the 1972 Easter Offensive, the ARVN 5th Division was commanded by Brig. Gen. Le Van Hung, who was no more than a mediocre commander. Yet, his subordinates rose to the occasion and mounted an astonishing defense that held the key city of An Loc against an overwhelming North Vietnamese assault for two months until relieved.²²⁸

In this usual pattern, it is the senior officer ranks (largely the general officers) who suffer the most from politicization and are corrupt, incompetent, and hamstrung by the requirements of politics and loyalty. The junior officers suffer from this much less, if at all, and typically display a more “normal” distribution of talents—unless their abilities are affected by some other factor, such as culture. Thus, in the ARVN and countless other politicized militaries, the usual malignant form of politicization produces bad generals who hamper the efforts of their often more capable subordinates, with colonels falling somewhere in between.²²⁹ In the modern Arab world, when politicization was present, it produced bad generals who exacerbated the culturally driven equally bad or even worse performance of their junior officers and NCOs.

In the UAE, benevolent politicization has had this effect *in reverse*. Because MbZ and his chief subordinates have done everything they could to promote a more effective military—trying to identify and promote the best officers and trying to empower them and encourage them to empower their subordinates—benevolent politicization has produced a core of highly *competent* senior officers. In this case, that is mostly manifested at the levels of colonels and brigadiers: The military is small enough that the senior leadership can exert its influence more effectively somewhat lower in the chain of command than is typical, but because of obligations to key families, tribes, and other Emirates, MbZ cannot do as much to pack the ranks of major generals and higher with high-quality figures. So this cadre of capable senior officers is a direct product of his benevolent politicization.

However, Emirati junior officers do not perform nearly as well. Because politicization rarely affects them, MbZ’s constructive efforts have far less impact on them. Instead, they are constrained by the same debilitating patterns of behavior derived from the dominant Arab culture as other Arab armed forces, and that is largely true even for competent junior officers, who are still less likely to show their qualities by exercising command than their superiors.

As should be expected, the picked troops of the PG suffer from these problems to a much lesser extent than in the Land Forces, navy, or even air force.

Because of MbZ's greater focus on the PG, there are more high-quality junior officers in the PG than in the Land Forces. Although even in the PG, while there are more high-quality junior officers, they still often do not feel able, empowered, or accustomed to making decisions, so they too often wait for guidance from colonels and brigadiers.²³⁰

Western instructors in the various Emirati professional military schools all agree that the PG officers they have taught stood out for their practical intelligence, greater creativity, greater willingness and ability to problem solve, and confidence in their ability to do so. The consensus was that they were not necessarily book smart or intellectual, but they are "MbZ's chosen," and they know it, so they tend to be both more able and more willing to exercise critical and innovative thinking.²³¹ In short, the raw talent is there, or at least there is more of it, but that talent still is not being employed as the Emirati leadership would like. They remain constrained by the same cultural patterns of behavior common to the other Arab militaries, despite all MbZ's efforts to overcome them.

In short, the raw talent is there, or at least there is more of it, but that talent still is not being employed as the Emirati leadership would like.

Benevolent, Not Malignant Politicization. As an aside, none of this is a problem of "coup-proofing," or what I have referred to as "commissarist politicization." There was no Emirati captain or major holed up in a fighting position in Aden in 2015 who remained passive and had to wait for orders from higher authority because he feared that showing initiative and

creativity would make MbZ suspect him of being a potential coup-plotter.

Indeed, quite the contrary, MbZ has been deliberately, explicitly, and comprehensively trying to appoint officers who show initiative and creativity, who act aggressively and demonstrate critical thinking. And he further—explicitly—authorizes and encourages those officers to promote and empower subordinates with the same attributes. If that captain or major on the front lines in Aden knew anything about his crown prince, he would know that MbZ would have *wanted* him to take the initiative and think creatively to win the battle.

Yet, the vast majority could not or would not. And this illustrates the difficulty of trying to increase Emirati military effectiveness with these traditional workarounds to the limitations created by Arab (in this case, Emirati) culture and society. The workarounds can take you only so far. MbZ will doubtless keep working to improve the performance of his junior officers, and because the force is so small and he is so determined, he will likely continue to enjoy some success. But doing so is likely to prove difficult. It is a hard way to squeeze military effectiveness from a society that does not have the right basic ingredients to produce large amounts of it yet.

However, the only way to derive more than modest success from disproportionate labor is to change the values and behavioral patterns promoted by the dominant Emirati (Arab) culture itself. Only when it is the rule, not the exception, that subordinates in an Emirati hierarchy show initiative, creativity, critical thinking and the like will MbZ be able to find large numbers of junior officers and eventually even NCOs willing and able to perform as he hopes.

That is precisely why he is deliberately and unapologetically trying to remake Emirati culture and using the armed forces to help do so.

Transforming Emirati Society and the Emirati Military

It may still be possible to squeeze some more juice from the short-term workarounds being employed

by the Emirati military. The military could continue to use its foreign advisers to identify still more competent personnel. If MbZ were willing to hazard the political fallout from diminishing the number of officer billets that go to the well-connected and instead open up more slots for those with the right skill sets, he could doubtless enlarge the number of higher-quality units.

Likewise, over time, the premilitary and military training and education programs should further reshape the organizational culture of the Emirati military the way the British did with Jordan's Arab Legion in the interwar years. However, as the Jordanian example demonstrates, this can take you only so far both in the ultimate quality of the military and the size of the higher-quality units within it.²³²

The great question for the Emirati armed forces is, given how difficult it is to gain additional increments of military effectiveness merely employing the traditional workarounds, what could they do instead to achieve a more radical improvement in combat effectiveness? MbZ already has the answer. It is the right one, but it is also the hardest thing to do in practice: transform Emirati society and culture.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) once famously remarked, "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself." Whether he knows the quote, this reflects MbZ's ultimate strategy. His goal is to employ his political power to change Emirati culture. He and his people are open about this. There is no one in the UAE who does not understand this, explicitly or implicitly.

As I noted earlier, MbZ and his officials endlessly say their ultimate aim is to produce a dynamic culture—an Emirati culture of tolerance, respect, self-sacrifice, devotion to country, innovation, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, knowledge creation, and honesty—the last half of which are the keys to success on the modern battlefield just as they are for success in the global economy. They are also precisely the traits that the dominant Arab culture has denigrated, at the expense of Arab economic progress and military effectiveness.

None of this is lost on MbZ. To the contrary, as a soldier himself and a man devoted to forging a world-class military, he understands quite clearly that one reason to transform Emirati culture is that doing so will transform the Emirati armed forces.²³³

Calvert Jones of the University of Maryland has written the definitive work on the UAE's comprehensive reform agenda, and it is best to let her explain how MbZ's goal is to transform Emirati society and culture. In her words, the Emirati leadership has embarked on a comprehensive program of

social engineering of a Western-accented style—of the kind many of them experienced personally at universities in the West—that is seen as an important part of the solution, a way to cultivate that kind of appropriate, productive culture in their own societies. Indeed, these ruling elites talk enthusiastically of the need to foster attitudes and values associated in political theory with liberal character formation, including individualism, self-reliance, personal autonomy, critical thinking, secularism, and tolerance or open-mindedness.²³⁴

The UAE's

ruling elites have turned instead to a social engineering campaign that aims to modify the person, the actor, the individual agent operating *within* that structure, thus attacking the *culture* of rentierism rather than its material underpinnings. And to do so, they have set their sights on an area of leverage over society viewed as more malleable and less likely to provoke a legitimacy crisis—the making of citizens.²³⁵ (Emphasis in original.)

And elsewhere, "State initiatives seek to engineer a 'revolution from above,' a particular vision of enlightenment embraced by UAE leaders. Such social engineering initiatives aim to expand knowledge, promote individuality, and foster creativity and critical thinking."²³⁶

Educational Reform. Because culture is transmitted through the educational process,²³⁷ the Emirati

reform agenda is aimed at transforming the UAE's educational methods to transform its culture. In its Vision 2020 statement from 1999, the UAE laid out its strategy for education reform:

The new citizens should be “creative and innovative nationals” who can “make knowledge, adapt with change and make progress.” To accomplish this, there must be “education for the future and adaptability, education for producing a creative character that is able to make and enrich knowledge, education for citizenship and affiliation despite globalization, education for responsibility and social accountability, education for competition in the world of global economy and free trade.”²³⁸

As a result, over the past decade or so,

a series of education reforms have sought to reduce rote learning, promote critical thinking, and encourage creativity through more student-centered schools. Reduced emphasis on religious instruction has made room for more robust science, math, reading, and English-language learning.²³⁹

Jones specifically notes that the Emirati shift toward Western educational methods is meant to bring about this cultural transformation and that MbZ's more traditionally minded critics have attacked it for that reason as demonstrating a “lack of faith in their own culture.”²⁴⁰ In pursuit of this, in 2006, the UAE introduced the Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA), a test like the SAT, to determine acceptance into higher education. CEPA emphasizes problem-solving and critical thinking. Hundreds of Emirati high school seniors are now rejected by the UAE's best public universities each year because they could not score higher on the CEPA, and the vast majority of those accepted have to spend one or more years in remedial classes.²⁴¹

Moreover, far from the common assumption in the West that this kind of cultural transformation is virtually impossible, the reforms are already starting to show results in transforming Emirati culture,

although as with all cultural change, it happens slowly. In terms of statistical evidence, the UAE's Human Development Index (HDI) rank for 2018 was 0.866, in the “very high human development category, and 35th out of 189 nations.” This represented an increase of 20 percent over the UAE's HDI in 1990.²⁴² Of greater importance, Jones' work demonstrated even greater qualitative progress, which is the key to cultural change. In her words:

I visited over twenty-five public schools aiming to understand how youth, arguably the most important “objects” of the social engineering campaign, actually view it. From Abu Dhabi to Fujairah, Emirati kids were noticeably excited about the changes under way. They described how classes had become more interesting. They pointed to their own work posted on the walls of the now “media-rich” classrooms. They mentioned field trips to the new museums, role-playing games, independent research projects that allow them to investigate a subject of their choosing. Away from the watchful eyes of administrators, they would often confess that their new teachers—often hired out of countries like Britain, America, Finland, Australia, and New Zealand—were some of the best and most inspiring teachers they ever had.²⁴³

There is also evidence of greater creativity and critical thinking. In 2010, a team from the University of Georgia conducted an external evaluation of one of the Ministry of Education's public school reforms, the “Schools of the Future” initiative. In some schools, the evaluators observed that “Students are beginning to develop and exhibit leadership skills as a result of the student-centered instruction and activities. Therefore, they are more creative and greater risk-takers when developing and manipulating content knowledge: they feel empowered and demonstrate improved attitudes.” The evaluators' own survey of 1,914 Emirati students in reform schools found that a majority were positive about the changes, overwhelmingly agreeing with statements such as “The teaching in my classes is better than it was before” and “I think all students should attend a school like this one.”²⁴⁴

Conclusions

The UAE armed forces are not yet a military of the highest rank, in the same league as Britain, France, Israel, or the United States. But neither are they a third-rate military. Some Emirati units can perform at levels of competence at or approaching the first rank. Most cannot, but the overall force is still probably qualitatively superior to that of any other Arab state and many others around the world. In some instances, it is because of superb hardware. Invariably, it can be traced back to the relentless drive and constructive leadership of MbZ. However, part of it also must be ascribed to the improving human capital of the UAE and its armed forces.

The key limitations facing the Emirati military are those derived from the dominant Arab culture that bedevil all Arab armed forces. The praiseworthy accomplishments Abu Dhabi has already made in improving military effectiveness, especially in its elite units, are largely derived from its herculean efforts to employ all the different workarounds that Arab militaries have tried over the years—and employ them more fully and with greater resources than ever before. It is also partly because Emirati societal reforms are already generating a somewhat larger number of personnel with the “right stuff.”

However, it is MbZ’s goal to transform Emirati society such that its culture emphasizes a different set of behavioral patterns from traditional Emirati Arab culture, those most closely associated with success in modern warfare and global economics. If he succeeds in doing so, it will mean far larger numbers of Emirati personnel with the ideal skills to be soldiers and officers. At that point, national service will suddenly generate a useful and plentiful pool of first-rate potential warriors, just as conscription has for so many other countries in the past. National service will then serve the cause of not only nation-building but also national security.²⁴⁵ The Emirati leaders themselves are well aware of this.

Of course, if MbZ’s wider reform agenda succeeds, national service may no longer be necessary because there should be large numbers of capable Emiratis willing, even eager, to serve in the armed forces, making an all-volunteer force more than adequate. It is worth going back to the words of Amb. Otaiba on this:

Building our military is not just about buying fancy equipment. It is about building a culture, building a national identity, building a bond between the leadership and the people, and building the kind of society where a soldier would be proud to die for his country.²⁴⁶

Over the long term, the true path to the kind of military effectiveness MbZ seeks is through the transformation of the wider Emirati culture he is already pursuing. If he succeeds, the UAE will truly become the Sparta of the Arab world.

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Notes

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17. Interview with a senior Western military officer who has commanded Emirati forces, June 2020.
18. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020.
19. Interview with a Western military officer who has fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer who has fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020.
20. Interview with a Western military officer who has fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; and Interview with a former member of the UAE armed forces, June 2020.
21. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020.
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26. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
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30. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020.
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33. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
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45. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
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59. Aziz el-Yaakoubi, "UAE Builds Up Yemen Regional Army but Country Fragments," Reuters, May 3, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-emirates-idUSKBN17ZoLW>; Michael Horton, "The Battle for Yemen: A Quagmire for Saudi Arabia and the UAE," *Terrorism Monitor* 15, no. 10 (May 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/battle-yemen-quagmire-saudi-arabia-uae/>; Ibrahim Jalal, "The UAE May Have Withdrawn from Yemen, but Its Influence Remains Strong," Middle East Institute, February 25, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-may-have-withdrawn-yemen-its-influence-remains-strong>; Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Gulf Coalition Operations in Yemen (Part 1): The Ground War," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 25, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-coalition-operations-in-yemen-part-1-the-ground-war>; and UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, "Final Report," January 27, 2020, 12–13, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/%5BEN%5DLetter%20dated%2027%20January%202020%20from%20the%20Panel%20of%20Experts%20on%20Yemen%20addressed%20to%20the%20President%20of%20the%20Security%20Council%20-%20Final%20report%20of%20the%20Panel%20of%20Experts%20on%20Yemen%20%28S-2020-70%29.pdf>.

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61. Knights, discussion. See also, Michael Horton, "Can the UAE and Its Security Forces Avoid a Wrong Turn in Yemen?," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 2 (February 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/can-uae-security-forces-avoid-wrong-turn-yemen/>; Thomas Joscelyn, "Arab Coalition Enters AQAP Stronghold in Port City of Mukalla, Yemen," Foundation for the Defense of Democracy, April 25, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/arab-coalition-enters-aqap-stronghold-in-port-city-of-mukalla-yemen.php>; and Michael Knights, "The UAE Approach to Counterinsurgency in Yemen," *War on the Rocks*, May 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/the-u-a-e-approach-to-counterinsurgency-in-yemen/>.

62. Michael Knights, "Lessons from the UAE War in Yemen," *Lawfare*, August 18, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/lessons-uae-war-yemen>.

63. Saleh al-Batati and Asa Fitch, "Yemeni Troops Retake al-Qaeda-Controlled City," *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2016. There are also reports that the UAE co-opted some, perhaps even many, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) fighters at Mukalla to join their coalition and then employed them in subsequent fights in Yemen, raising American concerns that the UAE's actions were preserving AQAP cadre rather than eliminating it. See Maggie Michael, Trish Wilson, and Lee Keith, "AP Investigation: US Allies,

al-Qaida Battle Rebels in Yemen,” AP News, August 6, 2018, <https://apnews.com/f38788a561d74ca78c77cb43612d50da/AP-investigation-Yemen-war-binds-US-allies-al-Qaida>.

64. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; and Knights, discussion.

65. Adam Baron, “The Gulf Country That Will Shape the Future of Yemen,” *Atlantic*, September 22, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/yemen-mukalla-uae-al-qaeda/570943/>.

66. CIA, *The World Factbook*, [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/211Interview 19.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/211Interview%2019.html).

67. Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.

68. The UAE–Presidential Guard Reconnaissance Group consists of three battalions: one that controls unmanned aerial vehicles, a long-range reconnaissance battalion, and an armored reconnaissance battalion. Athol Yates, *The Evolution of the United Arab Emirates Armed Forces* (forthcoming), 185, 199.

69. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.

70. Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces, May 2020; Horton, “Can the UAE and Its Security Forces Avoid a Wrong Turn in Yemen?”; and Knights, “The UAE Approach to Counterinsurgency in Yemen.”

71. Knights, interview, May 2020.

72. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.

73. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.

74. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.

75. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Knights, interview, May 2020.

76. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.

77. Knights, interview, May 2020.

78. Leone Hadavi, “Logbook, Part I: The UAE’s BMP-3 IFV in Yemen,” *Bellingcat*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/04/11/logbook-part-i-the-uaes-bmp-3-ifv-in-yemen/>.

79. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Knights, interview, May 2020; and Hadavi, “Logbook.”

80. Aya Batrawy and Sam Magdy, “AP Explains: How Emirates Troop Drawdown Impacts Yemen War,” *Associated Press*, July 25, 2019, <https://apnews.com/52fd37cfd4d698c56878378ced692>.

81. Guillaume Paris, “Leçons de l’engagement des chars Leclerc au Yémen,” *Ultimaratio*, December 2, 2016, <http://ultimaratio-blog.org/archives/8148>.

82. Jeremy Binnie, “Analysis: Emirati Armoured Brigade Spearheads Aden Breakout,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, August 7, 2015, <https://www.janes.com/article/53503/analysis-emirati-armoured-brigade-spearheads-aden-breakout>; and Knights, interview, May 2020.

83. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Yates, *The Evolution of the United Arab Emirates Armed Forces*.

84. Knights, interview, May 2020.

85. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military

officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Knights, discussion.

86. Knights, interview, May 2020.
87. Knights, interview, May 2020.
88. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
89. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020.
90. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020.
91. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Knights, interview, May 2020.
92. Michael Knights (senior fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy), personal correspondence with the author, July 2020.
93. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020.
94. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020.
95. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.
96. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
97. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020.
98. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Nathan Toronto, *How Militaries Learn: Human Capital, Military Education, and Battlefield Effectiveness* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 66.
99. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020.
100. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020.
101. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020.
102. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020.
103. The quote is from an interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020. Concurring views came from an interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020.
104. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.
105. Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020.
106. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
107. Knights, interview, May 2020.
108. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.
109. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
110. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a senior

Western military officer who has commanded Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.

111. Knights, interview, May 2020.
112. Interview with a senior Western military officer who has commanded Emirati forces, May 2020.
113. Interview with a Western military officer who has fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020.
114. Knights, interview, May 2020; Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 10, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-saudi-uae-war-effort-in-yemen-part-1-operation-golden-arrow-in-aden>; and William Maclean, Noah Browning, and Yara Bayoumy, "Yemen Counter-Terrorism Missions Shows UAE Military Ambition," Reuters, June 28, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-emirates/yemen-counter-terrorism-mission-shows-uae-military-ambition-idUSKCN0ZE1EA>.
115. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020. Several other interviewees said that they were not aware of the specific command arrangements in Aden but that they were consistent with their own experiences of Emirati conventional ground forces. Interview with a Western military officer who has fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who has worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who has fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; and Knights, discussion, May 2020.
116. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a senior Western military officer who has commanded Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Barany, "Military Officers in the Gulf," 12.
117. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who has worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.
118. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who has worked in the UAE, May 2020.
119. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, July 2020.
120. Athol Yates, private correspondence with the author, July 2020.
121. The Sudanese are the best example of this. However, there are also reports that the UAE has engaged small numbers of highly skilled Western mercenaries for targeted killing missions in Yemen as well. See, for instance, Aram Roston, "American Mercenaries," BuzzFeed News, October 16, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/aramroston/mercenaries-assassination-us-yemen-uae-spear-golan-dahlan>.
122. With a little effort, you can find many of their profiles on LinkedIn.
123. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, July 2020.
124. Toronto, *How Militaries Learn*, 64.
125. Knights interview, May 2020.
126. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
127. Khalil Charles, "Pressure Mounts for Sudan to Withdraw Troops from Yemen," *Middle East Monitor*, April 30, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180430-pressure-mounts-for-sudan-to-withdraw-troops-from-yemen/>.
128. Knights, interview, May 2020.
129. Kolby Hanson and Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Noncitizen Soldiers: Explaining Foreign Recruitment by Modern State Militaries," *Security Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 295; and Mark Mazzetti and Emily B. Hager, "Secret Desert Force Set Up by Blackwater's Founder," *New York Times*, May 14, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/world/middleeast/15prince.html?_r=0.
130. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 110.
131. In a surprising number of the interviews I conducted, when I asked about the UAE navy, the interviewee referred to it as the "red-headed stepchild" of the Emirati armed forces.

132. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020.
133. Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces.
134. Votel, interview, May 2020.
135. Knights, interview, May 2020.
136. On modern Arab military history, see Pollack, *Arabs at War*.
137. Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 106.
138. Calvert W. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization*, Kindle Edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 94.
139. Jon B. Alterman and Margo Balboni, "Citizens in Training: Conscription and Nation-Building in the United Arab Emirates," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 12, 2018, 4, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180312_Alterman_UAE_conscription.pdf?Cm63tWWtbEUVPxNhcFyl6lehkkL8rFks; and Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 92–94.
140. See Global Medical Solutions, "About Us," http://www.gmshm.ae/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=121&Itemid=570&lang=en.
141. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 102–24.
142. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 103.
143. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
144. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.
145. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020. See also, Zoltan Barany, "Why Have Three Gulf States Introduced the Draft? Bucking the Trend on Conscription in Arabia," *RUSI Journal* 162, no. 6 (2017): 19.
146. There is a clear and explicit expectation that a stronger society will make for a stronger military over the long term.
147. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020.
148. Alterman and Balboni, "Citizens in Training," 20.
149. Interview with a former member of the UAE armed forces, June 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.
150. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; and Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020.
151. Interview with a former member of the UAE Armed Forces, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 112.
152. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.
153. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020. See also, Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 36–37.
154. Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 105.
155. Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 29.
156. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
157. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
158. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.

159. Knights, interview, May 2020.
160. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
161. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020.
162. Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 179.
163. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
164. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020.
165. Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE)," 18. See also Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 106–07.
166. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
167. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, August 2020.
168. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
169. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
170. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020.
171. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.
172. Alterman and Balboni, "Citizens in Training," 53.
173. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a former member of the UAE Armed Forces, June 2020; and Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
174. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
175. Athol Yates, "Western Expatriates in the UAE Armed Forces, 1964–2015," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 6, no. 2 (December 2016): 197.
176. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
177. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
178. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
179. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020.
180. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; and Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
181. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020. Concurring opinions are from Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
182. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
183. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military expert with insight into Emirati military performance, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020;

Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, June 2020; Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces, May 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020. This is also borne out by my own experience of over 30 years with various Arab militaries.

184. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.

185. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020.

186. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020.

187. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.

188. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020.

189. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.

190. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; and Toronto, *How Militaries Learn*, 66.

191. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Toronto, *How Militaries Learn*, 73–77. The quote is from Toronto, *How Militaries Learn*, 74.

192. Barany, “Military Officers in the Gulf,” 6.

193. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; and Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.

194. Toronto, *How Militaries Learn*, 7.

195. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020.

196. Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who has worked in the UAE, May 2020.

197. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.

198. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.

199. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; and Barany, “Military Officers in the Gulf,” 11.

200. Barany, “Military Officers in the Gulf,” 5.

201. Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.

202. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020.

203. For a fuller discussion of the sources of Arab military ineffectiveness, see Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
204. On the impact of politicization on Arab military effectiveness, see Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 107–232. See also James T. Quinlivan, “Coups-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,” *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 131–65.
205. On the impact of underdevelopment on Arab military effectiveness, see Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 233–342.
206. On the impact of Arab cultural patterns on Arab military effectiveness, see Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 343–509.
207. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 368–405.
208. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 415–38.
209. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 439–509.
210. On Iraqi Republican Guard performance, see Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 218–64.
211. For more on these workarounds, see Michael Eisenstadt, “‘Defeat Into Victory’: Arab Lessons for the Iraqi Security Forces,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 17, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeat-into-victory-arab-lessons-for-the-iraqi-security-forces>; and Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Training Better Arab Armies,” *Parameters* 50, No. 3 (Autumn 2020): 95–111; Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 453–75. Some Arab non-state militaries, such as Hezbollah and Da’ish, have employed aspects of these workarounds but have also been able to take advantage of other, better solutions to these problems that are simply not available to the armies of the Arab states. On this, see Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 476–509.
212. Eisenstadt and Pollack, “Training Better Arab Armies,” 100–02; and Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 469–72.
213. Eisenstadt and Pollack, “Training Better Arab Armies,” 102–04; and Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 472–75.
214. Gary S. Gregg, *Culture and Identity in a Muslim Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 292–93; and Yasuko Minoura, “A Sensitive Period for the Incorporation of a Cultural Meaning System,” *Ethos* 20, no. 3 (1992), 304–39.
215. Eisenstadt and Pollack, “Training Better Arab Armies,” 106–08; and Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 453–69.
216. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 463–69, 505–06.
217. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
218. This is why many militaries, traditionally including the US Army, dislike elite forces, preferring to keep the best personnel in the line formations to raise their performance, rather than concentrating them in elite units and leaving the bulk of the force less capable than it otherwise would be.
219. Yousef al-Otaiba (UAE ambassador to the US), interview with the author, June 2020.
220. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
221. Dylan Welch, Kyle Taylor, and Dan Oakes, “Australian Army Veterans Advising Foreign Army Accused of War Crimes,” Australian Broadcast Corporation News, December 13, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-14/australian-army-veterans-advising-foreign-army-accused-war-crime/10611142>.
222. In 2020, Stephen Toumajan was transferred from commanding the JAC to commanding the National Search and Rescue Center.
223. On the ultimate limitations of these workarounds to compensate for the culturally driven shortcomings of Arab armed forces, see Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 452–75.
224. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
225. Athol Yates (UAE military historian), personal correspondence with the author, July 2020.
226. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
227. Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; and Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020.
228. Dale Andrade, *America’s Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi’s 1972 Easter Offensive* (Topeka, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 354–69; Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 174–204; and James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 135–38.

229. For more examples, see Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 107–28, 205–31.
230. Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer who fought alongside Emirati forces, June 2020; and Knights, interview, May 2020.
231. Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020; and Interview with a Western expert on the Emirati military who worked in the UAE, May 2020.
232. On this, see Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 453–69; and Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 267–357.
233. Interview with a senior Western military officer who commanded Emirati forces, June 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a highly knowledgeable Western expert on the UAE military, May 2020; Interview with a Western military officer with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, June 2020; Interview with a Western official with extensive knowledge of the UAE military, May 2020; Alterman and Balboni, “Citizens in Training”; and Toronto, *How Militaries Learn*, 82.
234. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 53.
235. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 58.
236. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 2.
237. On this, see Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 415–38.
238. Quoted in Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 59.
239. Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Social Engineering in the UAE,” May 17, 2018, 2.
240. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 128.
241. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 77.
242. UNDP, “Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century: United Arab Emirates,” Human Development Report, 2019, 2–3, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/ARE.pdf.
243. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 132.
244. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois*, 156.
245. Alterman and Balboni, “Citizens in Training”; and Yates, *The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces*, 80–82.
246. Al-Otaiba, interview, June 2020.

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