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Bucking the Trend:

The UAE and the Development of Military Capabilities in the Arab World

Abstract

The literature examining national militaries in the Arab world paints a near-universally bleak picture of their capabilities. Some argue that issues rooted in ‘Arab culture’ – so-called essentialist rationales – fatally undermine military effectiveness. Others assert that regime security concerns encourage leaders to actively politicize, coup-proof, and consequently weaken their military. This article challenges these literatures by demonstrating that UAE forces have repeatedly exemplified unusual levels of military effectiveness and sophistication in hostile campaigns. Using approaches from public policy studies (the Advocacy Coalition Framework), this paper investigates how the UAE military bucked the trend. The 1990 invasion of Kuwait was a ‘focusing event’ that prompted a rethink of existing approaches. Catalyzed, a key ‘policy entrepreneur’, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, changed approaches to training, unified federal militaries, and tested forces in challenging operations. Such findings undercut lingering essentialist critiques of Arab militaries, provide a potential pathway for other states to emulate, demonstrate that secure and motivated leaders can overcome coup-proofing concerns, and showcase the fruitful pollination of methodologies from public policy to security studies.

The military forces of states in the Arab world do not enjoy a stellar reputation. Much of the literature paints a critical picture of the ability of Arab states to employ military force to achieve victory on the battlefield.¹ Critiques of the Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait,

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Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are stark. These states have bought over \$1.5 trillion worth of high-end military equipment and have for decades sent cadets and officers to the world's most prestigious military colleges.² One might assume that enjoying such advantages alongside fielding some of the most technologically sophisticated military kit in the world would allow the monarchies to develop formidable military forces. But this is not what the literature on this topic finds. As Michael Knights, one of the leading experts in the field notes

It is a commonly held view in U.S. military and diplomatic circles that the states of the Gulf are unlikely to produce effective armed forces and will be forever dependent on the United States for their security. This impression derives from CENTCOM's experience in close partnership with Gulf militaries since 1990, during which time high numbers of U.S. military and diplomatic personnel have had the chance to

¹ Thus far, the literature lacks a review article assessing the development of the field. But works by Pollack and important research by leading scholars of military effectiveness like Brooks and Talmadge, though they temper their critiques with vignettes of improvement, overall offer a range of pointed criticisms. The literature is explored in more detail below.

Kenneth M Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), *Arabs at War*.

Armies of Sand: The Past, Present and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness (New York: Oxford University Press 2019).

Risa Brooks, "Civil Military Relations in the Middle East," in *The Future Security Environment in the Middle East: Conflict, Stability, and Political Change*, ed. Nora Bensahel and Daniel Byman (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2004).

Stephanie Cronin, *Armies and State Building in the Modern Middle East: Politics, Nationalism, and Military Reform* (London: IB Tauris, 2013).

² Data derived from "Sipri Extended Military Expenditure Database, Beta Version," (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2016).

According to data obtained from the UK's Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the modern-day UAE has sent the most students out of any nationality to the institution. Gulf students remain strongly represented at military training institutions in the UK, France, and the US not least because so much of their military equipment is purchased from these three states.

observe GCC militaries... those views have left a lasting, negative impression that the GCC states are able to contribute little to their own defense.³

This quote stems from 2006, but similar sentiments emerge from the ongoing 2015 Saudi and UAE-led war in Yemen against the Houthis, a tribal group indigenous to the north of Yemen that took over much of the country precipitating the conflict. The promised Saudi strategic aims of quickly undercutting the power of Houthi militias never transpired and the pledge to force the Houthis out from the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, never materialized. Even more important from the Saudi perspective was countering the Houthi ballistic missile threat. However, four years into the conflict, the Houthis still regularly launch ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia, threatening Riyadh, the capital, 700km from the Yemen-Saudi border, while drones attack Saudi oil installations 500km from Houthi territory.⁴ The Houthis also retained the ability to harass and attack Saudi troops on the Yemeni-Saudi border.

However, in the war in the south of Yemen, UAE military operations challenge the literature questioning military capabilities of Arab states. In its amphibious landing in Aden in the summer of 2015, the UAE undertook a technically difficult expeditionary operation in hostile territory that liberated the city.⁵ This operation, undertaken unilaterally, surprised outside

³ Michael Knights, *Troubled Waters: Future US Security Assistance in the Persian Gulf* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2006), 125.

⁴ "Interactive: The Missile War in Yemen," *Missile Threat* ([Ongoing]), <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile-war-yemen/>.

Vivian Yee, "Yemen's Houthi Rebels Attack Saudi Oil Facilities, Escalating Tensions in Gulf," *The New York Times* 14 May 2019.

⁵ Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* 10 (2015).

observers including the US military.⁶ A closer examination of smaller operations in Yemen and training missions in the UAE's recent history further indicate that Emirati forces have bucked the regional military trend. Important examples include the UAE Air Force flying close air support for NATO forces in Afghanistan, a particularly strong vote of confidence in their skill, and elements of UAE Special Operations Forces (SOF) fighting side-by-side with International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) counterparts in operations in Afghanistan and alongside American forces in Yemen.⁷

There are no obvious reasons why the UAE might develop atypical military capabilities. The UAE is a small, hydrocarbon-rich state in a dangerous region with a large and looming politically, religiously, culturally, and historically redolent adversary nearby, Iran. But the same applies to Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait and there is no hint that they have developed 'unusual' military capabilities. There is little socio-culturally unique about the UAE; no facet of its history endows it with an unusually martial attitude.⁸ Similarly, it has no regionally-unusual experience with warfare – no fight for independence, no repulsing of enemies from its capital – that might propagate a martial attitude. So how has the UAE confounded wider regional trends that suggest there are intrinsic problems with Arab states forging effective military forces?

⁶ Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen," *The New York Times* 13 March 2016.

⁷ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "In the UAE, the United States Has a Quiet, Potent Ally Nicknamed 'Little Sparta'," *The Washington Post* 9 November 2014.

Mazzetti and Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis."

Interview #159 (Gulf-Based Nato Military Officer), 26 October 2016.

⁸ David B Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring," *The Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (2017): 544-45.

Examining UAE operations provides the first contemporary account of an Arab state undertaking complex, expeditionary warfare in hostile territory to achieve strategic aims. This is an important addition to the literature. Evaluating such operations offers a rejoinder to essentialist critiques arguing that there is something intrinsic within Arab culture that precludes Arab states from forging effective military forces. This article uses methods from the public policy discipline to analyze how a pivotal leader, deeply secured in his position, can, motivated by a perceived threat, drive through difficult changes necessary to develop effective military forces. In this way he can escape from the coup-proofing trap that leads so many leaders to actively undercut their own forces, prioritizing *regime* security over *state* security. Methodologically, it also showcases an example of the fruitful cross-pollination of approaches from public policy into the realm of security studies.

Framework

First, the literature on Arab militaries is evaluated to contextualize the analysis. When it comes to concepts of military effectiveness in the Arab world there is a small and established kernel of texts. Militaries in the Arab world were top of the agenda of students and scholars ‘during the heyday of military coups in the Middle East’ in the late-1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.⁹ Subsequently, in both Arabic and English, the scholarly focus switched to economic and political issues, while the topic of Arab security sectors received dwindling attention.¹⁰ Difficulties accessing regional defense archives and a region-wide narrowing of the

⁹ Oren Barak and Assaf David, "The Arab Security Sector: A New Research Agenda for a Neglected Topic," *Armed Forces & Society* 36, no. 5 (2010): 806.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 806-10.

Tim Niblock, "Introduction," in *Social and Economic Development in the Arab Gulf*, ed. Tim Niblock (Routledge, 2014), 11.

intellectual space in which researchers operate inhibits research.¹¹ Such caveats notwithstanding, the contemporary scholarly understanding of the ability of Arab states to use their military forces effectively paints a critical picture.

Second, analyses are updated by examining the Saudi and Emirati performance in operations in Yemen from 2015 onwards. The war in Yemen contains the largest Arab military coalition in modern history. It involved a dozen Arab states, tens of thousands of troops, dozens of fast jets with dozens more in supporting roles, the deployment of SOF supported by close-air-support, a multinational flotilla of naval craft, the employment of counter-ballistic missile launchers, and the use of proxy forces on a grand scale.¹² Moreover, for the Gulf monarchies, this conflict is without precedent, having never deployed their forces on such a scale, in such a hostile environment, and with such far-reaching goals. As such, it offers an unparalleled opportunity to examine the effectiveness of two Arab militaries as the protagonists in the conflict. Conclusions are drawn from an array of sources. Such is the international focus on the war in Yemen that, despite the difficulties of accessing the conflict, rigorous reports and diligently researched articles have emerged from scholars and regional specialists with first-hand access to Yemen. Blind spots remain and, as ever, scholars must carefully parse judgments. Using interviews with regional scholars and military officers familiar with the conflict provides another way to double-check conclusions.

¹¹ Jane Kinninmont, *Future Trends in the Gulf*, (London 2015). 32-44.

¹² David B Roberts and Emile Hokayem, "Reassessing Gulf Security: The War in Yemen," *Survival* 58, no. 6 (2016): 165-74.

Criticism of Saudi Arabia's conduct in the war is relentless, while the UAE has received more favourable assessments. But it is important to note that the Saudi war in the Yemeni north is of a different character to the Emirati war in the south. The former took place in Houthi heartlands and is the kind of war among the people in hostile terrain that, for example, the US struggled so badly within its Global War on Terror campaigns. In contrast, as explored in detail below, the Emirati campaign faced fewer intrinsic difficulties fighting in areas broadly hostile to Houthi interlopers. The point is not, per se, to criticize Saudi forces, but to note that nothing has changed. Saudi military forces remain, as the literature expects, unable to achieve strategic aims. While the UAE did not operate in deeply hostile, rugged terrain, it still had to contend with an urban warfare environment which comes with its own challenges. That the UAE was able to achieve significant military victories which were parlayed to operational successes challenges the literature's expectations and is worthy of examination.

Third, to explain the policy decisions and processes underpinning the development of the UAE's unusual military capabilities, an approach is borrowed from the public policy literature. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) is a flexible, well-developed, and much-deployed concept used to 'provide a coherent understanding of the major factors and processes affecting the overall policy process... over periods of a decade or more.'¹³ It focuses research on 'a common language' and it identifies 'relevant analytical components and relationships within a policy subsystem.'¹⁴ This flexibility – how it can allow for 'diverse

¹³ Paul A Sabatier, "The Advocacy Coalition Framework: Revisions and Relevance for Europe," *Journal of European Public Policy* 5, no. 1 (March 1998): 98. For a general introduction to the ACF see Christopher Weible and Paul Sabatier, "A Guide to the Advocacy Coalition Framework," (2006), 122-33.

¹⁴ Jonathan J Pierce et al., "There and Back Again: A Tale of the Advocacy Coalition Framework," *Policy Studies Journal* 45, no. S1 (2017). 14

examination of policy foci' while still 'encouraging comparability, replicability, and falsification' – is both one of the key attributes of the ACF approach underpinning its longevity and success and its key challenge.¹⁵ The central work by Sabatier in 1988 has been cited nearly 5000 times and over the past two decades it has been refined multiple times.¹⁶ The ACF approach was initially critiqued for being overly US-focused with too much emphasis on elements of the policy process prevalent in democratic societies.¹⁷ This reflects concerns that in authoritarian states there is limited space for coalitions to form, express ideas, and inform policy.¹⁸ However, the ACF has been successfully deployed in inventive ways by scholars investigating a range of subject areas from shifts in Chinese environmental policies, failures in German security policy in Afghanistan, and public finance reform in the Philippines.¹⁹

The ACF focuses on the 'policy subsystem' as the location where change is slowly enacted. Within this subsystem are the key actors, who, in the search for influence, coalesce into the

¹⁵ For an examination of the tension between replicability and the requirement of each ACF to be specific and relevant see Jonathan J Pierce, Holly L Peterson, and Katherine C Hicks, "Policy Change: An Advocacy Coalition Framework Perspective," *ibid.* 2, 15-18

¹⁶ For a meta-analysis see Pierce et al., "The Tale of the Acf," 22-26. And on the evolution of the theory see Paul A Sabatier and Christopher M Weible, "The Advocacy Coalition Framework: Innovations and Clarifications," ed. Paul A Sabatier and Christopher M Weible, 2nd ed., *Theories of the Policy Process* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009). 189-90.

Paul A Sabatier, "An Advocacy Coalition Framework of Policy Change and the Role of Policy-Oriented Learning Therein," *Policy sciences* 21, no. 2-3 (1988).

¹⁷ Jonathan J Pierce, "Coalition Stability and Belief Change: Advocacy Coalitions in U.S. Foreign Policy and the Creation of Israel, 1922–44," *Policy Studies Journal* 39, no. 3 (2011): 412.

¹⁸ These concerns are reflective of wider debates about the nature of decision-making being different in democratic and authoritarian states. See Michael James Hill, *The Policy Process in the Modern State* (Prentice Hall 1997). Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions That Changed the World, 1940-1941* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 2007).

¹⁹ For a recent overview of the literature see Pierce et al., "The Tale of the Acf." 13-18

Björn Dressel, "Targeting the Public Purse: Advocacy Coalitions and Public Finance in the Philippines," *Administration & Society* 44, no. 6 suppl (2012).

Kyae Lim Kwon and Robert J Hanlon, "A Comparative Review for Understanding Elite Interest and Climate Change Policy in China," *Environment, development and sustainability* 18, no. 4 (2016).

eponymous coalitions.²⁰ Energized by their beliefs, coalitions focus resources and derive strategies to modify institutional rules and change policy.²¹ Both the ACF and wider policy change literature mixes exogenous and endogenous variables as prompts for change.

The Emirati Case

Each application of the ACF tailors the framework to the context. Some ACF case studies prioritize the importance of actors like the media or think-tanks undertaking research, making arguments, striving to shape public opinion, and engaging with policymakers. But such an approach would be inappropriate in the case study of the UAE. The state is not a democracy, its civil liberties scores are low, recent rankings find no Emirati think-tanks in the world's top 100, nor in the Middle East's top ten, such that expectations of civic participation in elite decision making would be misguided.²²

Moreover, consider the population dynamics of the UAE. Of the state's nine-and-a-half million inhabitants, only just over eight hundred thousand are Emirati citizens, and only half-a-million of these citizens come from the state's capital and richest Emirate, Abu Dhabi. Expatriates are widely regarded as having a highly circumscribed ability to exert influence on the government, and it is impossible to conceive of an expatriate-ran pressure group striving

²⁰ Michael Mintrom and Phillipa Norman, "Policy Entrepreneurship and Policy Change," *Policy Studies Journal* 37, no. 4 (2009): 657

²¹ Pierce et al., "The Tale of the ACF," 15-16

²² James G McGann, "2017 Global Go to Think Tank Index Report," (University of Pennsylvania: Think Tanks and Civil Societies Programme, 2017). 93

'United Arab Emirates' www.FreedomHouse.org [Various dates]

'Annual Report 2018' CIVICUS <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/state-of-civil-society-report-2018>

Lewis W. Snider, "Comparing the Strength of Nations: The Arab Gulf States and Political Change," *Comparative Politics* 20, no. 4 (1988): 461.

Gregory Gause III, "Understanding the Gulf States," *Democracy Journal*, no. 36 (Spring 2015): 31.

to exert influence on the state's security and defense policy. Similarly, as explored in more detail below, security and defense have long been considered the purview of the elite in Abu Dhabi and it is similarly difficult to conceive of citizens from the other six federal Emirates mounting pressure groups to influence UAE security and defense policy. Thus, with a circumscribed civil society, a non-democratic government with limited formal representation of popular will, a state where most citizens are disenfranchised non-nationals, and where many of the nationals do not come from the state's capital, the ACF approach needs to be tailored appropriately.

This is not to say that advocacy coalitions do not exist in the Emirati context; they have been shown to exist in authoritarian climates and identifiable examples of small coalitions are explored in the analysis. But, just as Dressel introduced and developed the concept of 'policy brokers' as a new kind of actor in ACF specific to the context of the Philippines, this paper emphasizes a typology of an actor-specific to the Emirati case study. The literature on policy entrepreneurs – individuals inside the policymaking community who 'seek to initiate dynamic policy change'²³ – is voluminous and complementary to the ACF.²⁴ Additionally, building on peer-reviewed work, the innovation this research uses is to focus the level of analysis at the top of elite structures and specifically on today's Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan.²⁵ This reflects scholarly understandings of both his role as

²³ Michael Mintrom, "Policy Entrepreneurs and the Diffusion of Innovation," *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 3 (1997). 739

²⁴ On the development of the policy entrepreneurship and its links to the ACF see Michael Mintrom and Sandra Vergari, "Advocacy Coalitions, Policy Entrepreneurs, and Policy Change," *Policy Studies Journal* 24, no. 3 (1996). 422-425 and Mintrom and Norman, "Policy Entrepreneurship and Policy Change." 657-658 Nor is the importance of leaders limited to the Gulf Arab States. See Margaret G Hermann and Joe D Hagan, "International Decision Making: Leadership Matters," *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (1998).

²⁵ For the successful use of this kind of approach in the Emirate case study see Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE." 549-557

the key Emirati decision maker and policy entrepreneur in the defense sector in recent decades and how Gulf leaders are seen as being ‘decisively important’ decision makers in Gulf politics.²⁶

The ACF provides heuristics to guide research as to how the coalitions (and policy entrepreneurs) change policy. First, the ground is shaped by internal and external factors. The former, often referred to as ‘relatively stable parameters’, stem broadly from the nature of the state itself. Following the extensive work of Birkland, this article characterizes external events primarily as ‘focusing events’, which he defines as

...sudden; relatively uncommon; [they] can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms; as harms that are concentrated in a particular geographical area or community of interest; and that is known to policymakers and the public simultaneously... Focusing events can lead interest groups, government leaders, policy entrepreneurs, the news media, or members of the public to identify new problems, or to pay greater attention to existing but dormant problems, potentially leading to a search for solutions in the wake of apparent policy failures.²⁷

²⁶ Athol Yates, "Western Expatriates in the UAE Armed Forces, 1964-2015," *Journal of Arabian Studies* (2016): 11.

Victor Gervais, "Du Pétrole À L'armée : Les Stratégies De Construction De L'état Aux Émirats Arabes Unis," in *Études de l'IRSEM* (Paris: Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire (IRSEM), 2011), 115-26.

Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE," 449-550.

John Willoughby, "Segmented Feminization and the Decline of Neopatriarchy in GCC Countries of the Persian Gulf," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008): 184.

²⁷ Thomas A Birkland, "Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting," *Journal of Public Policy* 18, no. 1 (1998): 54-55.

Rooted in scholarly assessments, this paper argues that the invasion and decimation of Kuwait in 1990 is a quintessential focusing event that energized the key policy entrepreneur, Mohammed bin Zayed, to change Emirati policy.

The second part of the ACF examines the policy subsystem itself and how beliefs and resources combine with strategies to shape the environment to lead changes in governmental decisions, which change institutional rules, which lead to policy outputs and impacts. The research explaining the changes within the policy subsystem stems from extended periods of time traveling to and living in the Gulf region, during which time interviews were conducted with local academics, diplomats, and serving military officers of various nations. Freedom of Information requests for annual Ambassadorial and Defence Attaché reports from the UK Embassy in Abu Dhabi were also critical in providing detail on the development of Emirati military forces in the 2000s.

The article proceeds as follows. First, the literature on the military effectiveness of Arab forces is examined as the backdrop against which, second, contemporary Emirati military successes in Yemen are elucidated and appear even more unusual. Saudi military failures are also noted. Third, the shaping conditions of the Emirati policy milieu are outlined before, fourth, the machinations within the policy subsystem are considered. Fifth, the article reflects on the roots of the UAE's exceptionalism before concluding.

Military Effectiveness in the Arab World

Defining military effectiveness is not straightforward. Traditionally, basic metrics related to large populations, acquisition of military matériel, or military expenditure were acceptable proxies for military power.²⁸ But Biddle shows that there is a negligible link between such metrics and their translation into military power and victory on the battlefield.²⁹ Scholars thus focus on the concept of military effectiveness as a better way to assess the translation of raw material capabilities into military power.³⁰ Military effectiveness remains ‘a property intrinsic to a particular military or military units’ such that, though any unit or force will operate in an environment replete with external stimuli (the terrain, the enemy, defined strategic goals, etc.) the key test revolves around how the military unit *responds* to these challenges and succeeds (or not) in overcoming them.³¹ Indeed, it is important to recognize that a simplistic judgment of ‘who won the war’ is inadequate. A military unit can be highly effective at its job in battle, but wider political machinations may mean that the war is lost. Based on these premises, Talmadge focuses on two key tasks of militaries as the fundamental building blocks of military effectiveness: basic tactics and complex operations.³² This approach takes into account a range of possible types of warfare, from the relatively simple up to contemporary joint operations involving air, sea, and land integration. Also, it reduces the qualitative business of assessing military effectiveness to a workable formula of whether the forces in question performed in an *excellent* fashion, combining successfully basic and complex

²⁸ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 19-27, 192-94.

²⁹ "Explaining Military Outcomes," in *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness*, ed. Risa Brooks and Elizabeth Stanley (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 207-28.

³⁰ For an overview of the different approaches to understanding military effectiveness see Risa Brooks, "Introduction," *ibid.* (Stanford), 2-9.

³¹ Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015). 4-5

³² *Ibid.* 6-8

operations, in an *adequate* fashion, able to do basic operations but not complex ones, or *poorly*, able to complete neither operation.³³

Out of everywhere in the Arab world, the concept of military effectiveness is particularly salient in the Persian Gulf. The six Gulf monarchies have spent over \$1.5 trillion on weapons since records began.³⁴ However, when it comes to assessing their military effectiveness, as Russell puts it, the states are ‘long on hardware, short on power.’³⁵ Such conclusions are reinforced by Norville DeAtkine, a former US Army Colonel with decades of experience working with and training military forces in the Arab world. He concludes that fundamentally different cultural approaches of western and Arab military forces mean that ‘decades of Western-led military training on western military kit has been – and will be – an exercise in ‘pounding square pegs into round holes.’’³⁶

Arguably the leading scholar of Arab military effectiveness is Dr. Kenneth Pollack, formerly a CIA Gulf military analyst, Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs and later Persian Gulf Affairs at the US National Security Council. He has written extensively on Arab militaries motivated to explain ‘What’s wrong with the Arab armies? Why do they lose so many wars that by all rights they should win? And why is it that when they do win, their victories tend to be so modest, if not outright pyrrhic?’³⁷ In his 2019 book, Pollack examines

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Sipri Database."

³⁵ Richard L Russell, "Future Gulf War," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 55 (2009).

³⁶ Norville B DeAtkine, "Western Influence on Arab Militaries: Pounding Square Pegs into Round Holes," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2013).

"Why Arabs Lose Wars," *The Middle East Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (December 1999).

³⁷ Pollack, *Armies of Sand*. ix

potential causes of this underperformance. He discusses and dismisses Soviet doctrine, politicization, economic underdevelopment as particularly causative and refines his earlier theses arguing that Arab culture is the core problem. He sees Arab cultural ‘patterns and predilections’ that act on military effectiveness as being conformity, centralization of authority, deference to authority and passivity, group loyalty, manipulation of information, atomization of knowledge, personal courage, and ambivalence towards manual labor and technical work.³⁸ He subsequently matches these patterns to practice in military organizations, then in civilian organizations, all tied together by Arab culture deeply influencing Arab education providing the causal link.³⁹ Confirming conclusions from his earlier book, these cultural tropes thus mean that Arab forces suffer particularly from poor tactical leadership, poor information management, poor weapons handling, and poor maintenance.⁴⁰ Pollack assiduously defends himself from the charge that he is taking an Orientalist approach, noting that dealing with such an issue is akin to ‘working with nitroglycerin.’⁴¹ Under the subtitle ‘No Judgments’, he inoculates his analysis from drawing wider value judgments about the ‘superiority’ of a culture and, in by far his most heavily footnoted chapter, he carefully develops his argument and explains his understanding of ‘Arab culture.’⁴²

These critiques must neither be lightly dismissed nor simply castigated as Orientalist and thus ignored and subject to ideologically-rooted opprobrium. Many scholars will, nevertheless, struggle epistemologically to agree to a logic that places such explanatory weight on

³⁸ Ibid. 368-393

³⁹ Ibid. 394-439

⁴⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 574.

⁴¹ *Armies of Sand*. 343

⁴² Ibid. 353-354, 368-393

monocausal factors.⁴³ Arguing that Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Druze men and women from tribal and urban backgrounds, who grew up in the depths of Yemen, the multicultural melting pot of Beirut, the hills of Morocco, and the international metropolis of Dubai are significantly and specifically shaped and directed by an amorphous concept like ‘Arab culture’ is simplistic. Generalizations about how ‘relatively few Arab personnel had...[a] basic understanding of machinery’ – as if Western soldiers emerge somehow cognisant of ‘machinery’ – or how Arabs have ‘an aversion to manual work’, leave readers puzzled as to how such an experienced analyst could make such crass assertions.⁴⁴

Moreover, too many discrepancies and inconvenient realities appear and are explained away, while other explanations are dismissed too readily. Pollack highlights six case studies of Arab forces that did not fail and achieved limited objectives from 1948 to recent Da’esh campaigns. On each occasion, he provides discrete reasons as to why they overcame the ‘impediment’ of Arab culture. They include directive roles played by British commanders, the small and elite nature of the forces, the discrete nature of the campaigns, and high levels of zeal motivating the forces.⁴⁵ The weight of contemporary history may still suggest a curious underperformance of Arab military forces, but the reader wonders how many exceptions can be explained away and what it would take for the core case to be falsified.⁴⁶

Exacerbating this issue is the reality that we know that Pollack has championed cultural

⁴³ Peter Jackson, "Pierre Bourdieu, the ‘Cultural Turn’ and the Practice of International History," *Review of International Studies* 34, no. 1 (2008). 156-163

Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (London: Hurst & Co., 2009). 6-19, 24-32, 55-6, 192-198

Arjun Chowdhury, "Shocked by War: The Non-Politics of Orientalism," in *Orientalism and War*, ed. Tarak Barkawi and Keith Stanski (London: Hurst & Co, 2012). 19-37

⁴⁴ Pollack, *Armies of Sand*. 511, 402

⁴⁵ Ibid. 452-510

⁴⁶ Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes*. 57-84

conclusions since 1988 with his Ph.D. thesis.⁴⁷ As scholars have noted concerning his 2004 and his 2019 book, there are real conceptual and methodological questions to be raised regarding his approach that at times seems to be retrofitted with the conclusions coming first.⁴⁸ His examination of the minutiae of Arab battles can, as Neff suggested, read more like ‘the compilation of the undigested field notes for a war college seminar’ such that it gets lost in detail.⁴⁹ Such relentless critique is reminiscent of Officer Controller Syndrome, the phenomenon of the propensity of military evaluators to find myriad problems with ‘other’ units they are assessing. Add to this that swathes of the 2019 book’s references are dated, and its wider approach can feel anachronistic.

A more plausible area of explanation as to the underperformance of Arab militaries is rooted in politics and associated civil military relations. Specifically, the phenomenon of coup proofing refers to the myriad ways that politicians actively politicize their armed forces to undercut their effectiveness lest they pose a threat to their rule such that ‘even where it may be in a *state*’s best interest to perform... key tasks, the *regime* ruling a given state may eschew the benefits of conventional military effectiveness because of the coup risk that such expertise poses [*italics in original*].’⁵⁰ First, autocratic leaders manipulate loyalties in their militaries. This takes many forms. Loyalty to the leader can be fostered via ‘ethnic, religious, and personal bonds’ such as empowering specific minorities (‘ethnic stacking’), or by

⁴⁷ Kenneth M Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness" (MIT, 1988).

⁴⁸ Risa A Brooks, "Making Military Might: Why Do States Fail and Succeed?: A Review Essay," *International Security* 28, no. 2 (2003).

Daniel Moran, "Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991, by Kenneth M. Pollack," *Strategic Insights* III, no. 1 (January 2004).

Dov Zakheim, "Kenneth Pollack’s New History of Arab Armies," *The National Interest* (10 February 2019).

⁴⁹ Donald Neff, "Faulting Junior Officers," *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXXIV (Summer 2005).

⁵⁰ Talmadge, *Dictator's Army*. 237

Mehran Kamrava, "Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 1 (2000).

allowing the military to profit financially.⁵¹ Second, autocrats create duplicate competing and mutually-suspicious forces to counterbalance each other.⁵² This explains why some states, such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia, created ‘fourth forces’ to balance the state’s traditional armed forces.⁵³ Third, some literature suggests that fostering international alliances can enhance the incumbent’s power ‘since plotters would have to assume that status quo oriented foreign powers would stand by their allies.’⁵⁴

Other political actions in the Arab world undermine the effectiveness of their military forces. Brooks persuasively argues that a proclivity for heavily centralized decision-making in highly stratified societies in the Arab world detrimentally impacts upon the nature of civil-military relations and the construction of an effective military.⁵⁵ Examples backing up her conclusions are provided from Syria and Iraq, while the Gulf monarchies also experience acutely centralized decision-making by either key individuals or small groups of (usually) royals.⁵⁶ Such centralized leadership fosters a competitive atmosphere at elite levels and leads to the creation of fiefs that undermine inter-service and intra-service coordination. Drawing on

⁵¹ Holger Albrecht, "The Myth of Coup-Proofing: Risk and Instances of Military Coups D'état in the Middle East and North Africa, 1950–2013," *Armed Forces & Society* 41, no. 4 (2015). 661

Kristen A Harkness, "The Ethnic Army and the State: Explaining Coup Traps and the Difficulties of Democratization in Africa," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no. 4 (2016). 587-611

⁵² Steffen Hertog, "Rentier Militaries in the Gulf States: The Price of Coup-Proofing," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 03 (2011).

James T Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999). 131-165

Brooks, "Civil Military Relations in the Middle East," p.136-8.

⁵³ Cronin, *Armies and State Building*, Chapter 5.

Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing." 133

⁵⁴ Albrecht, "The Myth of Coup-Proofing: Risk and Instances of Military Coups D'état in the Middle East and North Africa, 1950–2013." 661

⁵⁵ Brooks, "Civil Military Relations in the Middle East," 141-43.

Risa A Brooks, "Integrating the Civil–Military Relations Subfield," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019). 379-393

⁵⁶ Gause III, "Understanding the Gulf States," 31.

Stam's work, she argues that this means that 'these militaries will be at a systematic disadvantage in maneuver warfare,' the standard contemporary approach to warfighting.⁵⁷

Rubin charges that in the Arab world procurement is consistently undertaken 'based on the military commanders' preference – i.e. a political choice – rather than on the nation's need for arms or the armed forces' ability to maintain them.'⁵⁸ Anthony Cordesman, the most prolific author focusing on the Gulf militaries writing in Arabic or English, echoes these sentiments describing procurement as too often driven by leaders' desire for the 'glitter factor' rather than for meaningful operational and strategic rationales.⁵⁹ In terms of civil-military relations, in contrast to democratic states where citizens have instilled a nominal say in how the state is governed by the ballot box, in much of the Arab world this is not the case. Gregory Gause, arguably the leading expert on the Gulf monarchies, argues that the nature of the Gulf ruler-ruled relationship stemming from an oil-based rentier bargain means that Gulf governments are reluctant to press their citizens into the military lest such a move was to 'bring forth pressure for citizens to have a say in state policy.'⁶⁰

These authors are joined by regional experts commenting on the lack of seriousness in the realm of military affairs. Many argue that the over-promotion of royals in the Gulf and the

⁵⁷ Brooks, "Civil Military Relations in the Middle East," 143.

Allan C Stam, *Win, Lose, or Draw: Domestic Politics and the Crucible of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

⁵⁸ Barry Rubin, "The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 1 (March 2001).

⁵⁹ Anthony H Cordesman, *The Gulf Military Balance: Volume I: The Conventional and Asymmetric Dimensions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 50.

⁶⁰ Gregory Gause III, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994), 119.

wider lack of meritocracy is pervasive and acutely detrimental to overall efficiency and belies the notion that the governments are serious about creating military power.⁶¹ These critiques chime with those who argue that military forces are not kitted out and trained as meaningful defenders of the homeland. Instead, aside from the aforementioned ‘glitter factor’ as a rationale for procurement, Sorenson argues that a desire to buy or rent protection from the US via huge military purchases better explains procurement than a desire for capability.⁶²

But there is no scientific method to determine how, when, or if a state will engage in such practices. Data shows that elites are far more likely to be hit by a coup within their first few years of power.⁶³ But the threat does not dissipate in non-democracies; in the language of Samuel Finer, author of the seminal work *The Man on Horseback*, this just means that while the *opportunities* for a coup may dissipate over time, the *disposition* does not.⁶⁴ Scholars find that leaders engage in coup proofing not when there is a threat but when they (the leader) is strong, pre-empting the build-up of tension.⁶⁵ Ultimately Talmadge argues that decisions to coup-proof are contingent upon the personalities of the leaders in question and circumstances

⁶¹ Anthony H Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century*, vol. 1 (Westport & London: Praeger), 143 & 284.

Rubin, "The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics," 58-61.

William Taylor, *Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings and the Future of Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East: Analysis from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria* (New York: Springer, 2014), 75 & 129.

Cronin, *Armies and State Building*, Chapter 5.

Daniel L Byman and Jerrold D Green, "The Enigma of Political Stability in the Persian Gulf Monarchies," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1999).

⁶² David S Sorenson, "Why the Saudi Arabian Defence Binge?," *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 1 (2014).

Rubin, "The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics," 49.

Colum Lynch, "Arms Sales and the Militarization of the Middle East," *Foreign Policy* (22 October 2013). Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Hurst & Co., 2012), 163-69.

⁶³ Albrecht, "The Myth of Coup-Proofing: Risk and Instances of Military Coups D'état in the Middle East and North Africa, 1950–2013." 661

⁶⁴ Samuel E Finer, *The Man on Horseback* (London: Pall Mall Press (Routledge), 1962 (2017)). 21

⁶⁵ Jun Koga Sudduth, "Strategic Logic of Elite Purges in Dictatorships," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 13 (2017). 1768-1796

"Coup Risk, Coup-Proofing and Leader Survival," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 1 (2017). 3-15

they face, and she offers two indicators to guide judgment for understanding when leaders may need to coup-proof their regimes: ‘the strength of the regime’s institutions and its civil-military history.’⁶⁶.

Thus, as a non-democracy, the literature argues that the UAE remains vulnerable to coups, even though, decades into his *de facto* rule, Mohammed bin Zayed has long past the early years when rulers are most vulnerable.⁶⁷ Also, analysis of Talmadge’s variables suggests that the UAE ought to coup-proof in a relatively heavy way. Not only is the state not even fifty years old, having received independence in 1971, meaning that its institutions are young and thus more potentially susceptible to politicization. But the UAE’s armed forces have only been united for a matter of decades, meaning that it would be plausible to have concerns about split loyalties between lingering elements of federal forces versus the wider national sentiment. Moreover, the UAE is a state dominated by key individuals who dominate both the military and the state apparatus, further making coup-proofing more likely.⁶⁸

In summary, the literature on the effectiveness of Arab militaries presents two challenges for this article to address. First, there is relative unanimity that Arab military forces have, *ceteris paribus*, fared surprisingly poorly in recent history. No example exists thus far of an Arab state successfully undertaking a combined arms expeditionary military operation at scale in hostile territory. Thus, in challenging this finding, this article must cut against much of the

⁶⁶ Talmadge, *Dictator's Army*. 19-20

⁶⁷ It should be said that the literature deals ineptly with the difference between *de facto* and *de jure* rule. Were Mohammed bin Zayed to become *de jure* leader tomorrow after decades of *de facto* power, he would not be as vulnerable as a genuinely new individual that emerged to power. But such subtleties are lost in the literature, which requires further disambiguation.

⁶⁸ Talmadge, *Dictator's Army*. 21

literature to provide a compelling case of an Arab state successfully undertaking complex, coordinated, contemporary conflictual operations. Second, explanations for this underperformance vary. Cultural explanations are prevalent but are problematically dependent on one single sweeping explanatory factor. Explanations rooted in the politicization of Arab military forces, which lead to a range of practices deleterious to military effectiveness such as coup-proofing, antagonistic civil-military relations, and whimsical procurement, are more persuasive. This article will first challenge the literature using the example of the UAE undertaking successful paradigm-challenging operations. Consequently, this article must then engage and explain how the UAE managed to escape both essentialist and politicization-based explanations for Arab military underperformance.

Yemen: Testing the Rule

The preponderance of analysis critiquing the effectiveness of Arab military forces is reinforced by the performance of Saudi Arabia in the 2015- conflict in Yemen. The state found itself fighting a similar conflict with the Houthis on its shared border as in 2009-2010 when Riyadh was forced to sue for an ignominious peace after being fought to a bloody stalemate.⁶⁹ Even though the Saudi in charge of this debacle, Prince Khalid bin Sultan Al-Saud, was sacked in 2013 and lessons were supposed to be learned, the 2015 intervention went, if anything, worse.⁷⁰ Saudi was unable to secure its border with the Houthis and, four

⁶⁹ Lauren Gelfand, "Saudi Arabia Launches New Air Offensive in Northern Yemen," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (21 January 2010).

"Saudi Prince Reports Recovery of Dead Soldiers on Yemeni Border," *Jane's Terrorism Watch Report - Daily Update* (26 January 2010).

Lucas Winter, "Riyadh Enters the Yemen-Huthi Fray," *The Middle East Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2012).

"Sitrep on Saudi Military Operations against the Houthis," *Wikileaks* (23 December 2009), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09RIYADH1667_a.html.

⁷⁰ Abeer Allam, "Saudi King Sacks Deputy Defence Minister," *Financial Times* 21 April 2013.

years in, the core priority to remove the missile threat from the Houthis remains unfulfilled with Scuds being regularly launched deep into Saudi Arabia.⁷¹ In response to these ongoing failures, as in 2009, Saudi forces increased the employment of a blunt coercive bombing campaign.⁷² This failed to force the Houthis to capitulate and political objectives remained unfulfilled.⁷³ Though the Houthis are responsible for scores of civilian deaths through launching un-aimed missiles at Saudi cities or by using anti-aircraft fire as artillery, the preponderance of casualties and destruction stems from Saudi actions.⁷⁴ And, as ever with the use of air power in such a cluttered war among the people, there have been egregious mistakes with wedding parties and children's busses attacked by mistake.⁷⁵

There are occasional articles alluding to the efficacy of Saudi SOF and its border guard, and in private Saudis cognisant of the campaign insist that, though problems exist, the conflict is progressing better than it is being reported.⁷⁶ Also, perversely, the failure of Saudi strategies to stop the Houthis launching Scud missiles means that Saudi (and Emirati) operators of Patriot anti-missile batteries are the most practiced in the world.⁷⁷ But such analysis is rare

⁷¹ "Gulf States News (Gsn)," (London: Cross Border Information, 3 November 2016).

"Interactive: The Missile War in Yemen".

⁷² Ralph Shield, "The Saudi Air War in Yemen: A Case for Coercive Success through Battlefield Denial," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2017).

⁷³ Daniel Byman, "Yemen's Disastrous War," *Survival* 60, no. 5 (2018): 147.

Shield, "Saudi Air War," 462, 68-73.

⁷⁴ Saudi planes outnumber the rest of the coalition air power approximately 10:1.

"Situation of Human Rights in Yemen," in *Human Rights Council, Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner* (United Nations, 4 August 2016), 8.

Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 2): The Air Campaign," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* 11 August 2015.

Declan Walsh, "The Tragedy of Saudi Arabia's War," *The New York Times* 26 October 2018.

⁷⁵ Salma Abdelaziz, Alla Eshchenko, and Joe Sterling, "Saudi-Led Coalition Admits 'Mistakes' Made in Deadly Bus Attack in Yemen," *CNN* (2 September 2018), <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/01/middleeast/saudi-coalition-yemen-attack/index.html>.

⁷⁶ Interview #177: Senior Saudi Military Advisor 2 December 2016.

Omar Mohammed and Michael Stephens, "Casus Belli," *Newsweek* (25 May 2016), <http://newsweekme.com/casus-belli/>.

⁷⁷ David Des Roches, "GCC Security," in *World Congress of Middle East Studies* (Seville, Spain 2018).

and not reflective of the wider open source material. Though the difficult nature of the conflict's mountainous terrain should not be ignored, its location on the Saudi border means that it remains well within Saudi's operational reach. Overall, the continued inability to control its own border or stop Houthi ballistic missile strikes confirms that Saudi faces problems efficiently creating and deploying military power.

In the south of Yemen, UAE forces experienced a very different war. Operation Golden Arrow was the UAE-conceived and led plan to recapture Aden, Yemen's second city and largest and most important port.⁷⁸ Initially, the UAE sought US assistance planning the operation but was rebuffed, notably with the refusal to loan a US landing craft. This was because the US neither believed the UAE capable of such operations nor wanted to get as involved in Yemen.⁷⁹ Instead, the UAE purchased its own craft and built a network of bases around the Horn of Africa.⁸⁰ Emiratis worked alongside local and international allies to set the conditions for an amphibious assault; Aden was under Houthi control, thus a landing space needed to be secured. As Knights and Mello detail, this involved coordinating multinational use of suppressing naval gunfire, air-strikes, and pallet drops to supply local forces. Coordinating with Yemeni forces, Emirati SOF from the Presidential Guard were inserted into Aden, repulsing multiple Houthi counterattacks, to secure a bridgehead. This enabled a bold amphibious operation, supported by close air support from fast-jets and Apache helicopter gunships, that allowed the UAE to land troops and vehicles to secure their

⁷⁸ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*, E Book ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 208-12.

⁷⁹ Mazzetti and Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis."
Interview #158 (Emirati Policy Advisor), 25 October 2016.

⁸⁰ Diana Alghoul, "The Gulf Arabs' Military Expansion in the Horn of Africa," *Middle East Monitor* 31 December 2016.

advantage. Ultimately, the UAE landed approximately 3,000 of their own troops including SOF and regular armed forces and an array of equipment including nearly half the their Leclerc tank inventory, armoured recovery vehicles, hundreds of Oshkosh Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs), dozens of BMP-3m infantry fighting vehicles, self-propelled howitzers, mortar carriers, and a range of logistical support trucks. After securing Aden and breaking out to secure nearby bases and towns, the UAE (and international allies) increasingly used Aden International Airport and Al-Anad Air Base as the operations base for Apache gunships, Bell 407 light attack helicopters, drones, and AT-802 light strike aircraft.⁸¹

Such a series of unprecedented operations from March to July 2015 belie the essentialist critiques of Arab militaries. For example, the multinational nature of operations mandated a close sharing of information lest severe ‘blue-on-blue’ friendly-fire incidents were to have occurred, a sentiment that explicitly cuts against expectations that Arab forces struggle with centralization of authority and that they tend to atomize knowledge. Similarly, in a successful multinational coalition, the prioritization of group loyalties, another apparent Arab trait, could not transpire in a successful mission of this variety. Lastly, the profound logistical requirements of shipping and supplying the dozens of types of military equipment that the UAE transported to the Yemeni fronts deeply undercuts assumptions that Arab forces are intrinsically poor at the logistics of warfare (because of their predilections against mechanical work).

⁸¹ Knights and Mello, "The Saudi-UAE War P1." Roberts and Hokayem, "Reassessing Gulf Security," 169. Jeremy Binnie, "Analysis: Emirati Armoured Brigade Spearheads Aden Breakout," *Jane's Defence Weekly* 7 August 2015.

Such operations must be judged as successful using Talmadge's concept of military effectiveness as they so clearly displayed the mixing of both basic and complex military tasks towards a given end. Each objective could easily not have been met. Rooting out the Houthis from Aden could have descended into a city-bound fight, which inevitably leads to significant civilian deaths. Similarly, even though the Houthis do not enjoy widespread support in the south (as they hail from the north), forcing them to retreat from hard-fought gains was no foregone conclusion. Moreover, without a history of planning for such an operation, the UAE evidenced immense flexibility and adaptability, characteristics that essentialist readings of Arab military forces do not envisage.

After Aden, Emirati forces turned eastwards to root out Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) from strongholds as in Mukalla.⁸² These kinds of operations required a very different skillset compared to Golden Arrow. The AQAP grip in Yemen's east was clear; they broadcast festivals to demonstrate their control over the administration of whole towns.⁸³ But the UAE approach, based on recent western counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine, was nuanced.⁸⁴ COIN relies, perhaps above all else, on careful information management based on intelligence so that forces do not antagonize local populations while at the same time not overlooking or ignoring hostile actors mixed up in local populations. While AQAP's presence diminished because of Emirati actions, which suggests it was a successful operation

⁸² Michael Knights, "The UAE Approach to Counterinsurgency in Yemen," *War on the Rocks* (23 May 2016), <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/the-u-a-e-approach-to-counterinsurgency-in-yemen/>.
Nicholas A Heras, "'Security Belt': The Uae's Tribal Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen," in *Terrorism Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation, June 2017).

Kyle Monsees, "The Uae's Counterinsurgency Conundrum in Southern Yemen," *Arab Gulf States Institute Washington* 18 August 2016.

⁸³ Michael Horton, "Fighting the Long War: The Evolution of Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 1 (2017).

⁸⁴ Adam Baron, "The Gulf Country That Will Shape the Future of Yemen," *The Atlantic* (2 September 2018).

in the interim, the literature rightly notes that it is impossible to yet know whether these successes are permanent.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the change of pace from (relatively) major combat operations to COIN is one that many western forces struggle with. For UAE forces to sweep so quickly east and then north suggests that the UAE became, at the very least, highly adept at maintaining its forces, while its wider successes could hardly have been achieved if its forces were poor at the basics like handling weapons. To put this into perspective, a clear majority of NATO nations would struggle to perform any kind of operation analogous to Operation Golden Arrow.

These operations are the culmination of years of increasingly offensive Emirati exercises and deployments. The state has undertaken 13 military deployments since independence in 1971 as in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Libya, which is far more than any other Arab state. While the number of deployments alone is not critical, the nature of the UAE's forays is important and regionally unusual. Emirati fast jets, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and troops that were to make up the UAE Presidential Guard were deployed to Afghanistan for 11 years to contribute to the ISAF mission.⁸⁶ They were not there as a public relations exercise, but as contributing troops to the mission and to oversee the dispersal of Emirati aid.⁸⁷ The core point

⁸⁵ Byman, "Yemen's Disastrous War," 151.

⁸⁶ Kenneth Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates: Issues for US Policy," (Congressional Research Service 21 August 2018), 16.

"Scenesetter for Your Visit and Attendance at the 2009 Dubai Air Show," *Wikileaks* (12 November 2009), <https://cablegatesearch.wikileaks.org/cable.php?id=09ABUDHABI862>.

⁸⁷ Daniel P Brown and Ariel I Ahram, "Jordan and the United Arab Emirates: Arab Partners in Afghanistan," ed. Gale A Mattox and Stephen M Grenier, *Coalition Challenges in Afghanistan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 209.

of operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan was to get UAE forces used to the nuts and bolts of engaging with modern equipment, in large numbers, in far-flung territories.⁸⁸

The Emirati use of air power was similarly unusual. Alongside Australia, the UAE was the only non-NATO force trusted to provide hundreds of close air support missions for NATO troops on the ground and took an active role in bombing Taliban positions.⁸⁹ That Emirati pilots were trusted to quickly and accurately drop bombs in proximity to NATO forces indicates that they are seen and treated as pilots nearly on a par with their western counterparts. No other Arab state can say this. This level of expertise was mirrored in the Yemeni conflict where Saudi pilots, in contrast to Emirati counterparts, were criticized for lacking the skills to fly low enough to target effectively.⁹⁰ The key differentiating factor between these sets of pilots is the UAE pilots' abilities to react in real time to information and act accordingly – something that acutely relies on the sharing of information and a delegation of command. Another air element is the UAE Joint Aviation Command (JAC). Larger numerically than its Air Force, the JAC, headed by a former American Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Toumajan who became a Major General in the UAE military, operates all SOF aircraft and attack helicopters.⁹¹ They are often credited with playing decisive roles supporting in both the break-out from Aden and wider operations.⁹²

⁸⁸ CJB Copeland, "Defence Attache United Arab Emirates Valedictory Report - 1998," *Defence Section, Foreign and Commonwealth Office* (August 1998).

⁸⁹ Chandrasekaran, "Little Sparta."

Hussein Ibish, "The Uae's Evolving National Security Strategy," *Arab Gulf States Institute Washington* (April 2017). 19

⁹⁰ Mazzetti and Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis."

Interview #159 (Gulf-Based Nato Military Officer).

Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Sales to Saudis Leave American Fingerprints on Yemen's Carnage," *The New York Times* 25 December 2018.

⁹¹ Interview #180: Former UAE-Based Military Officer, 12 June 2019.

⁹² Interview #159 (Gulf-Based Nato Military Officer).

As with every military campaign, the UAE struggled at times and failed to achieve objectives. Heavy casualties were suffered as they pushed northwards and the Houthis remain implacable and ensconced in Sana'a and in strategic cities like Hodeida.⁹³ Similarly, it must not be forgotten that the majority of the successful operations undertaken by the UAE noted here were led by the Presidential Guard, the Air Force, with the JAC in support. The role of the UAE Army, as distinct from the Presidential Guard, in Yemen remains opaque. Thus, conclusions about wider Emirati military effectiveness need to be measured.

Nevertheless, multiple vignettes from the UAE's recent history and its operations in Yemen, conducted over 3000km from home bases, clearly counter the argument that there are essentialist issues within Arab culture that undercut military effectiveness. For its operations in Yemen's south and against AQAP to have gone so successfully, the UAE simply had to have accomplished a litany of basic and complex military tasks to an 'excellent' level.

Among niche military and security communities in the Gulf and in key western capitals, even before operations in Yemen, the UAE military (or at least, key parts thereof) developed an axiomatic reputation as demonstrably the most proficient military in the Gulf region.⁹⁴

The Advocacy Coalition Framework

The ACF examines how change happens in policy subsystems by structuring analysis. First, it suggests that contextual shaping conditions need to be understood. Specifically, it sees

⁹³ Byman, "Yemen's Disastrous War," 148, 51.

⁹⁴ "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance* 117, no. 1 (2019). 372-3

Interview #64 (Serving UK Officer in a Gulf Military), 21 June 2012.

Interview #16 (Senior Gulf Based NATO Military Officer), 19 September 2015.

Interview #177: Senior Saudi Military Advisor

change within the policy subsystem resulting from endogenous and exogenous shaping factors often referred to, respectively, as ‘relatively stable parameters’ and ‘focusing events’. In this study, this translates into focusing on Mohammed bin Zayed’s rise to power as the core endogenous factor, and the impact of the 1990 invasion of Kuwait as the key exogenous shaping factor. The second part of the ACF examines the policy subsystem itself and how beliefs and resources combine with strategies to shape the environment to lead changes in governmental decisions, which change institutional rules, which lead to policy outputs and impacts.

Contextual Shaping Conditions

One of the most influential sons of the founding UAE President, Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, Mohammed bin Zayed became Chief of Staff of the military at the end of 1992.⁹⁵ By the time he was made Deputy Commander of the Armed Forces on the death of his father in 2004, according to reports from the British Embassy in Abu Dhabi procured for this research and leaked secret US diplomatic cables, he was already the de facto decision-maker in the military.⁹⁶ By 2009 US cables refer to Mohammed bin Zayed as ‘the man who runs the United Arab Emirates... [and is] ...the key decision maker on national security issues.’⁹⁷ This is important as the ACF assesses such developments as a change in the ‘systemic governing’ arena. Moreover, given that the UAE was and remains an autocratic state where the leader’s

⁹⁵ Christopher Davidson, "After Shaikh Zayed: The Politics of Succession in Abu Dhabi and the UAE," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 1 (2006).

David Kirkpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler Isn't M.B.S. It's M.B.Z.," *The New York Times* 2 June 2019.

⁹⁶ Copeland, "Valedictory Report 1998."

TR Dumas, "Defence Attache Annual Report on the United Arab Emirates 1999/2000," (April 2000); Anthony Harris, "Abu Dhabi: Annual Review 1997," (London: MED, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, December 1997); Interview #142 (Former Ambassador to the UAE), 19 September 2015.

⁹⁷ "Scenesetter for the President's Meeting with Shaykh Mohammed Bin Zayed," *Wikileaks* (31 August 2009), <https://cablegatesearch.wikileaks.org/cable.php?id=09ABUDHABI862>.

role is privileged, the ‘basic constitutional structure’ and the ‘fundamental sociocultural values and social structure’, two further facets of the ACF’s typology, endow Mohammed bin Zayed with significant power and resources.⁹⁸

In terms of exogenous factors, this study discusses the 1990 invasion of Kuwait as a critical focusing event.⁹⁹ A key inflection point in the modern history of the region, the surprise invasion changed the character of the region’s security architecture.¹⁰⁰ Previously, the US played an important ‘off-shore balancing’ role. But it did not have tens of thousands of troops pre-positioned on the Arabian Peninsula and was shunned by some monarchies such as their dislike of the US’s close Israeli relations.¹⁰¹ But the 1990 invasion shifted cost-benefit calculations. For the Gulf states, the analogies were clear. Kuwait, a small, hydrocarbon-rich state with a minimal defense force was easily invaded and decimated by a larger regional neighbor. Saudi leaders ditched their policy of five decades – keeping US forces over the horizon – and within two days agreed to accept over half-a-million western troops to defend Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait, and the other monarchies followed suit. After the liberation, US military bases remained in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE, and most have only expanded ever since.¹⁰² The invasion of Kuwait as a focusing event had different effects on different monarchies. The specific character of each state’s

⁹⁸ Sabatier and Weible, "The ACF." 191

⁹⁹ Ibish, "UAE National Security." 13-17

¹⁰⁰ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Dynamics of Change in the Persian Gulf: Political Economy, War and Revolution* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 196-202.

¹⁰¹ Geoffrey F Gresh, *Gulf Security and the US Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), Chapter 6.

Charles A Kupchan, *The Persian Gulf and the West: The Dilemmas of Security* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1987), Chapter 6.

¹⁰² Micah Zenko, "US Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal," in *IS and Americas Programme* (Chatham House, October 2018), 3-5.

policy subsystem, and the prime importance of the proclivities of leaders, translated this exogenous impact into different types of policies.¹⁰³

The Policy Subsystem

Beliefs & Resources

Within the UAE policy subsystem, Mohammed bin Zayed is the core policy entrepreneur who drove change. Two key themes energized Mohammed bin Zayed from his emergence through to today and can be identified as motivating his desire to augment and strengthen UAE military and security policies. As former US Ambassador to the UAE Richard Olson put it, Mohammed bin Zayed is convinced that the UAE has two enemies, “Iran and terrorism.”¹⁰⁴

Like counterparts around the Islamic Middle East who are concerned about ideational threats, the Abu Dhabi political milieu has long been acutely perturbed with the growth of Islamist groups within the UAE.¹⁰⁵ Leaked US secret diplomatic cables frequently remark on Mohammed bin Zayed’s preoccupation with this threat.¹⁰⁶ A niche advocacy coalition

¹⁰³ For a detailed exploration of how regional events are interpreted differently by differing regional ruling elites see Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE." 549-561

¹⁰⁴ "Strong Words in Private from Mbz at Idex," *Wikileaks* (25 February 2009).

¹⁰⁵ Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE." 556

Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance: Ideational Treats in Arab Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). 4-10

Coates Ulrichsen, *The UAE*. Location 2185-2260, 5473-5600

¹⁰⁶ "UAE Minimizing Influence of Islamic Extremists," *Wikileaks* 10 November 2004.

Martin Quinn, "UAE Dismisses Academics with Presumed Islamist Leanings," *ibid.* (20 September 2007), http://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07ABUDHABI1567_A.html.

Michele J Sison, "Scenesetter for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Advisor Visit to the UAE," *Wikileaks* (10 April 2006), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06ABUDHABI1401_a.html.

Martin Quinn, "Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Stresses Education in Countering Islamic Extremism," *ibid.* (20 May 2008), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08ABUDHABI619_a.html.

emerged around Mohammed bin Zayed shaping and reinforcing a world-view that promoted a ‘Jeffersonian’ approach to, wherever possible, separate organized religious groups from power.¹⁰⁷ As elsewhere in the ACF literature, it is possible to find influential founders of quangos (quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations linked to the state via funding like a Council, Foundation, or Commission) who can be interpreted as members of relevant coalitions.

Dr. Jamal Al-Suwaidi has long been a close confidant of Mohammed bin Zayed. His think-tank, the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR), was founded in 1994 to provide Mohammed bin Zayed with ‘intelligence analysis.’¹⁰⁸ Today, the ECSSR remains government-funded and is the most established and vocal think-tank in the UAE, publishing a range of hawkish articles and books. Notably, Dr. Al-Suwaidi has long espoused a deep mistrust for political Islam, as he wrote extensively in his book, *The Mirage*.¹⁰⁹ The ECSSR and is also notably hawkish on Iran.¹¹⁰

The Muslim Council of Elders and the Tabah Institute were founded and designed to promote alternative, more quietist, strains of Islamic thought and practice: ‘ideational balancing’, as Rubin puts it.¹¹¹ And given that the Abu Dhabi leadership views political Islam as near-

¹⁰⁷ David B Roberts, "Mosque and State: The United Arab Emirates' Secular Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* (18 March 2016).

¹⁰⁸ Michele J Sison, "UAE Think Tank Director Speaks out on Iran, Iraq, and the UAE," in *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (Abu Dhabi, UAE: Wikileaks, 10 May 2006).

Christopher Davidson, *Abu Dhabi: Oil and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). 113

¹⁰⁹ Jamal Sanad Al Suwaidi, *The Mirage*, 7th ed. (Abu Dhabi: ECSSR, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Sison, "Think Tank Director Speaks Out."

Davidson, *Abu Dhabi*. 113

¹¹¹ James Dorsey, "Fighting for the Soul of Islam," in *RSIS Commentaries* (Nanyang Technological University, 2016).

Rubin, *Islam in Balance*.36-37

inevitably leading to radicalism, well-funded and influential think-tanks have emerged in the counter violent extremism (CVE) space, notably Hedaya, founded and run by Dr. Ali Al-Nuaimi, a man with extensive leadership positions in Abu Dhabi's and the UAE's education sector.¹¹² While these quangos do not enjoy an unfettered civil space, they are encouraged to proselyte along government-sanctioned lines.

Dr. Theodore Karasik, an experienced scholar of the UAE security and defense space, suggested that Major General Khalid Al-Buainain ought to be considered a close confidant and a key member of the immediate coalition around Mohammed bin Zayed as his initial mentor in the forces.¹¹³ An architect of the UAE's air force acquisition plans in the 1990s as the head of the Air Force and Air Defense, Al-Buainain led Emirati delegations at bilateral exercises with the US where he consistently warned about the threat from Iran.¹¹⁴ That Al-Buainain went onto take a founding and then a leading role in a UAE-based security and defense think-tank – the Institute for Near East Gulf Military Analysis – follows a pattern of close, trusted allies, often from military backgrounds, being given the latitude and mandate to found such institutes to be a part of the advocacy coalition.

Countering these threats and putting policy into practice, Mohammed bin Zayed's rise to prominence and power throughout the 1990s coincides directly with various crack-downs on

¹¹² Maqsood Kruse, "Countering Violent Extremism Strategies in the Muslim World," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 668, no. 1 (2016): 202.

¹¹³ Interview with Dr Theodore Karasik, 10 December 2018.

¹¹⁴ "UAE Hosts Annual Eagle Resolve Exercise," *Wikileaks* (26 May 2007), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ABUDHABI1743_a.html.

"Scenesetter for General Abizaid's Visit to the UAE," *Wikileaks* (7 March 2004).

Ivan Gale, "Khalid Al Buainain, Ex-Airforce Top Gun Who Now Drives a Think Tank," *The National* 23 September 2010.

local political Islam group Al-Islah and its activities.¹¹⁵ This included purging Islamists in the Armed Forces, firing sympathizers from government positions, and ultimately jailing some Islamists and banning Al-Islah.¹¹⁶ Moreover, having developed a military instrument over decades, Mohammed used it to combat Islamist forces in Libya and Iraq most notably when the UAE Air Force undertook a bombing raid to support local allies several thousand kilometres away without US knowledge or assistance.¹¹⁷

Mohammed bin Zayed evidenced a similar level of zeal when it comes to countering what he perceived to be a multifaceted, serious threat from Iran. Again, leaked secret US cables paint a picture of a deeply mistrustful individual who wanted to develop an indigenous and credible military power to, as he put in 2008, 'go across the border' if required.¹¹⁸ In this sense, the conflict against the Houthis in Yemen is a combination of these fears. The UAE view is that the Houthis are self-evidently an Iranian proxy force that is also one manifestation of the politicization of Zaydi Shiism.

Energized by these beliefs, Mohammed bin Zayed marshaled resources. World Bank data notes that from 1992 when he was made Chief of Staff, Emirati GDP doubled within a decade (\$54.24bn to \$109.81bn in 2002), and more than tripled by 2012 (\$373.59bn).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE." 556-557

Kirkpatrick, "Most Powerful Arab Ruler."

¹¹⁶ Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE," 554-55.

¹¹⁷ Ian Black, "Uae's Boldness in Libya Reveals New Strains between West and Its Arab Allies," *The Guardian* 26 August 2014.

¹¹⁸ Martin Quinn, "March 11 Gulf Security Dialogue and March 12 Joint Military Committee with UAE," *Wikileaks* (6 March 2008), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08ABUDHABI296_a.html.

"Strong Words in Private from Mbz at Idex."

Kirkpatrick, "Most Powerful Arab Ruler."

¹¹⁹ "Gdp (Current Us\$) United Arab Emirates," *The World Bank* www.data.worldbank.org

Mohammed bin Zayed translated this into defense budget increases of approximately 12% per year.¹²⁰ Though this does not automatically boost military effectiveness, it alleviated budgetary pressures and allowed for a significant expansion in military equipment that the UAE would deploy around the region including in Yemen. He also carefully marshaled the resource of his own time. Until 2012 when he created the state investment vehicle, Mubadala, Mohammed bin Zayed's near-exclusive substantive focus was on the military and its offset group. By regional standards this is unusual and, according to interviews in Abu Dhabi, is an important factor enabling him to effect a quiet revolution in the UAE military.¹²¹

Strategies & Decisions

The shape of the UAE military and the role of foreign trainers changed profoundly under Mohammed bin Zayed's tenure. In 1971, there were approximately 200 mostly British expatriate military officers as trainers, loan-service, and contract officers in the UAE military.¹²² This number dipped throughout the 1980s and early-1990s. By 1993, there were only 28 such expatriates from the UK and seven in 1994.¹²³ This represented the low point in such international cooperation, and Mohammed bin Zayed soon augmented the numbers. He initially turned to the British and the states worked out a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) that was signed in 1998 and constituted 'the strongest written defense commitment that the UK has given to any country outside of NATO.'¹²⁴ That the UAE would turn to the

¹²⁰ "The UAE: Sipri Military Expenditure Database," (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SPPRI), 2015).

¹²¹ Interview #158 (Emirati Policy Advisor).

Interview #157 (Emirati Academic), 25 October 2016.

¹²² Yates, "Western Expatriates in UAE Forces," 7.

¹²³ Copeland, "Valedictory Report 1998."

¹²⁴ Patrick Nixon, "United Arab Emirates: Annual Review 1998," (MED, Foreign and Commonwealth Office December 1998).

UK made sense. Aside from historical links bequeathing a familiarity between elites, the UAE has sent more soldiers to the UK's officer training college at Sandhurst than any other nation.¹²⁵

Higher numbers of foreign military officers over the decades – whether in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or elsewhere – did not foster an appreciable growth in military effectiveness as the critique of Arab militaries outlined earlier. But, from the mid-1990s onwards, instead of predominantly relying on foreign trainers for merely tactical education, more foreign officers (mostly from the UK) were integrated into the UAE ranks. This avoided, as one UAE-based academic described it, the ‘cantonization’ of expertise in isolated pockets in the military.¹²⁶ Moreover, challenging existing *modus operandi* that stymied expatriates from exerting direct influence, under this new system the foreigners were given real power – or endowed with ‘wasta’¹²⁷ as another interviewee put it – by Mohammed bin Zayed to make recommendations that mattered for promotion and to affect changes in the way training was conducted.¹²⁸ Accordingly, inculcated into Mohammed bin Zayed's mission, these trainers can legitimately be classed as members of his advocacy coalition. More broadly, their employment was a part of his attempt to break with the past to instill the beginnings of a meritocratic officer selection system at a time when the UAE forces were growing and reacting to the Kuwaiti invasion.¹²⁹ Another interviewee noted that by actually giving foreign

¹²⁵ The federal nature of the UAE meant that several more Emiratis per year were sent to Sandhurst. Data obtained from Sandhurst's library.

¹²⁶ Interview #163 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic), 23 October 2016.

¹²⁷ Wasta is the short-hand term used throughout the Arab world to describe the importance that comes with having influential connections and associations, similar to ‘guanxi’ in China. Kate Hutchings and David Weir, "Guanxi and Wasta: A Comparison," *Thunderbird International Business Review* 48, no. 1 (2006).

¹²⁸ Interview #159 (Gulf-Based Nato Military Officer).

Interview #156 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic), 26 October 2016.

Interview #161 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic), 27 October 2016.

¹²⁹ Interview #158 (Emirati Policy Advisor).

officers power in selection and promotion issues – as tactical decision makers in an advocacy coalition – this alleviated pressures on Emirati officers to smooth the passage of certain individuals because of familial or tribal connections: they could ‘blame’ the expatriate officer.¹³⁰ In another change in practice, expatriates were increasingly incorporated into Emirati forces as independent contractors and not as loan-service officers (i.e. actively serving British officers being loaned by the UK government to the Emiratis).¹³¹ The theory here was that the traditional loan-service trainers had, hitherto, evidently had little effect.¹³² Their contractual relationship also meant that if they were judged not to be working, they could not easily be replaced without state-to-state bilateral relations being affected.¹³³ The system that recruited and oversaw the placement of expatriate officers was designed and run by a former British Royal Marine who took on the rank of Major General in the UAE forces, Andrew Pillar.¹³⁴ These individuals resolved the ‘collective action’ problem inherent in policy change by ‘assembling and coordinating networks of individuals and organizations that have the talents and resources necessary to undertake change.’¹³⁵

After jurisdictional issues with the deployment of British officers in the UAE stemming from the DCA were resolved in 1999, British officers were scattered throughout the UAE armed forces. Key individuals became important members of the advocacy coalition at operational levels including as Head of Academics at the Emirati Air Warfare Centre and the Staff

Interview #159 (Gulf-Based Nato Military Officer).

Interview #161 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic).

¹³⁰ Interview #161 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic).

¹³¹ Yates, "Western Expatriates in UAE Forces."

¹³² Interview #161 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic).

¹³³ A V Malkin, "Annual Report 2001/2002," (MED, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2003).

¹³⁴ Yates, "Western Expatriates in UAE Forces," 12.

¹³⁵ Mintrom and Vergari, "Advocacy Coalitions, Policy Entrepreneurs, and Policy Change." 422

College.¹³⁶ By 2008, there were over 350 former British officers contracted to the UAE military, with plans to up the number to 500.¹³⁷ The UK was, for this time at least, ‘the trainer of choice’ but the UAE soon expanded its roster.¹³⁸ Aside from the influx of more empowered military training officers like Andrew Pillar, expatriates were given significant leadership roles in the UAE military: they became members of the advocacy coalition at operational and strategic levels. This is something that is entirely unique to the contemporary UAE. As noted above Stephen Toumajan created and headed the JAC, but the most influential and significant example of the leveraging of expatriate military expertise within the UAE Armed Forces is that of the former head of Australia’s SAS. General Mike Hindmarsh has been the senior officer in charge of (what was to become) the UAE’s Presidential Guard since 2009.¹³⁹ It was the Presidential Guard that proved agile enough to adapt and conduct the amphibious landing near Aden. With a new attitude towards integrating foreign military officers into the ranks of the UAE military, the state turned a corner. Pillar, Toumajan, Hindmarsh, and the hundreds of expatriate trainers wearing Emirati uniforms thus became genuine policy entrepreneurs in the wider advocacy coalition ‘facilitating exchanges...[using] their intellectual authority or market expertise to reinforce and legitimate certain forms of policy or normative standards as ‘best practice.’’¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Dumas, "Defence Attache Report 1999/2000."

"United Arab Emirates: Annual Review 2002/2003," (MED, Foreign and Commonwealth Office December 1998).

¹³⁷ D C B Adams, "Defence Section Annual Report - May 2006," (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2006).

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Rori Donaghy, "Revealed: The Mercenaries Commanding UAE Forces in Yemen," *Middle East Eye* 23 December 2015.

¹⁴⁰ Diane Stone, "Transfer Agents and Global Networks in the ‘Transnationalization’ of Policy," *Journal of European Public Policy* 11, no. 3 (2004): 545-6, 56

Institutional Rules & Resource Allocation

The other facet of the approach that distinguishes the UAE from a neighbor like Qatar, is that Emirati procurement is more focused. Qatar's concurrent acquisition of the latest fast-jets from France, the US, and the UK is in a military sense illogical. It makes training and logistical pipelines vastly more complex and more expensive, while the basic interoperability of Qatari equipment is made more difficult. But Qatar's leaders decided that three financially significant acquisitions from three key international states trump any practical military-rooted rationale.¹⁴¹ In contrast, UAE procurement under Mohammed bin Zayed has been more pragmatic and orientated towards acquiring relevant equipment. The fact that much of the UAE kit is American or French boosts bilateral relations, but without impeding operational effectiveness. Rather, the UAE acquired advanced equipment allowing its forces to train alongside important NATO counterparts to reach regionally unusual levels of combat efficacy, as demonstrated in the Yemen campaign and elsewhere.

The procurement offset group that Mohammed bin Zayed established built on enlightened policies from the 1980s that sought to outlaw commission agents and mediators from defense sales and was region-leading in the 1990s.¹⁴² Founded in 1992, the Military Offsets Office was of wider utility as it secured Mohammed bin Zayed a direct source of funding from offset contracts (in addition to traditional financing through oil and gas sales). Thus, by creating a new institution, he could control the procurement policies himself without seeking funding

¹⁴¹ David B Roberts, "Securing the Qatari State," in *Issue Paper* (Washington DC: Arab Gulf States Institute Washington, June 2017).

¹⁴² Knights, *Troubled Waters*, 134-5.

from other power centers in the state. This strengthened his position in the state and allowed him to develop a wider role in society as a key state-wide investor, which raised his profile.¹⁴³

Mohammed bin Zayed also changed Emirati military structures to increase the number of troops at his disposal. From 43,000 in 1989 *The Military Balance* notes that by 1999 the overall numbers in the armed forces increased to 64,500.¹⁴⁴ This rise stems from the unification of the federal forces in the UAE. Though six federal states formed the UAE in 1971 (with Ras Al-Khaimah joining in 1972) and their armed forces were nominally unified on 6 May 1976, in reality, Dubai and Ras Al-Khaimah kept their forces separate into the 1990s. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that Abu Dhabi, long the de facto capital of the Emirates, was only so officially confirmed in May 1997: unification has been a long, slow road. After the invasion of Kuwait and the resolving in the UAE of the desire to create genuine military capability, the Emirati troops tied up in these smaller, inefficient local commands became a precious commodity. An economic rationale – saving money – along with the desire to foster closer relations with Abu Dhabi led to the ultimate dissolution of Dubai's 'Central Military Command' in December 1997.¹⁴⁵ Otherwise, Mohammed bin Zayed disbanded Ras Al-Khaimah's Northern Military Command 'because they were refusing to take orders from GHQ [General Headquarters in Abu Dhabi]' in May the same year.¹⁴⁶ This allowed Mohammed bin Zayed to swell the ranks with troops looking for better

¹⁴³ Interview #160 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic), 26 October 2015.

Gervais, "Du Pétrole À L'armée," 193-96.

¹⁴⁴ Years 1990 to 1999 of *The Military Balance*, IISS

¹⁴⁵ Harris, "Abu Dhabi: Annual Review 1997."

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

salaries in the national armed force, and to thus create a constituency loyal to himself, grateful for giving them such an opportunity.

Policy Outputs & Policy Impact

Close coordination with foreign militaries extended to joint deployments, which were seen by Mohammed bin Zayed as critical to driving military modernization and testing progress.¹⁴⁷ In Kosovo in 1999, he wanted Emirati forces to be deployed with NATO to learn and for Emirati forces to experience combat. An initial request to the British did not work out, but an Emirati battlegroup of 1200 soldiers was deployed under French command, while the US oversaw the deployment of Emirati Apache helicopters, both for a total of two years.¹⁴⁸ The British Defence Attaché described the complex preparations for this deployment and the sustainment involved therein as a key part of developing Emirati skills and confidence.¹⁴⁹ As noted above, the long-term Emirati deployment with ISAF forces in Afghanistan was yet another step change: it was far larger, more dangerous, and involved much greater complexity. It involved not only Emirati SOF (from its Presidential Guard), but fast-jets, helicopters, and UAVs.¹⁵⁰ It was followed up by supporting NATO operations in Libya alongside Qatar. The UAE Air Force then joined the coalition against Da'esh in Iraq, and it launched unilateral operations supporting clients in Libya in 2015 without US or NATO

¹⁴⁷ Interview #16 (Senior Gulf Based Nato Military Officer).

Interview #158 (Emirati Policy Advisor).

Interview #142 (Former Ambassador to the UAE).

¹⁴⁸ Dumas, "Defence Attache Report 1999/2000."

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ "Scenesetter Dubai Air Show".

support.¹⁵¹ Such deployments, continually building up in intensity, risk, and complexity are unparalleled in the Gulf region or the wider Arab world.

The key elements of the Emirati forces that were deployed in these more recent operations were the Air Force, the JAC, and the Presidential Guard. Such structures fundamentally hail from Mohammed bin Zayed's procurement policies. As elsewhere in the Gulf region, the invasion of Kuwait precipitated an increase in military spending.¹⁵² Given that the basic limiting factor for the UAE armed forces is its small scale manpower,¹⁵³ with a population of under 1 million in the 1990s from which to recruit, in the quest for an effective military, Mohammed bin Zayed focused on force multiplying elements; hence, procuring advanced fast jets, advanced attack helicopters, and creating an elite group, the Presidential Guard.¹⁵⁴

Understanding Exceptionalism

Joint warfare – managing SOF, close air support, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR), naval support, an armored component, air defense, and the deployment of multinational and local proxy forces – is a hallmark of contemporary conflict and it is difficult to do. Add in a large distance from home bases to the theatres of operations, a determined and experienced foe, and a congested and cluttered environment, and UAE operational successes appear all the more surprising. Using Talmadge's understanding of

¹⁵¹ "Islamic State Crisis: UAE Sends F-16 Squadron to Jordan," *BBC* (7 February 2015), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31202878>.

David Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.," *The New York Times* 25 August 2014.

¹⁵² Knights, *Troubled Waters*, 126.

¹⁵³ According to General Khaled Al Bu-Ainnain, quoted in Gervais, "Du Pétrole À L'armée," 135.

¹⁵⁴ Interview #158 (Emirati Policy Advisor). Interview #161 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic).

military effectiveness, UAE forces in Yemen repeatedly demonstrated the ability to deliver both basic and complex military tasks in operations.

While Pollack identified examples of Arab military forces undertaking moderately successful operations, none comes close to the sophistication, the expeditionary nature, or the joint manipulation of modern technology across sea, land, air, and intelligence domains towards an operational end as demonstrated in Yemen. Yes, the UAE adversaries in the south of Yemen were not on their home turf and UAE actions did not encompass massed Emirati forces. Nevertheless, these UAE operations are clearly the most successful complex and joint expeditionary deployment of an Arab military force in modern history. This challenges culturally rooted explanations for Arab military ineffectiveness.

Pollack may view these vignettes as another (and the biggest yet) exception to a wider rule. Several factors identified by Pollack as present during his analysis of relatively successful Arab military forces can be found in the UAE case: foreigners played an important role directing actions, the force in question was elite and relatively small in number, and the opposition was also limited. Those with *a priori* assumptions of the explanatory importance of culture may argue that this shows that weaknesses in Arab culture need to be overcome by foreign leadership. But such sentiment is one of the most critiqued tropes of Orientalism; the onus being on the honorable westerner with his wisdom to enlighten the noble but ignorant Arab. There are many advantages to employing foreigners in military forces.¹⁵⁵ Just because

¹⁵⁵ On the role of foreigners in contemporary militaries see Kolby Hanson and Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Noncitizen Soldiers: Explaining Foreign Recruitment by Modern State Militaries," *Security Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019). 300-306

the Governor of the Bank of England is Canadian, one need not assume that British people are inherently innumerate. Instead, as in the UAE case with the likes of Hindmarsh, it should be assumed that he was at the apex of his field and simply the best candidate for the job for which very few people are qualified. As important as foreign trainers, commanders, and counterparts on the ground were, without Emiratis working effectively with basic and complex tasks in operations in and around Aden, the wider missions could simply not have been successful. UAE operations thus add substantially to the litany of exceptions testing the essentialist rule and beg the question of what it would take to falsify the essentialist theory.

The other approach to explaining Arab military inefficiency argues that this is a phenomenon that results from politics and the nature of civil military relations, which allows for coup proofing tactics, political interference, and a wider lack of seriousness in military affairs. Many of the typical facets of coup proofing or politicization are not evident. There is no sense that Mohammed bin Zayed was quarterbacking operations in Yemen trying to micromanage which units went where, an issue that deleteriously affects forces in fast-moving contemporary maneuver warfare environments. Procurement was neither whimsical nor for the ‘glitter factor’ but proved to be effective considering the operations engaged in by UAE forces. The proactiveness of the UAE offensives in Yemen with thousands of Emirati soldiers committed demonstrates that citizens will fight (and die) for their commander-in-chief. There is little evidence of preferential promotion of Royals in contemporary UAE operations. More generally, there is no forging of an exclusionary identity-based military (‘ethnic stacking’), no obvious rotation or purging of officer corps, no systematic rewarding of military elites with commercial opportunities, and there is minimal counterbalancing. As noted, there are important caveats. The UAE’s successful operations in Yemen were predominantly led by their Presidential Guard, an elite force taking the best officers and

soldiers, and not the regular forces. There is insufficient evidence to draw conclusions as to the effectiveness of the regular UAE armed forces. While the Presidential Guard sounds like a praetorian guard, this is not the case. Rather, as an expeditionary force of 13,000 with aspirations to augment its own air and naval assets that is deployed on extended tours in a foreign war it transcends the nomenclature of being ‘just’ a praetorian guard and ought to be considered more like the US Marines.¹⁵⁶ This presents a challenge to the coup-proofing literature. Remembering that, statistically-speaking, the threat of coups remains high in non-democratic states, how did an Emirati leader become so confident in his *regime* security that he forged such an effective and deployable *state* military force?¹⁵⁷

Talmage argues that if states prioritize wider threats over domestic coup concerns, they are less likely to engage in coup-proofing practices.¹⁵⁸ Conclusions from this study agree. With Mohammed bin Zayed intuiting that US assistance would suffice for state-on-state threats such as from Iran, but not sub-state or transnational concerns, he felt compelled to act. Such is the scale of Abu Dhabi’s domination of elite politics and decision making that there is ultimately elite consensus and no dissention is meaningfully visible.¹⁵⁹ Crucially, elite consensus has been shown to be a critical variable required for the presence of balancing behavior.¹⁶⁰ Some may puzzle why threats from pan-Islamism have such salience to a strong state like the UAE and consequently need to be balanced. But it must not be forgotten that, as Rubin puts it, in the Islamic Middle East ‘transnational ideologies may present a greater and

¹⁵⁶ Interview #179: Former US Defence Official 23 May 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Albrecht, "The Myth of Coup-Proofing: Risk and Instances of Military Coups D'état in the Middle East and North Africa, 1950–2013." 660-683

¹⁵⁸ Talmadge, *Dictator's Army*. 233-241

¹⁵⁹ Coates Ulrichsen, *The UAE*. Location: 5367, 6047-6066

¹⁶⁰ Randall L Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004). 170-173

more immediate national security threat than shifts in military balance of power.’¹⁶¹ Add to this the personalized nature of Gulf policies where elite preferences can decisively shape policy, and the concerns of a niche elite get quickly transposed to state policy.¹⁶²

Had Mohammed bin Zayed not spent decades training and testing the Presidential Guard, when, from his perspective, it was imperative that his forces act against a local sub-state power, the Houthis, he would have had no means at his disposal. Meanwhile, in contrast to states like Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, Mohammed bin Zayed felt minimal threats from within the UAE itself, so felt confident in raising an effective military and deploying it abroad.¹⁶³ This is because Abu Dhabi dominates the other federal entities because of its prodigious wealth and is a core provider of subsidies and, in any case, all federal armed forces have, under Mohammed bin Zayed’s leadership, been amalgamated into national armed forces: Abu Dhabi faces no threat on a federal level to its leadership. Within Abu Dhabi itself, Mohammed bin Zayed faces few obvious challengers to his leadership. He has overseen the rapid expansion of Abu Dhabi to a city of international prominence, for which he is regularly feted locally, and used the Emirate’s wealth to forge one of the world’s most generous welfare states. Installing close confidants and former military men to populate key decision-making positions further cements his rule.¹⁶⁴ While he established a technologically

¹⁶¹ Rubin, *Islam in Balance*. 4

¹⁶² Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE." 549-562

¹⁶³ It is interesting to contrast UAE regime security with that in Saudi Arabia. For the majority of its recent history, the Saudi elite has been fractured with competing sections of the Al Saud overseeing different (often military-based) fiefdoms. As such, Saudi Arabia’s ruling oligarchy comprises the exact kind of competing elite structure that animates the coup proofing literature. In contrast, with the unprecedented centralization of power more recently under Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, it remains to be seen how far he can follow the UAE model.

¹⁶⁴ Shana Marshall, "Military Prestige, Defense-Industrial Production and the Rise of the Gulf Military Activism," in *Armies and Insurgencies in the Arab Spring*, ed. Holger Albrecht, Aurel Croissant, and Fred H Lawson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). 247-249
Interview #179: Former Us Defence Official

sophisticated internal security service, regime security and loyalty-checking in the military is not dependent on coercive measures of some pervasive Securitate-like secret police.¹⁶⁵ ¹⁶⁶ In the event of serious disturbance, according to the New York Times, there is a cadre of up to 800 foreign troops that could be deployed to defend the state or the regime: coup-proofing, perhaps, of a different variety.¹⁶⁷

The loyalty of the Presidential Guard is maintained in various ways. The military in the UAE is regarded highly in society as a notably prestigious occupation, and the Presidential Guard takes the elite of the wider forces.¹⁶⁸ The prominence of the forces in wider society has grown in recent years, as demonstrated by conspicuously martial National Day parades, the institution of an annual Martyr's Day in 2015, the rally-around-the-flag sentiment echoed in the domestic press concerning operations in Yemen, and in the introduction of compulsory national service in 2014.¹⁶⁹ Importantly, in this way 'special loyalties' are established and tied to Mohammed bin Zayed as the Commander-in-Chief in a pan-national way, and not in a fashion that divides Emirati society along lines (ethnic or other) that have long been shown to undermine military effectiveness.¹⁷⁰ Simultaneously, thanks to the state's tremendous hydrocarbon wealth, the armed forces in the UAE are remunerated handsomely such that they

¹⁶⁵ Hicham Bou Nassif, "Generals and Autocrats: How Coup-Proofing Predetermined the Military Elite's Behavior in the Arab Spring," *Political Science Quarterly* 130, no. 2 (2015). 253

¹⁶⁶ Jenna McLaughlin, "Spies for Hire," *The Intercept* (24 October 2016), <https://theintercept.com/2016/10/24/darkmatter-united-arab-emirates-spies-for-hire/>.

¹⁶⁷ Mark Mazzetti and Emily B Hager, "Secret Desert Force Set up by Blackwater's Founder," *The New York Times* 2011.

¹⁶⁸ Interview #179: Former Us Defence Official ; Interview #163 (Gulf-Focused, UAE-Based Academic). Marshall, "Military Prestige, Defense-Industrial Production and the Rise of the Gulf Military Activism." 247-249

¹⁶⁹ Zoltan Barany, "Why Have Three Gulf States Introduced the Draft?," *The RUSI Journal* (2018). 17-23

Interview #179: Former Us Defence Official

Ibish, "UAE National Security." 8-13

Coates Ulrichsen, *The UAE*. 209-211

¹⁷⁰ Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing." 131

Vipin Narang and Caitlin Talmadge, "Civil-Military Pathologies and Defeat in War: Tests Using New Data," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (2018). 1383

are ‘taken care of for life’, which reinforces the prestige of serving, inculcating and engendering the forces to support the current leadership.¹⁷¹ Lastly, Mohammed bin Zayed has forged a niche role for the UAE and himself as a ruler in Washington DC policy circles as an interlocutor for the US’s regional politics and one of the more reliable allies in the region.¹⁷² Such a role – as well as wider hosting of international military forces – speaks directly to one of the logics of the coup proofing literature, but one that does not impact on local (i.e. Emirati) military effectiveness.

Conclusion

The 2015 Saudi and UAE-led intervention in Yemen showcases the deployment of military force that both reconfirms and challenges existing understandings of the effectiveness of Arab military forces. Saudi forces struggled in Yemen. The nature of the terrain and the asymmetric conflict with a hardened, experienced foe should not be underestimated. But only in 2009, they struggled with the same kind of war. Yet the open source evidence suggests that Saudi forces evidenced an inability to learn from previous mistakes, prepare properly for war (it was, after all, up to Saudi Arabia to declare this war in Yemen), or translate one of the largest consistent defense budgets on earth into capability precisely where the state needs it most. Years into the conflict, the threat from Houthi ballistic missiles, far from being eradicated, has grown.

In contrast, UAE forces both in Yemen and other recent missions evidenced levels of military proficiency that were unexpected. It is true that the UAE war in Yemen was different from the Saudi’s, and Emirati forces struggled elsewhere. But the UAE battlespace in southern

¹⁷¹ Interview #179: Former Us Defence Official

¹⁷² Chandrasekaran, "Little Sparta."; Kirkpatrick, "Most Powerful Arab Ruler."

Yemen was far from home bases, still deeply cluttered, hostile, and they were facing the same well-trained and experienced foe that the Saudis struggled so badly against. Nevertheless, a technically difficult, highly complex, and dangerous amphibious landing led to operational and wider strategic success. The UAE also evidenced a level of expertise deploying its fast-jets and SOF to work side-by-side with US allies. These instances stand out as the most sophisticated and successful Arab military expeditions in contemporary history.

Researching and contextualizing these operations acts as an inflection point in the scholarly writings about Arab militaries. This evidence provides a rejoinder to essentialist critiques that interpret aspects of ‘Arab culture’ as posing barriers to Arab militaries developing effective forces. Contrary to such culture-based conclusions, this paper suggests that with the correct political direction and elite support Arab military forces can successfully engage in complex and taxing military operations in the contemporary environment to achieve political ends. It further shows that a leader, profoundly secure at home, when energized by a deeply held and salient ideological fear, can instigate the necessary policies to derive effective military forces, overcoming coup-proofing concerns. Moreover, the leader can forge a virtuous circle whereby the genuine prioritization of the forces boosts their prestige locally, remunerates them particularly well, both of which can tie their loyalties ever closer to the leader and encourages their progression and professionalization.

The specific recipe that proved successful for the UAE started with a focusing event that shocked leaders out of accepting hitherto patterns in the field of security and defense. It then galvanized and motivated a key policy entrepreneur to force through a series of difficult changes, such as the promotion of empowered, senior foreign military officers in domestic

ranks, something that is today unique in the Arab world. It is important to stress the ‘empowered’ nature of these foreigners. There are dozens if not hundreds of foreigners in other Arab forces, notably in the Gulf states. Thus, foreigners alone are not a causal variable in effective transformation. Rather, foreigners are important but must be actively encouraged and supported by the elite for them to have an effect. Thus, politicization (or the lack thereof) is the key variable.

Circumstances in the UAE allowed for the rise to dominance and power of a key policy entrepreneur, Mohammed bin Zayed. A military man with a security-first mindset, he focused to an unusual degree on developing the armed forces motivated by stringent concerns about the rise of sub-state actors and Iran. This included overhauling state-wide military structures (amalgamating federal forces), redefining procurement approaches, and focusing on creating pockets of military excellence in areas like the Presidential Guard, the Air Force, and the JAC. Always willing to test and redefine Emirati norms, not least through the incorporation of foreigners as leaders of significant military bodies, Mohammed bin Zayed sought arenas to test his forces in low-level conflicts. There are no guarantees that an Emirati approach would work elsewhere. But, given that the literature on the effectiveness of Arab military forces paints such a bleak picture, increasing focus is merited on the only documented cases in the contemporary era of an Arab state effectively using its military to achieve political ends.

Lastly, this article showcases an important methodological innovation bringing the ACF to the discipline of security studies and Middle East studies. Focusing on elites as policy entrepreneurs fit snugly with existing understandings of political decision making in the

Middle East. The ACF's flexibility also allows for its application in an area that is difficult to research and would be particularly suited for a comparative approach.