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Evolving UAE Military and Foreign Security Cooperation: Path Toward Military Professionalism

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+ CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Priorities and Performance	2
Military Effectiveness and Leveraging Foreign Assistance	6
Conclusion	10
About the Authors	12
Notes	13

Introduction

After two decades of concerted investment and operational experience, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) armed forces, dubbed “Little Sparta,” are now one of the leading militaries in the region.¹ With approximately 63,000 active uniformed personnel for a population of 9.9 million (only 1.2 million of which are Emirati), allegedly augmented by foreign auxiliary and mercenary forces, the UAE has gained global attention for its role in countering Iran and violent extremist networks and for interventions in Yemen and Libya.² It is one of the United States’ closest military partners in the Middle East.³ American scholar Kenneth Pollack assesses that, taken as a whole, the UAE’s military is the most capable among the Arab states, while there may be variance across the force.⁴

The UAE has an opportunity to capitalize on these developments and become a professionalized military by building its strategic planning and force development capabilities, enabling it to set its regional priorities and force structure, and by committing to international principles of professional military conduct and greater transparency and accountability that will buttress its legitimacy at home, in the region, and with international partners. Military professionalism includes an understanding of leadership, strategy, history, tactics, warfighting domains, organization, technology, and capabilities. It also involves a commitment to moral conduct and to incorporating lessons learned to apply and move forward as part of an institution.

If developed, the UAE’s strategic planning capabilities would enable it to better match defense priorities with resourcing. For example, if the country envisions other counterinsurgency and proxy war campaigns in the future, does it need to create both capacity and capability within the UAE force to perform those missions in a more effective and integrated manner? Or will a continued reliance on mercenary forces be sufficient, but open the UAE to international scrutiny and erode its legitimacy in the eyes of key partners? Concretely, the UAE should undertake a review of its interventions in Yemen and Libya, which have tested the military’s force structure and capabilities and wherein the UAE reportedly has hired and mobilized mercenary groups and proxies to supplement its force. Gaps in the UAE’s strategic planning capabilities exacerbate the risks of overextension and reliance on less professional and less integrated forces.

Investments in the UAE’s strategic planning capabilities could also be linked to an integrated approach to defense and technology industrial development to build not only the UAE’s industrial base but also to unlock further opportunities for joint production and development with the United States and other foreign partners. However, international concerns about the values undergirding the UAE military as an institution, including whether it upholds Law of Armed Conflict principles and

its reliance on shadowy mercenary forces, point to limitations in its growth as a professional military and may limit international cooperation with the UAE over time. Such concerns have drawn the scrutiny of the U.S. Congress.⁵

To further professionalize its military and sustain key security cooperation partnerships, such as with the United States, the UAE should take several steps. It should invest in its strategic planning capabilities to better match priorities with resourcing. It also should invest in joint defense research and development opportunities with the United States while also building a technology security and export control regulatory framework. Finally, it should enhance the professionalism of its military to engender greater legitimacy with key partners by building oversight, accountability, and transparency measures to ensure adherence to the Law of Armed Conflict and international humanitarian law and to regulate the use of mercenary forces.

Priorities and Performance

The priorities and performance of the UAE military highlight its government's goals to protect the country's role and influence and develop itself as a force in its own right within the broader region. In partnership with key regional and international allies, the UAE has pursued a security strategy that involves harnessing its human and natural resources to compensate for its modest size, building its military and national security apparatus, creating strategic depth through foreign military installations and deployments, and developing its partnerships with Saudi Arabia, the United States, and other key partners.⁶

Three main priority areas rise above the rest for the UAE military: countering Iranian threats throughout the region, including in Yemen; preserving the regional status quo, particularly against the threat of radical political and terrorist groups; and becoming an increasingly self-reliant military force. The UAE's own threat perceptions, as well as shifting U.S. and other donor policies that encourage partners to take more responsibility for their security, inform these priorities.

Countering Iranian Threats

Iran represents the greatest security challenge to the UAE. The two countries have a longstanding territorial dispute over three islands (Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb), adjacent to strategic shipping lanes crucial for both countries. Moreover, the UAE has serious concerns about Iranian proxies' activities in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.⁷ Iran's missile capabilities are well

within striking range of all of the Emirates and its strategic resources.⁸ The UAE continues to closely watch Iran's nuclear development as well. The UAE recently became the first Arab nation to open a nuclear power plant, though it insists that this is for energy generation.⁹ Iranian competition poses a significant threat to Arab Gulf states' influence over the Middle East. Despite reported tensions over Yemen strategy between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the former has been closely aligned with the latter in prioritizing and working to counter Iranian threats.¹⁰ On the military front, this has manifested most significantly in the UAE's involvement in the Yemen conflict and in its participation in a maritime coalition to deter Iranian attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz.

Conflict in Yemen

The UAE was a key player in the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, launched in 2015 to counter what both governments regarded as an Iran-backed threat from the Houthi rebels.¹¹ Although the UAE officially completed its military withdrawal from Yemen in February 2020, its five-year involvement laid the foundation for continued Emirati influence within the country, creating a persistent bulwark against Iran in the UAE's view.¹²

The Emirati military deployed around 3,500 troops to Yemen, with another 3,000 air- and sea-based personnel providing in-theater support.¹³ This force enabled the push back of Houthi territorial gains in southern and eastern Yemen, though it encountered resistance in the north.¹⁴ In parallel, the UAE has established a series of maritime access points on the Horn of Africa and along Yemen's coast that enable it to shape maritime trade and gather information about rivals' and adversaries' activities in the region.¹⁵ According to UAE sources, the military has also nurtured a network of some 90,000 Yemeni fighters, comprising a combination of tribal militias, former military personnel, and paramilitary units such as the Security Belt Forces and Shabwani and Hadrami Elite Forces.¹⁶ Despite the UAE and Saudi Arabia being on the same side of military operations in Yemen's war, they have had competing objectives in navigating a political outcome, including over support for the Southern Transitional Council, backed by the UAE, and the role of Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, supported by Saudi Arabia.

Strait of Hormuz

After a series of Iranian attacks on oil tankers in the vitally important Strait of Hormuz, the UAE joined a U.S.-led maritime coalition in September 2019 seeking to protect commercial vessels in and around the strait.¹⁷ With one-fifth of the world's oil supply passing through the 21-mile-wide, strategically significant waterway, protecting the strait from asymmetric Iranian threats (such as undersea mines, cruise missiles, and swarming patrol boats) is of paramount importance to the UAE and its allies and partners.¹⁸ Further, the UAE has demonstrated effective interoperability and maritime performance within the coalition.¹⁹

Countering Violent Extremism

Containing the spread of violent extremism is a high priority for the UAE. In particular, political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the self-proclaimed Islamic State are singled out as threats to the UAE's efforts to preserve the status quo and its own standing and influence within the region.

Muslim Brotherhood

The Emirati government views the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to the Middle East's balance of power due to the group's opposition to monarchic and dynastic governments. The threat posed by the brotherhood intensified after its meteoric—albeit, in some cases, short-lived—political resurgence in the wake of the status quo-shattering Arab Spring protests.²⁰ The UAE's aversion to the brotherhood is evidenced by its 2014 decision to list the group as a terrorist organization, although the brotherhood publicly disavowed violence years prior, in the 1970s.²¹ The local Islamist group al-Islah, allegedly affiliated with the brotherhood, was accused by UAE officials of plotting to incite an armed rebellion against the state. The Emirati government also had a significant hand in the coup d'état that overthrew Egypt's then president and Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, and it supports the anti-brotherhood leader of the Libyan National Army, General Khalifa Haftar.²²

The UAE's own experience with domestic protests has been less intense—largely limited to a letter petitioning President Khalifa bin Zayed for reforms, signed by roughly 130 Emirati activists, that included individuals linked to the brotherhood. However, the harsh reaction from the Emirati government was indicative of its fear of the status quo being disrupted; many of the signatories were jailed, and a handful had their UAE citizenship revoked.²³

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State

Just as the Muslim Brotherhood poses a threat to the regional status quo, so do more violent groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. As part of its efforts to preserve stability within the Middle East, the UAE has focused military efforts on counterterrorism in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The UAE military has been an active member of the U.S.-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State since 2014. It has trained Syrian rebels to counter the Islamic State and focused on counter-messaging through the Communication Working Group (which it co-leads with the United Kingdom and the United States). The working group has convened meetings between Defeat ISIS (D-ISIS) Coalition member countries (including militaries), civil society, media, tech companies, and academics to exchange information and strategies to counter extremist messaging on and offline and to promote alternative, affirmative messages.²⁴ In addition, the Emirati military is second only to the United States in the number of sorties it has flown over Islamic State-held territory during operations in Iraq and Syria.²⁵

After the initial phase of Emirati operations to counter Houthi rebels in Yemen, the focus of the mission shifted toward the threat from AQAP.²⁶ UAE counterterrorism efforts against AQAP, in partnership with the United States—which mostly contributed via drone strikes—led to a significant degradation of the group’s ability to carry out attacks inside and outside of Yemen.²⁷

Self-Reliance

Despite the UAE’s close relationship with countries like the United States, it is working toward limiting its dependencies on foreign partners.²⁸ In order to achieve this goal, the UAE is focusing its efforts on augmenting two main areas: the defense industry and the capacity of military personnel.

Defense Industry

Emirati efforts prioritize increasing the UAE’s military capabilities and developing its defense industry to the extent that it can wean off some partner-dependent foreign military sales and training while simultaneously working to become a niche market supplier.²⁹ In late 2019, the UAE consolidated twenty-five local defense companies into one all-encompassing corporation named Edge.³⁰ Edge aims to accelerate arms production at “cost-effective price points,” with the ability to compete within the region on bids related in particular to ships, armored vehicles, and unmanned aerial systems.³¹ In addition, the UAE has entered into the small arms market via its manufacturer, Caracal.³² Further, the UAE’s NIMR Automotive has developed a series of light combat vehicles. Its partnership with the UK’s MIRA engineering company to develop the Rapid Intervention Vehicle highlights the potential for joint development with foreign partners.³³

Personnel Capacity

The UAE invests a significant amount in training its military personnel, particularly through U.S.-based and -led programs, ranging from professional military education at the staff and war colleges stateside to tactical training in U.S. and Emirati facilities. The country has also begun developing its own education capability through the establishment of a National Defense College. While most of its students have been Emirati nationals, the college aspires to matriculate U.S. and other foreign students. Emirati alumni are placed in positions of authority in the government after graduating. Over time, the college’s graduates may help instill a greater focus on strategic planning and analysis within the UAE’s national security and defense ministries.³⁴

In 2014, the UAE introduced universal conscription for men between the ages of 18 and 30.³⁵ Doing so seeks not only to increase the number of uniformed personnel and enhance Emirati self-reliance in the military arena, but also to instill a sense of identity and further a narrative that may counter domestic and external pressures.³⁶ The program’s first three years saw about 50,000 men go through the conscription program, while 850 women volunteered for the same.³⁷ While there is no

compulsion in continuing military service past the sixteen months of mandated conscription, the program helps identify military talent that may otherwise have slipped under the radar. The program also helps to augment the civilian workforce: those individuals falling below the conscription fitness standards—about one in five—do not get an exemption, but instead are expected to train for civilian positions in the government.³⁸

Military Effectiveness and Leveraging Foreign Assistance

The Emirati military's effectiveness is characterized by the following overarching categories: policy and doctrine; equipment, training, education, and exercises; operations; and institutions. Although the UAE is often privately lauded by U.S. defense officials as having the most capable and effective military force within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), in order to become a fully professionalized force, it must invest in its strategic planning capabilities, assess and incorporate lessons learned from the Yemen war, and address international concerns about its transparency and adherence to human rights and its reliance on mercenary forces. These issues cannot be fixed by money alone, requiring a willingness by the Emirati leadership to invest in these priorities, commit to principles to undergird military professionalism, and alter aspects of its operational culture.

Policy and Doctrine

Although the UAE does not have a publicly available policy document akin to the U.S. National Defense Strategy, the tenets of its policy and doctrine can be deduced from how its defense and security actions and involvement have unfolded over time.³⁹ The UAE is closely aligned with the policies and priorities of the GCC, a body of Arab Gulf states established after the 1979 Iranian Revolution.⁴⁰ Members of the GCC have a shared interest in working together to serve as a counterbalance to the adversarial government in Tehran and to protect their respective monarchies from similar upheaval.⁴¹ Competition among the GCC states and their different political and ideological viewpoints undermines their cohesiveness and ability to plan and work together.

Security is a high priority for the UAE, whose defense spending is estimated to be between 11.9 and 14 percent of its total federal budget. In 2019, UAE federal budget spending reportedly increased to \$16.4 billion, up from \$13.9 billion in 2018. \$2.3 billion was reportedly allocated to defense spending in 2019, up from \$1.66 billion in 2018.⁴² While it has focused its investments in human capital, modernization, and technology and in its partnerships with Australia, France, GCC countries, and the United States, it has also invested heavily in military hardware. Lack of transparency about the UAE defense budget makes it difficult to determine the proportionate breakdown of these investments.

Due to the close ties between the UAE and the United States, elements of Emirati military doctrine reflect that of the U.S. military, adapted to its local context. For instance, the UAE Presidential Guard was established in the image of the U.S. Marine Corps, with the request reportedly coming directly from Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (known to many by the acronym MBZ) to then commander of U.S. Central Command General James Mattis.

Equipment, Training, Education, and Exercises

Equipment

As a wealthy Gulf state, the UAE can afford to buy advanced capabilities and equipment beyond what its military likely needs. The UAE is one of the highest importers of arms in the world and among the foremost customers of U.S. foreign military sales. The government purchased close to \$7.6 billion worth of arms from the United States between 2008 and 2018.⁴³ The equipment in its portfolio of purchases includes F-16 and F-35 aircraft, Apache and Chinook helicopters, precision-guided munitions, the THAAD and Patriot missile defense systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and associated missiles.⁴⁴ In addition to the weapons that the UAE has bought out of pocket from the United States, it has also obtained \$32 million worth of U.S. excess defense articles.⁴⁵ The UAE is not, however, beholden solely to the United States for its arms. It has also purchased equipment from China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and allegedly North Korea.⁴⁶

In addition to purchasing equipment, the UAE is looking to develop its own capabilities in the same arena, largely through the aforementioned defense industry efforts of Edge. It also seeks to work with other countries to develop equipment. Controversially, there were reports that the UAE may have entered into a collaboration with Russia to produce aircraft modelled on the MiG-29 fighter jet, potentially in violation of U.S. sanctions.⁴⁷

Training and Education

The Emirati military has invested significantly in the training and education of its military officers, both within the country and outside. Professional military and defense educational institutions within the UAE provide an array of instruction. These include cadet academies such as the Zayed the Second Military Academy for men and the Khawla bint Al-Azwar Military School for women; traditional military training schools such as the Naval and Air College and the Joint Command and Staff College; and the National Defense College, which educates senior military as well as civilian leaders.⁴⁸

The UAE and the United States are signatories to a 2019 bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement, an avenue to further enhance coordination, interoperability, and joint operations.⁴⁹ The U.S. training mission within the UAE and stateside ranges from aviation and missile defense training to special operations training and artillery, reconnaissance, and maneuver exercises.⁵⁰ The UAE hosts 5,000 U.S. personnel, while annually, between 600 and 800 Emirati military personnel go to the United States for training and education.⁵¹ Notably, the U.S. Marine Corps trains UAE Presidential Guard Reconnaissance Group personnel at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in 29 Palms, California.⁵² The UAE does not receive educational funding from the United States' International Military Education and Training program, instead using its national funds to have its personnel educated in U.S. military staff and war colleges.⁵³ A number of retired U.S. military members advise in planning and administration for critical organizations like the Joint Air Command. In addition, a significant mix of active duty and retired British and Australian military personnel advise the UAE military.

Other than the U.S. military, approximately 400 French personnel and 1,600 South Korean personnel have reportedly been providing training to the Emirati military.⁵⁴

Exercises

The Emirati military takes part in several elaborate joint exercises with the United States, including the Iron Union and the Native Fury exercises, both of which take place in the UAE.⁵⁵ These exercises aim to increase interoperability and enhance ties between the two partners, as well as impart skills and experiential learning to personnel in the respective militaries. The UAE has also joined large-scale multilateral exercises hosted by and in the United States, such as the annual Red Flag aerial exercise in Nevada.⁵⁶ The Emirati military has also participated in joint exercises with other partners, such as Egypt, France, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom.⁵⁷

Operations

The UAE military has had operational experience in several joint missions and has been deploying with regularity since 1992, when it participated in operations in Somalia.⁵⁸ Emirati military personnel have served alongside North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Kosovo and Afghanistan, alongside Saudi forces to quell uprisings in Bahrain during the Arab Spring, and alongside partner forces to counter piracy and terrorism in North Africa.⁵⁹

Although the UAE military had extensive operational experience, it had not planned and executed a campaign by itself until its involvement in the Yemen conflict, and earlier, the more limited airstrikes in Libya. After five years of fighting in Yemen, the UAE has gained experience in operating in urban

and amphibious environments, conducting complex operations involving air, ground, and sea-based capabilities.⁶⁰ Yemen is also where the UAE suffered its most significant military losses, particularly in 2015, when forty-five Emirati soldiers were killed in a single missile strike. The UAE recently completed a martyrs' memorial to commemorate these and other casualties across its military history.⁶¹

In addition to recent experience in Yemen, the UAE has also participated actively in counterterrorism efforts against the Islamic State as part of the D-ISIS coalition and also against AQAP in Yemen.

Institutions

Although the titular head of the UAE Ministry of Defense is the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, and although the title of supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces rests with Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, MBZ, Sheikh Khalifa's brother, is the true power broker when it comes to military affairs. MBZ has, in several decades as deputy supreme commander at the helm of the Emirati military, driven substantial changes within the military, particularly the Presidential Guard. In addition to successfully leveraging funds to purchase the best weapons and equipment available, MBZ has also molded the military's organizational culture and developed its human capital.

His personal relationships with senior U.S. military officers—such as Mattis and General John Allen, former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan—have also helped in the advancement of the Emirati military. Both U.S. generals served as advisers to the UAE military after their retirement, in addition to several other U.S., British, French, and Australian retired flag officers.⁶² Major General Michael Hindmarsh, a retired Australian officer, commands the Presidential Guard and retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel Stephen Toumajan, raised to the rank of major general by the Emirati military, formerly led the UAE's Joint Aviation Command and National Search and Rescue Center. Some active duty foreign military officers have also been seconded on loan to positions within the Emirati military.⁶³

Although the UAE military as an institution has a strong central command and control structure modelled doctrinally on that of the United States, it lacks institutional mechanisms and oversight to ensure professionalism and accountability that other countries place on their forces. The large number of Emirati officers going through U.S. professional military education would, as is the norm, receive training on human rights and legal areas such as the protection of civilians and the Law of Armed Conflict. However, the Emirati military has yet to adopt these principles as institutional norms and lacks accountability processes to check and remediate behavior if those norms are violated.⁶⁴

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner has documented violations and crimes by the UAE and other armed actors under international law.⁶⁵ Humanitarian organizations and advocacy groups have also condemned UAE actions in Yemen. These allegations include using indiscriminate force resulting in civilian casualties, running secret torture prisons in Yemen, and turning a blind eye to proxy groups with links to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.⁶⁶ Ostensibly due to the dearth of institutional processes and accountability mechanisms within the country and its military, substantive action to address, investigate, or remediate these criticisms has yet to be taken.⁶⁷

With its increasing involvement in regional politics and security operations, the UAE leans on foreign military auxiliaries to augment its force size or to train, advise, or command its personnel. This happens both through formal bilateral channels between partner militaries—Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, for instance, all have military forces serving a role within the UAE military—as well as through private firms such as Global Aerospace Logistics, an Emirati firm, and Academi, formerly known as Blackwater.⁶⁸ In 2015, the UAE also reportedly deployed 450 Latin American mercenary troops—mostly from Colombia, but also from Chile, El Salvador, and Panama—to bolster the proxy war in Yemen, drawing from a brigade of 1,800 Latin American personnel training in the UAE.⁶⁹ With institutional accountability already hazy, the presence of foreign auxiliaries outside the institutional structure and not subject to certain rules and norms adds to the ambiguity of the UAE's use of a range of security forces to achieve its objectives.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The UAE has made remarkable progress in building one of the most capable militaries in the region over the last twenty years. However, in order to chart a sustainable plan to secure its objectives in the region as a fully professional military and to ensure enduring partnerships with countries like Australia, France, and the United States, it should pursue several reforms.

First, it will need to invest in strategic planning capabilities to better chart its priorities to its resourcing. This should also include investments in institutions for strategic, operational, and tactical lessons learned and feedback loops to inform future force planning—most immediately from the Yemen war, while lessons are still fresh. If the UAE wants to achieve its objectives, it should rigorously review and prioritize where it wants to make investments and deploy its forces. It should seek cooperative arrangements with partners within and outside the region to match its comparative advantages with partners' capabilities in order to better achieve its objectives and to seek efficiencies.

Augmenting its ranks with auxiliary and mercenary forces may increase capacity in the short term to take on additional missions, but absent reflection on the relative effectiveness of these auxiliary forces and their level of integration with the core UAE military, their ultimate value is suspect. Moreover, use of auxiliary forces could undermine security cooperation relationships with Australia, France, and the United States over time, particularly if they are not closely regulated or held accountable for their actions and particularly within these partners' legislative bodies. The UAE should be transparent about the goals and activities of these groups. Foreign partners could share best practices with the UAE on how to oversee and manage security contractors in pursuit of national objectives.

Second, the UAE should seek to professionalize its military by developing transparency, oversight, and accountability mechanisms for upholding Law of Armed Conflict and human rights principles. With significant gains in operational prowess and close relationships with the United States and other key partners over the last decade, the UAE will plateau in its development as a professional military if it does not uphold international principles for military conduct and take publicly transparent steps to address transgressions. Taking these steps will buttress the UAE military's legitimacy in the eyes of its own population and with its regional partners beyond the Gulf, such as Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, where popular legitimacy is growing increasingly important for determining military success and stability. Evolving to this level of military professionalism can also improve planning at all levels, with the ability to recognize missteps or failures and learn from them. While not always perfect themselves, the United States and other partners can reinforce this goal through diplomatic engagement and military training, institutional capacity building, and combined exercises.

Finally, the UAE should work with partners like the United States to pursue joint development opportunities for new military technologies. Harnessing the UAE's industry, joint research opportunities could benefit both the UAE and U.S. militaries. Advancing this form of partnership will require enhanced technology security protocols and export control infrastructure to regulate development in the UAE and bring it in line with other advanced international partners and professional defense and military establishments. The United States and the UAE share a long-term interest in building defense transparency and strong institutions that can extend into a post-oil future for the region.

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