



2017

# CITIZENS IN TRAINING

Conscription and Nation-building  
in the United Arab Emirates

AUTHORS

Jon B. Alterman

Margo Balboni

CSIS

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

A REPORT OF THE  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**I**n 2014, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) embarked on a bold experiment: It began drafting young men into the military. This move was not only a departure for the Emirates, it was a departure from world trends. Governments have been moving away from national service requirements for decades as military missions have changed and governments have sought to create highly skilled all-volunteer armies. But the UAE move to press young men into military service was meant to build the country, not just the army.

Several factors contributed to the decision to adopt conscription. One was a deeply unsettled regional environment. Another was a drive to promote a stronger sense of shared Emirati identity. A third was a growing fear that young Emirati men were becoming lazy and “soft” just as the government eyed an increasing imperative to shape its workforce for a world less centered on oil. A fourth consideration was the UAE’s resolve to blunt the forces that contributed to the Arab uprisings in 2011. Staring down all of these factors, the UAE leadership decided a bold intervention was needed. The leadership constructed a program combining intensive physical fitness training with military training, national education, and character education. It did not only reach 18 year-olds. Everyone 30 years of age and younger is required to register, pulling men from their jobs and families to live with their peers in barracks, perform predawn calisthenics, and clean toilets. Those lacking the fitness for military training—nearly one in five—are not exempted, but rather are trained for civilian roles in vital sectors.

The UAE drew from careful studies of other national service programs around the

world—especially in Finland, Singapore, and South Korea—and had indirect knowledge of Israel’s program. Compared to these countries, the UAE has made innovations in its approach to citizenship education, workforce development, and public health. Women can volunteer, but fewer than 850 have done so, compared to 50,000 male conscripts. Women are cast largely in a supportive role as relatives of conscripts.

While the program has been broadly met with acceptance, some of the longer-term impacts—and potential unintended consequences—are unclear. Will the program make Emiratis more militaristic? Will a program that closely links the making of citizens to the making of men magnify an already large gap between men and women in the UAE? Does socializing young men into a hierarchical military system prepare them for entrepreneurial jobs in a highly networked world? Will the program be sustained at a high enough level for long enough to have the desired impact?

Right now, though, the program stands as the clearest sign yet of the UAE leadership’s vision: how it diagnoses the strengths and weaknesses of its society, what it sees as the strongest path forward, and where it is trying to go. It is far more than a program to build the military. It is a program to build the society from the military. The goals it has set and the path it has chosen to accomplish them will have a profound effect not only on the Emirates, but also on neighboring countries that will draw lessons from the Emirates’ example.

**A recruit to the  
third class of  
national service  
trainees begins his  
intake processing  
in March 2015.**

Photo courtesy of  
the UAE National  
Service and Reserve  
Authority.


VIII

CITIZENS IN TRAINING



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# INTRODUCTION

n the right side of a wide frame, a young Emirati man stands against a slate-gray background. A ghutra cloth loosely wrapped atop his head, his white robes wash over his body as he stares into the camera. To the left is an image of the same young man against a stylized camouflage background. There, he stands erect in a crisp military uniform, his body taut, his chin slightly raised, and his eyebrows slightly arched. His civilian alter ego is anonymous, but the soldier is identifiable: his uniform bears his name in Arabic and English, and his green beret with the gold insignia indicates his function. The civilian looks merely present; the soldier looks like he is ready to follow a command. To their right is a slogan: “Sons are born, and men are made.”<sup>1</sup>

The image beamed into homes across the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the spring of 2015. It advertised a documentary film that promised a glimpse into a new rite of passage that thousands of young men had undergone since the previous fall, and to which

1      *Every Emirati's Son*, prod. Nomad Media, National Geographic Abu Dhabi, 2015.

thousands more would soon be called—conscription.

U.S. Marines have made famous their search for “a few good men.” The UAE, however, wants all its men—from the ages of 18 to 30—to experience the discipline and rigors of military life. For reasons of national security, nation-building, and societal development, the UAE instituted a universal conscription program in 2014—bucking a worldwide trend away from conscription over the last half-century.

A primary motivation for UAE’s military buildup lies in the instability of its surrounding region, where some of the world’s most intractable problems remain unresolved. As more than a third of the world’s sea-traded oil passes by its shores, the Emirati government feels under constant threat from Iran in the north and from religious radicals within. Wars rage nearby in Yemen and Afghanistan. Syria, Iraq, and Libya are all unsettled.

Yet, to look solely at the defense argument for conscription in the UAE is to miss much of what the country seeks to achieve. To understand the logic of its 2014 decision to pursue universal conscription for male citizens, it is important to understand just how broadly the UAE defines national security, how it judges its future, and just how ambitious the country’s national service program is.

The program is much more than a reaction to rising security pressures. More broadly, the UAE appears to have settled on conscription as a principal framework for nation-building. Using a military paradigm,

the UAE seeks to accomplish in one to two years of training what many nations seek to inculcate over more than a decade of public schooling. The UAE’s mandatory military service represents an ambitious effort to mold the citizenry and to refashion the relationship between the government and the governed. It both follows and innovates a long tradition of states that have sought to use the military as a “school for the nation,” with varying results.<sup>2</sup> The UAE’s program is so broad and ambitious, it is unlikely to succeed in every respect. However the UAE’s national service program unfolds, the effort has profound implications for the future of the Emirates and for any country that follows its lead.

This report is the most extensive effort to date to define and understand the UAE conscription program—its successes, failures, and its possible unintended consequences. The report will outline the circumstances of the program’s inception. It draws on original research to detail key elements of the UAE’s program, with a focus on important innovations, and it reports on the program’s initial results. Finally, it analyzes the likely implications of choices the Emiratis have made on Emiratis and their future.

## THE GENESIS OF CONSCRIPTION IN THE UAE

The Emirati leadership first considered conscription in the 1970s, shortly after the UAE was founded, and again a decade

2 Ronald R. Krebs, “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004): 85–124.

# **“TO UNDERSTAND THE LOGIC OF ITS 2014 DECISION TO PURSUE UNIVERSAL CONSCRIPTION FOR MALE CITIZENS, IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND JUST HOW BROADLY THE UAE DEFINES NATIONAL SECURITY, HOW IT JUDGES ITS FUTURE, AND JUST HOW AMBITIOUS THE COUNTRY’S NATIONAL SERVICE PROGRAM IS.”**

later, but it rejected it both times.<sup>3</sup> Through the 1980s, the UAE relied largely on a mercenary army made up of Yemenis and Omanis, with an officer corps from Jordan, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> One of the enduring obstacles was practical: Dubai and Ras al Khaimah maintained independent emirate-level forces distinct from the federal army until the mid-1990s.<sup>5</sup>

Over the course of decades, the UAE sought to build up the local content of its forces and began taking steps potentially leading toward

conscription. For example, in 2009 the UAE passed a general mobilization law allowing the High National Security Council to conscript nationals in case of an attack on the UAE or in the case of internal unrest.<sup>6</sup>

Around the same time, the government also began to experiment with applying a military framework to further human capital development and civic education. In 2008, the Abu Dhabi Education Council introduced a new “leadership skills program” in public schools that foreshadowed conscription. Initially

3 Interviews with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 17–25, 2016; U.S. State Department Cable, July 25, 1978, declassified March 20, 2014, [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1978ABUD-HO2039\\_d.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1978ABUD-HO2039_d.html).

4 Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 90.

5 For a fuller discussion of security integration see: Karen Young, *The Political Economy of Energy, Finance, and Security in the United Arab Emirates: Between the Majlis and the Market* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking* (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Christopher Davidson, *The Vulnerability of Success* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

6 Mahmoud Habboush, “If the UAE came under attack,” *The National*, June 16, 2009, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/if-the-uae-came-under-attack>.

## **“NATIONAL SERVICE CAN BE SEEN AS ONE OF [THE UAE LEADERSHIP’S] BOLDEST EFFORTS TO INVOLVE THE POPULATION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SHARED EMIRATI CONSCIOUSNESS.”**

termed the “Student Citizenship Program” and later rebranded “Al Bayariq” or “banners,” the joint venture between the military, Abu Dhabi police, and the Abu Dhabi Education Council sought to integrate “military education, police science, and life skills” in a program targeting students in the latter years of high school. While classes in “military and police skills” had existed in schools before Al Bayariq, the new curriculum integrated “soft skills” such as teamwork, discipline, dedication, and perseverance.<sup>7</sup> While the outward appearance of the program is entirely military—students in the program are required to wear military uniforms and learn marksmanship—the Abu Dhabi Education Council’s website promises that it teaches “leadership,

teamwork, discipline, perseverance, loyalty and tolerance.”<sup>8</sup> The implementing company is linked to Abu Dhabi’s ruling Al Nahyan family, and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed reportedly gave input on the curriculum.<sup>9</sup> By 2013, shortly before conscription was announced, the school program had grown to 162 sites, quickly spreading far beyond Abu Dhabi.<sup>10</sup>

### **FACTORS PROMPTING CONSCRIPTION**

Several factors have contributed to the UAE’s decision to pursue programs that explicitly combine military training with citizenship and human capital development.

- 7 Calvert W. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Amr Bayoumy, “Abu Dhabi Education Council confirms that it aims to train students on military education and life skills [Abu Dhabi lil ta`alim yu`akad anuhu yahdaf ila tadrib al-tullab `ala al-tarbiya al-`askariya wa al-maharat al-hayatiya],” *Emarat Al Youm*, September 28, 2013, <http://www.emaratalyoum.com/local-section/education/2013-09-28-1.610329>.
- 8 Abu Dhabi Education Council, “Albayariq,” <https://www.adec.ac.ae/en/Education/PP/Pages/Albayariq.aspx>.
- 9 Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization*.
- 10 Bayoumy, “Abu Dhabi Education Council confirms that it aims to train students on military education and life skills, [Abu Dhabi lil ta`alim yu`akad anuhu yahdaf ila tadrib al-tullab `ala al-tarbiya al-`askariya wa al-maharat al-hayatiya].”

The obvious ones relate to the UAE's regional threat environment, which became even more perilous in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Since 2011, civil wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, ongoing violence in Iraq, and a more ambitious Iranian regional agenda all informed Emirati thinking. With conditions in Bahrain clearly in mind, Emirati officials believe there is a very real possibility of Iranian-led attacks inside the Emirates. Having a well-developed civil defense and emergency management infrastructure is a necessary response to that.

Several other relevant factors emerged through the authors' conversations with hundreds of Emiratis, many of whom have nothing to do with the national service program. One is the drive to define and defend the boundaries of Emirati identity, which many Emiratis fear is being overwhelmed by immigration and globalization. Between the year of the country's establishment in 1971 and 2010, the population of the UAE multiplied by a factor of 28—with the vast majority of this boom the result of an influx of foreign workers.<sup>11</sup> Today, Emiratis are believed to make up just over 11 percent of the population.<sup>12</sup> In recent decades, Emirati commentators have expressed growing alarm that their identity could “vanish” in the face of this demographic tide along with the prevalence of English in the education system, the ubiquity of Western cultural im-

ports, and rising rates of “mixed marriages” between Emiratis and foreign spouses.<sup>13</sup> A complicating factor is that, given the newness of the UAE as a political entity, a unified Emirati cultural identity has not always been self-evident. Not only do Emiratis break down into family and tribal divisions, but the state itself is also a confederation of seven city-states, each with its own ruling family and a history of independence. The state has taken a leading role in articulating and asserting a more homogenous Emirati identity that supersedes local, tribal, religious, or ideological affiliations.<sup>14</sup> National service can be seen as one of its boldest efforts to involve the population in the construction of a shared Emirati consciousness.

Another factor is a perception that young Emirati men are becoming soft. Decades of free education and guaranteed employment have removed incentives for excellence. Peers complain of a growing cadre of Emiratis who focus on their insular world, addicted to constant stimulation from personal electronics. Out of shape and socially awkward, they stand in stark contrast to what Emiratis remember as their austere, rugged, and communally minded ancestors.<sup>15</sup> For a country that only recently was forged out of a barren desert, the new generation is a mystery to its parents and vice versa. An Emirati minister told visitors in May 2016 that “Young people don't believe

- 11 Françoise De Bel-Air, “Demography, Migration, and the Labour Market in the UAE,” Gulf Research Center, Gulf Labor Markets and Migration No. 7/2015, [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/36375/GLMM\\_Exp-Note\\_07\\_2015.pdf](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/36375/GLMM_Exp-Note_07_2015.pdf).
- 12 2010 UAE government estimates based on the most recent comprehensive census in 2005. See UAE National Bureau of Statistics, “National Population by Emirate and Sex (2010 mid-year estimates),” <http://www.uaestatistics.gov.ae/ReportPDF/Population%20Estimates%202006%20-%202010.pdf>.
- 13 Eman Mohammed, “The debate on UAE national identity,” *Gulf News*, May 26, 2008, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/general/the-debate-on-uae-national-identity-1.106921>.
- 14 Vânia Carvalho Pinto, “From ‘Follower’ to ‘Role Model’: The Transformation to the UAE’s International Self-Image,” *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 4:2, 231–43; Michael Herb, *The Wages of Oil: Parliaments and Economic Development in Kuwait and the UAE* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).
- 15 Nadia Rahman, “Place and Space in the Memory of the United Arab Emirates Elders,” in *Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States*, Eds. Alanoud Alsharekh and Robert Springborg (New York: Saqi Books, 2008).

that their parents lived without electricity and running water. . . . Now, if you want your son to come out of his room, you have to turn off his Wi-Fi.”<sup>16</sup>

Some believe that the education system is partly to blame for this trend and is incapable of reversing it. The schools have a large number of expatriate teachers who are unable or unwilling to criticize their Emirati students, let alone discipline them. This has formed a pattern of “super-entitlement” in which students expect only praise and success.<sup>17</sup> The problem is markedly more pronounced among men than women, since few women feel the same entitlement to success that Emirati men enjoy. Men are trailing women in educational attainment, dropping out of secondary school at significantly higher rates and making up only 30 percent of university graduates.<sup>18</sup>

A third factor in the institution of conscription is the UAE’s urgent need to adjust to a future in which oil plays a diminished role in the national economy. Oil wealth undergirds the UAE economy and is projected to do so well into the future, but for almost a decade the UAE has been focused on a post-oil boom future. The national “UAE Vision 2021” strategic framework and Abu Dhabi’s “Economic Vision 2030” both take as their premise that an oil-based economy

is a long-running handicap, subjecting the country to sustained economic volatility, distorting the labor market, and undermining sustainable growth. Taking oil-rich Norway as a model, with nods to Ireland, Singapore, and New Zealand, Abu Dhabi (the emirate with the overwhelming bulk of the nation’s oil wealth) seeks to transition to a far more diversified economy. The goal is to reduce the contribution of the UAE’s oil sector to about a third of GDP by 2030, down from almost two-thirds in 2005.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, the UAE’s insistence on transitioning from oil dependence long predated the present weakening in oil prices, which began mid-2014. Instead, it was a response to the boom-and-bust cycle that has sent oil prices gyrating between less than \$20 and more than \$130 in the twenty-first century. The UAE has increasingly recognized that as part of its transition it will need to rethink a longstanding arrangement in which Emiratis receive far-ranging lifetime benefits and subsidies and often view well-paying government jobs as an entitlement.<sup>20</sup> UAE Vision 2021 set targets to more than double the share of Emiratis in the country’s workforce and boost by roughly a factor of five the share of nationals in the private sector in particular, where as few as 1 in 10 employed Emiratis are estimated to work.<sup>21</sup>

16 Interview with senior Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization official, Abu Dhabi, May 24, 2016.

17 Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization*.

18 Sara Hamdan, “U.A.E. Promotes Women in the Boardroom,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/world/middleeast/uae-requires-women-board-members.html?mcubz=0>.

19 Government of Abu Dhabi The Economic Vision 2030,” Abu Dhabi, 2008, 30, <https://government.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/local-governments-strategies-and-plans/abu-dhabi-economic-vision-2030>; UAE Government, “UAE Vision 2021,” 2010, <https://www.vision2021.ae/en>.

20 See Carolyn Barnett, *Human Capital and the Future of the Gulf*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 12, 2015, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/151112\\_Barnett\\_HumanCapital\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/151112_Barnett_HumanCapital_Web.pdf); Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization*.

21 Government of the UAE, “National Key Performance Indicators,” UAE Vision 2021, <https://www.vision2021.ae/en/national-priority-areas/nkpi-export-pdf>; Françoise De Bel-Air, “Demography, Migration, and the Labour Market in the UAE,” *Gulf Labor Markets and Migration* No. 7/2015, Gulf Research Center, [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/36375/GLMM\\_ExpNote\\_07\\_2015.pdf](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/36375/GLMM_ExpNote_07_2015.pdf).

A further urgent factor influencing the conscription decision was the wave of protests that swept the Arab world in early 2011, bringing thousands of protestors to the streets, bringing down governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and elsewhere, and sparking major protests in Kuwait and Bahrain. While the so-called “Arab Spring” did not threaten the UAE government directly, the unrest underscored increasingly distorted relationships between governments and their citizenry in the Middle East. Citizens had rising expectations that their governments would be effective, efficient, and represent their best interests, but they felt little sense of reciprocal duty. Few felt much loyalty, and some flirted with radical ideologies. Arab societies had been built on networks of personal and communal obligation and on obedience to authority. In the Gulf, urbanization, education, and rising wealth altered traditional patterns. Increasingly, these societies were descending into individualism that fueled resentment and dissension. The Arab Spring was a stark reminder of how much dissatisfaction was building, how quickly ideologies of opposition could spread, and how powerless police and intelligence services often were to arrest such a movement once it had begun. The UAE government felt an urgent need to prevent things from reaching a crisis point.

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## THE UAE’S SEVEN EMIRATES

**The United Arab Emirates (UAE)** is a confederation of seven emirates that were independent sheikhdoms with ties to Great Britain until unification in 1971. The largest and the one with the most oil wealth is Abu Dhabi, which has traditionally led the confederation. Dubai, a trading entrepot since the late nineteenth century, hosts the UAE’s largest number of foreign workers. The other emirates—Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah, and Fujairah—enjoy varying degrees of independence, but in practical terms all have grown closer to Abu Dhabi in recent years. While each emirate has its own ruler and government, federal ministries often have significant overlap with the Abu Dhabi government.

**Recruits to the  
fourth class of  
national service  
receive their  
military-issued  
uniforms and gear  
on arrival in  
August 2015.**

Photo courtesy of  
the UAE National  
Service and Reserve  
Authority.

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## UAE NATIONAL SERVICE PROGRAM

**T**he UAE began a vigorous study of the experiences of other countries with ongoing conscription programs, including those that had applied a military framework for goals beyond defense. The government commissioned “comprehensive benchmark studies” of conscription in Finland, Singapore, and South Korea. The three nations vary widely in demographics, government type, and threat profiles. Their conscription programs have been ongoing for decades, with varying levels of popular support and reform efforts. Yet, UAE conscription officials describe each of the three case studies as demonstrating some form of “best practices” and the UAE carefully reviewed elements of their programs including their emphasis on military effectiveness versus societal goals, internal security purposes, reserve readiness, and societal responses to conscription.<sup>22</sup>

The UAE also sought to consult counterparts in case study countries. The most direct known engagement is the hiring of former

22 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

## **“MOHAMMED BIN RASHID WROTE THAT THE LAW AIMED TO ‘STRENGTHEN THE SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE NATION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND PLANT IN THEM DISCIPLINE AND SACRIFICE.’”**

second-in-command of the Finnish Defense Forces Markku Koli as an adviser to Mohammed bin Zayed’s office in 2011.<sup>23</sup> There is also indication that the UAE sought to engage Singapore in conversations on its own national service program. A UAE-Singaporean Joint Commission was formed in May 2013, and Emirati state media suggests that national service was among the files discussed under its aegis.<sup>24</sup> Although South Korea and the UAE deepened military cooperation in the years prior to UAE national service—including through the stationing of 150 South Korean troops in the UAE to train Emirati special forces beginning in 2011—it is not

known if the UAE consulted Seoul directly regarding its own conscription program.<sup>25</sup>

The UAE declared its intention to institute national service in January 2014. It named its legal basis as Article 43 of the UAE constitution, which calls the defense of the nation “the sacred duty of every citizen” and also located Vision 2021 as a strategic foundation for the service program.<sup>26</sup> In a series of tweets and a speech before the UAE cabinet, UAE vice president and ruler of Dubai Mohammed bin Rashid said that the new conscription law “adds another layer to the national defense force to further protect our nation, secure its

23 As of mid-2017, Koli’s LinkedIn profile says he worked for Mohammed bin Zayed’s office from 2011 to 2014 before taking on an executive advisory role to the new UAE conscription body from 2014 to 2015. “Markku Koli,” LinkedIn Profile, accessed July/August 2017, <https://www.linkedin.com/in/markku-koli-568a0127/>.

24 Caline Malek, “Singapore’s first resident ambassador to UAE returns home,” *The National*, December 24, 2016, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/singapore-s-first-resident-ambassador-to-uae-returns-home-1.170156>.

25 “S. Korea, UAE defense chiefs meet to promote military cooperation,” Yonhap News Agency, November 28, 2016, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2016/11/28/3/0200000000AEN20161128003100315F.html>.

26 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

borders, [and] preserve its achievements.”<sup>27</sup> National service aimed to promote not only the nation’s security, he said, but also the patriotism and development of its youth. Mohammed bin Rashid wrote that the law aimed to “strengthen the sense of belonging to the nation among young people and plant in them discipline and sacrifice.”<sup>28</sup>

Within two months, the UAE’s Federal National Council approved the government’s plans and it went into effect in June 2014. A major general and sheikh, Ahmed bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan (a cousin of Mohammed bin Zayed’s), was selected to run the new National Service and Reserve Authority (NSRA). As of 2016, the NSRA operated with a dedicated staff of around two dozen, including several female Emirati strategists, and a number of foreign advisers and consultants.<sup>29</sup>

In July 2014, the NSRA directed new high school graduates to report to designated recruitment centers for registration and examination.<sup>30</sup> By the end of August 2014, the first class of several thousand recruits had reported for basic training.<sup>31</sup> Although many other conscription programs draft men at the age of 18, the initial phase of national service is ambitiously broad, targeting all males between the years of 18 and 30. The

first class of recruits in their mid- to late twenties was inducted in December 2014.<sup>32</sup> While the initial training commitment was nine months (and two years for those who had failed to finish high school), the government announced intent to extend it to a full year in 2016.<sup>33</sup> The willingness to disrupt careers and take fathers away from families signaled the importance of the NSRA to the UAE government.

## DESIGNING THE UAE NATIONAL SERVICE AND RESERVE AUTHORITY

The UAE national service program is designed explicitly to pursue both military and societal goals. The program is also self-consciously dynamic, and states the need for continuous review and evolution as part of its mandate.<sup>34</sup> To meet its defense goals, the NSRA hopes to bring a group of civilians to a level of physical and technical competence as quickly as possible, so they can perform key roles in the military reserves and vital sectors. As a nation-building tool, the military program seeks to produce profound shifts in how conscripts think about themselves as citizens and how they act in their everyday lives.

27 Mary Sophia, “UAE Introduces Compulsory Military Service for Men,” *Gulf Business*, January 19, 2014, <http://gulf-business.com/uae-introduces-compulsory-military-service-for-men/>.

28 “UAE to make military service compulsory: agency,” *Agence France-Presse*, January 19, 2014, via <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Article.aspx?id=244534>.

29 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 19, 2016.

30 The NSRA issues updates most frequently through its Instagram account. UAE National Service and Reserve Authority, Instagram post, July 7, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/qKTmFVBCPg/?taken-by=uaensr>.

31 “First national service recruits in UAE start training,” *Gulf News*, August 31, 2014, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/government/first-national-service-recruits-in-uae-start-training-1.1378649>.

32 “Kawkaba jadida min shabab al-watan tulabi nida’ al-wajib [New constellation of the nation’s youth fulfill the call of duty],” *Al Bayan*, December 20, 2014, <http://www.albayan.ae/across-the-uae/news-and-reports/2014-12-20-1.2269935>.

33 “Tamdid al-khidma al-wataniya ila 12 shahran [Extension of national service to 12 months],” *Al Bayan*, March 8, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2sLQKCh>.

34 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 19, 2016.

Military drills, leaders hope, will do more than teach functional abilities. They are intended to teach lessons in grit, teamwork, and humility. While new recruits learn how to handle weapons, they also get lessons in proper diet and exercise, with the hope that these will become lifelong habits. They clean toilets and make their beds—many for the first time after a lifetime of relying on domestic servants. Rising before dawn, they march in formation and are given orders, with the goal of reversing the stereotype of young Emirati men with no motivation and a disregard for authority.<sup>35</sup>

NSRA officials described the UAE's decision to brand the program as "national service" rather than a "pure" military conscription system as one of the key lessons drawn from the study of other countries.<sup>36</sup> This has been reflected in officials' emphasis on the benefits to recruits in explaining the program to the Emirati public. Some recruits will surely find jobs in the defense sector—including some 24,000 unemployed Emiratis eligible for conscription, according to NSRA officials—but the goals go well beyond direct employment.<sup>37</sup> Mohammed bin Zayed was clear when he addressed NSRA recruits in 2016, saying, "Whether you are wearing those uniforms or working in any institution in the UAE, you are the real investment."<sup>38</sup> The program seeks to make Emiratis more

competitive in the civilian workforce and more productive members of society. Ahmed bin Tahnoon addressed the General Women's Union in the weeks before the first recruits began their service. "I assure you that this program will change the psyche of people and their lifestyle, and the way they deal with others. . . . [Y]ou will see this with your children."<sup>39</sup> In remarks published by the UAE armed forces periodical, Mohammed bin Rashid spoke of the gains that conscripts would gain from the military as a "a school of manliness and chivalry and discipline." Conscripts would learn the "ability to handle the responsibility of decisionmaking, mastering time management, adjustment to working in teams, and team spirit."<sup>40</sup>

The program is not merely about improving Emiratis' skills directly. Officials have been clear and consistent that the program seeks to deepen allegiance to the UAE. Addressing military and high government officials shortly after the NSRA was formed, Mohammed bin Zayed stated his desire for the NSRA to help elevate identification with—and loyalty to—the Emirates above other associations. "Loyalty to the UAE comes first and foremost, and shall prevail over any other loyalties. . . . This is what all of us must instill in the youth in order to strengthen our march and unite our ranks."<sup>41</sup> The program is designed to instruct soldiers

35 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 17, 2016.

36 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

37 Naser Al Wasmi, "UAE National Service 'to be making of youth,'" *The National*, July 3, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/uae-national-service-to-be-making-of-youth>.

38 Mohammed bin Zayed opens the national service school in Seeh Hafir camp [Arabic], *Sharjah 24 News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NA2AhrXR2k>.

39 Haneen Dajani, "Mothers told of military benefits," *The National*, August 12, 2014, via <https://www.pressreader.com/uae/the-national-news/20140812/281612418554952>.

40 "Mohammed bin Rashid: The military is a school of manliness and discipline [Mohammed bin rashid: al `askariya madrasat al-rujula wa al-indhibat], *Emarat Al Youm*, May 6, 2014, <http://www.emaratalyoum.com/local-section/other/2014-05-06-1.673508>.

41 "Sheikh Mohammed praises Emiratis who signed up for national service," *The National*, July 24, 2014, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/sheikh-mohammed-praises-emiratis-who-signed-up-for-national-service-1.259491>.

# COMPARISON OF THE UAE NSRA WITH CASE STUDY PROGRAMS

Country	Population*	Annual conscript intake	Active service requirements	Reserve duty requirements	Alternative service and conscientious objection
<b>UNITED ARAB EMIRATES</b>	*Citizen population: <b>947,997</b> (2010 estimate)	Around 10,000 (at program maturity)	All male citizens aged 18–30 liable with service obligation of 2 years for non-secondary school graduates, 12 months for graduates; voluntary training for men aged 30–40; female national service volunteers train for 12 months regardless of education level.	Obligation to age 58 for enlisted men, age 60 for officers; two to four weeks' annual training during active reserve period.	Alternative civilian service option available based on lack of medical fitness; conscientious objection not recognized.
<b>FINLAND</b>	<b>5,498,211</b>	Around 25,000	Active service obligation of 6–12 months for all male citizens with call-up at age 18.	Obligation to age 60 with compulsory refresher courses of 5–6 days every 3–7 years or as mandated by defense forces.	Alternative civilian service available to conscientious objectors; only Jehovah's Witnesses exempted from both civilian and military service.
<b>SINGAPORE</b>	*Citizen and permanent resident population: <b>3,933,600</b>	Around 20,000	Conscript service obligation of 2 years for men aged 18–21.	Obligation to age 40 for enlisted men, age 50 for officers; 10 years of liability for yearly training of up to 40 days.	No alternative civilian service for men eligible to serve; conscientious objection not recognized. Voluntary auxiliary service available for some exempted groups.
<b>REPUBLIC OF KOREA</b>	<b>51,181,299</b>	Around 300,000	All male citizens aged 20–30 liable for service with obligation ranging from 20–24 months according to branch.	8 year obligation following active service including 6 years of camp mobilization training.	Alternative civilian service available based on lack of medical fitness or possession of specific professional skills; conscientious objection not recognized.

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\*Where non-citizens make up a significant portion of the population, the population of citizens or citizens and permanent residents is shown to better convey the demographic military recruitment environment.

Sources: UAE National Bureau of Statistics, Finnish Defense Forces, Singapore Department of Statistics, Singapore Ministry of Defense, Republic of Korea Military Manpower Administration, Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, IISS Military Balance 2017, CIA World Factbook, media reports.

in the value of patriotism as well as the dangers of sedition and complacency.

The breadth and enforcement of the conscription law is an unmistakable indication of the nation-building intent behind it. While many countries are content to draft only younger recruits, the UAE government upped the ceiling for mandatory service to 30 years of age. In time, most Emiratis will begin service directly after secondary school but, under the current requirements, employees are forced to leave their jobs, and husbands are forced to leave their families. Exemptions are reserved for the sole sons of families; those who can prove a “permanent” lack of physical fitness sufficiently severe to prevent a potential conscript from performing even a civilian job through an “alternative service program” devised by the NSRA; and other select, narrow categories.<sup>42</sup> Academic deferments allow the best students to defer service, but they maintain their obligation to serve, even if they have passed the age of 30.<sup>43</sup> Away from the limelight, NSRA officials flew to the United States in 2015 for a special session with Emiratis studying abroad to communicate their obligations to the mandatory service.<sup>44</sup>

Leaders of the country have enforced the law strictly to ensure sufficient manpower

and to validate the program’s legitimacy. The UAE’s poorer northern emirates traditionally have shouldered the onus of the military manpower burden, but the current universal draft clearly is designed to effect a more equitable sharing of responsibility. To emphasize this point, the UAE state media has widely publicized the enlistment of a number of young royals and local celebrities.<sup>45</sup>

Compliance is promoted through carrots and sticks. Conscripts who complete their service are promised priority access for jobs and promotions, scholarships, land loans, and marriage grants.<sup>46</sup> While serving, conscripts receive a base stipend equivalent to \$816 a month—quite generous by the standards of many Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries with conscription programs—and exponentially more if called up for reserve duty lasting more than three months.<sup>47</sup> Older conscripts who must take a leave of absence from employment for national service or reserve duty are entitled to continue receiving their normal salary, half of which the government pays if the conscript is employed in the private sector. Notably, the law guarantees conscripts’ right to continue collecting any bonuses, raises,

42 For full text of national service law (Arabic), see National Service Law, UAE Federal Law No. 6 regarding National and Reserve Service, [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/98631/117537/F1124036572/0019-Federal\\_Law\\_no6\\_of\\_2014\\_ar.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/98631/117537/F1124036572/0019-Federal_Law_no6_of_2014_ar.pdf).

43 Ibid.

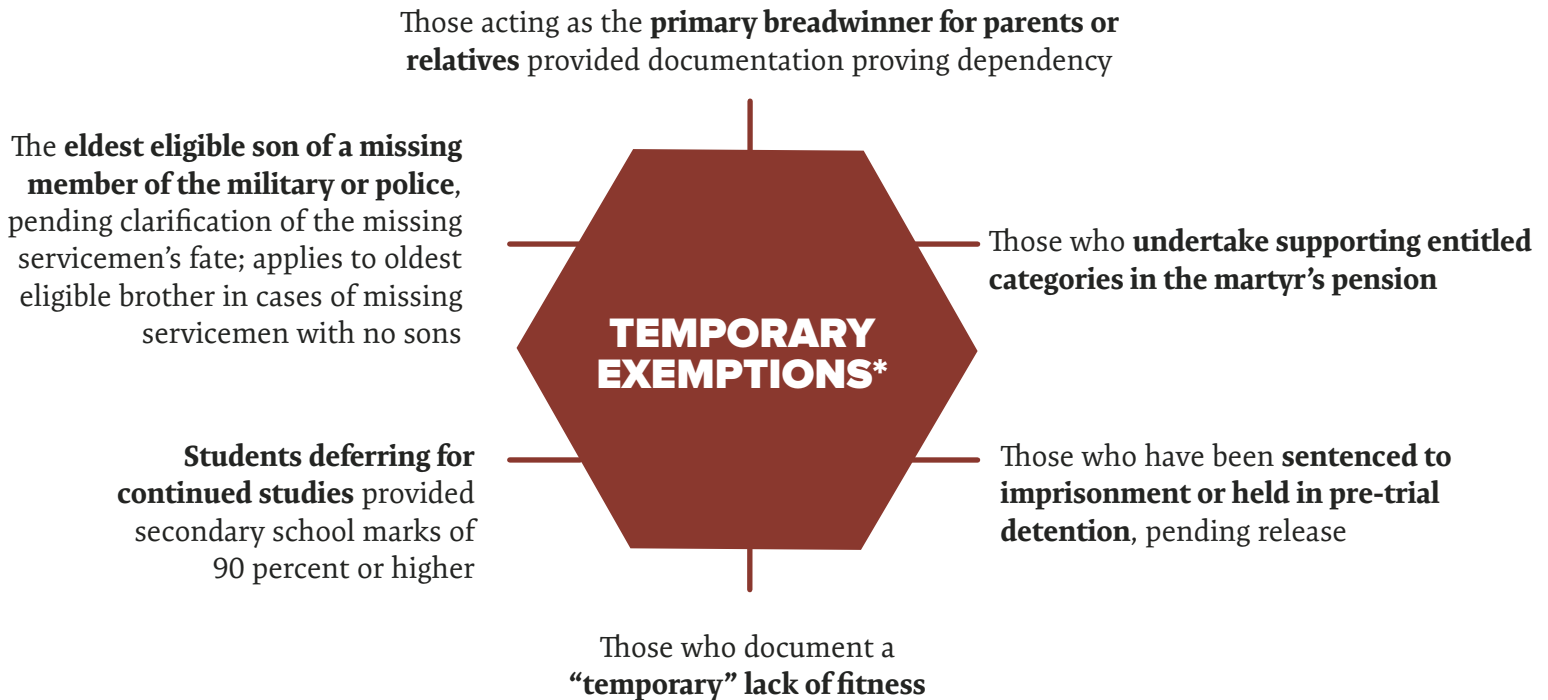
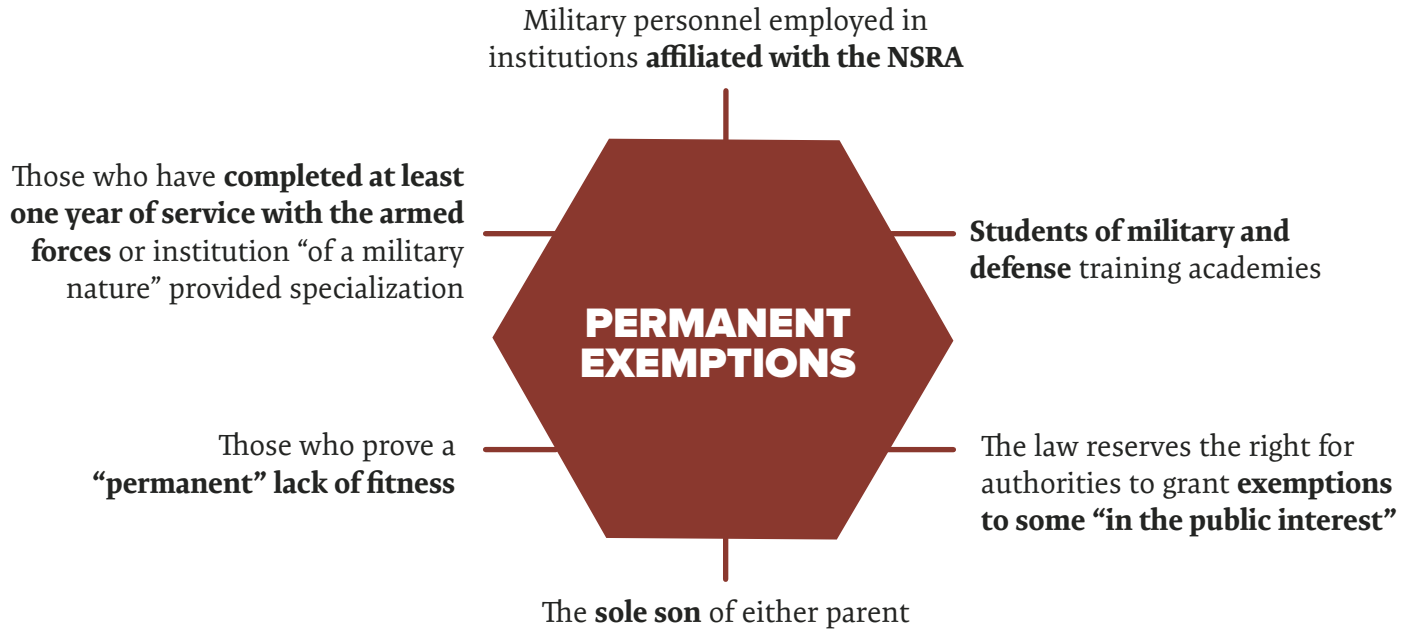
44 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 25, 2016.

45 Nick Webster, “National service an honour for all Emiratis, RAK Crown Prince says,” *The National*, March 17, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/national-service-an-honour-for-all-emiratis-rak-crown-prince-says>; “Crown princes of Fujairah and UAQ enroll for national service,” *The National*, October 30, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/crown-princes-of-fujairah-and-uaq-enrol-for-national-service>; “Dubai ruler’s son enlists for national service,” *The National*, January 17, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/dubai-rulers-son-enlists-for-national-service>.

46 Ola Salem, “Benefits await Emiratis who complete military service,” *The National*, March 4, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/benefits-await-emiratis-who-complete-military-service>.

47 “UAE President issues decree on remuneration of national service, reserve service recruits,” Emirates News Agency, December 23, 2014, <http://www.wam.org.ae/en/details/1395274188127>.

# GROUNDS FOR EXEMPTIONS



**\*When the reason for a temporary exemption has ceased, men liable for conscription must present themselves to be registered as eligible within the NSRA system.**

Sources: UAE Federal Law No.6 of 2014 on the National Military Service and Reserve Force, UAE National Service and Reserve Authority website.

or promotions that they would have earned if they had been present.<sup>48</sup>

Evasion brings harsh repercussions. Every male citizen between the ages of 18 and 30 must report to the NSRA within 30 days of a call-up. Under the 2014 law, failure to report for registration incurs a jail sentence between one month and one year or a fine between \$2,700 and \$13,600. Attempting to dodge the draft by lying or by deliberately rendering one's self physically unfit for service carries a minimum sentence of one year or a fine of up to \$27,225. Further, men who fail to complete their service are barred from government jobs and cannot enroll in any educational institution inside or outside the country.<sup>49</sup>

While the NSRA is stringent about exemptions, two categories of recruits do not complete the program. The first is recruits with a profound lack of physical fitness. The NSRA goes to lengths to accommodate recruits with moderate health challenges—including excess weight and diabetes—by putting them on custom fitness and nutrition plans.<sup>50</sup> Those who are judged “medically unfit” for military training even with accommodations, but adequately fit for civilian work, are channeled into an “alternative service program” that does not require physical exertion.<sup>51</sup> Of the first

50,000 men called up for service, 9,840—or nearly one in five—were placed into the alternative service pool.<sup>52</sup> The alternative service program trains recruits for roles to ensure the continuity of vital sectors in case of emergency. They train with food security authorities, national airports, and national security bodies, through a program designed with the UAE's national crisis management authority.<sup>53</sup> Programs are still being brought online as of September 2017, and only 1,444 of conscripts from the alternative service pool have been mobilized. However, those remaining maintain an obligation to serve as alternative service programs become ready.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, the NSRA screens for recruits who could pose a risk. Criminal records are not absolute grounds for disqualification, although conscripts with such records may be assigned to less sensitive areas.<sup>55</sup> However, anyone affiliated with an “illegal organization”—referring primarily to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups that the UAE considers to be security threats<sup>56</sup>—is barred from participating. It is also unclear exactly how Emiratis of Shi'ite origin are screened, but the potential of an Iranian fifth column within the Emirates is a clear concern of the leadership, and it likely has an impact on recruits' perceived suitability.

48 National Service Law, UAE Federal Law No. 6 regarding National and Reserve Service, [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/98631/117537/F1124036572/0019-Federal\\_Law\\_no6\\_of\\_2014\\_ar.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/98631/117537/F1124036572/0019-Federal_Law_no6_of_2014_ar.pdf).

49 Ibid.

50 UAE National Service and Reserve Authority, “Frequently asked questions,” UAE NSRA website (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2eGHSJV>.

51 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

52 Phone interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, September 19, 2017.

53 National Emergency Crisis and Disasters Management Authority, “National and Reserve Service... Honour... Loyalty... Sacrifice,” *Taware'e wa Azamat*, Issue 10, October 2014, <https://www.ncema.gov.ae/content/documents/Tawaree%20English%20Pages.pdf>.

54 Phone interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, September 19, 2017.

55 Ibid.

56 Hussein Ibish, “The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy,” Arab Gulf States Institute of Washington, Issue Paper No. 4, April 2017, <http://www.agsiw.org/uaes-evolving-national-security-strategy/>.

The NSRA sends the names of draftees to the UAE intelligence services, who reject approximately 2 to 3 percent, according to NSRA officials. The aim is to maximize participation, NSRA officials say, and they say they often push back on the rejections of some names by intelligence bodies or request a second review.<sup>57</sup>

To maximize participation, leaders also have created a number of pathways for categories of people exempted from mandatory service to enlist. In August 2015, the government announced that the children of Emirati mothers and non-Emirati fathers—who must apply for citizenship on reaching the age of majority—could participate voluntarily, and even expedite their citizenship applications by doing so.<sup>58</sup> In February 2016, the government opened enrollment in an abbreviated voluntary version of national service to men aged 30–40 who wished to serve.<sup>59</sup> A voluntary program for women has been a part of the NSRA since its inception, although to enroll, women must obtain permission of their guardians and their employers if they are working.<sup>60</sup> Their training period is 12 months, regardless of education level.<sup>61</sup>

## THE TRAINING PROGRAM

The NSRA runs two classes of 6,000–8,000 conscripts a year. Annual enrollment eventually will stabilize at two classes of 5,000 conscripts each.<sup>62</sup> Conscripts report to one of five military camps (one is reserved solely for female trainees) for basic training, whose duration was extended in 2016 from an initial three months to four months. This is followed by three months of specialized training within the military or a participating government body, and then by a period of applied training.<sup>63</sup>

### Adjusting Attitudes

Like all basic military training, the first phase of UAE national service is reeducation. Before recruits pick up a weapon, they are immersed in an environment designed to unravel patterns of entitlement and to instill obedience to a chain of command. The process begins on arrival, when conscripts with pre-shaved heads swap their white kandouras or sports clothes for nondescript tan uniforms and claim a bunk among rows of thin barrack mattresses—the first time many have slept in a room of strangers. Alarms go off before dawn for

57 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 19, 2016.

58 “UAE National Service is now open to those whose father is foreign,” *The National*, August 26, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/uae-national-service-is-now-open-to-those-whose-father-is-foreign>.

59 “Muqtarih yutih lil fi’a al-`omriya min (30 ila 40 sana) ta’diyat al-khidma al-wataniya [Proposal allows the age group from 30 to 40 years to perform national service],” *Emarat Al Youm*, February 17, 2016, <http://www.emaratalyoum.com/local-section/other/2016-02-17-1.870788>.

60 UAE National Service and Reserve Authority (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2eGHSJV>.

61 “Al-khidma al-wataniya: 23 setember iltihaq al-duf’a al-sadisa lil inath [National service: September 23 enlistment of the sixth female class],” *Al Bayan*, August 1, 2017, <http://www.albayan.ae/across-the-uae/news-and-reports/2017-08-01-1.3014613>. As late as May 2017, the NSRA was promoting the female program lasting nine months rather than 12. See “Istimrar al-tasjeel fi al-khidma al-wataniya wa al-ihtiyatiya duf’a at setember lil inath [Continued registration in national and reserve service of the September class for females],” Emirates News Agency via *Al Bayan*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.albayan.ae/across-the-uae/news-and-reports/2017-05-01-1.2932837>.

62 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

63 UAE National Service and Reserve Authority (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2eGHSJV>; “Muqtarih yutih lil fi’a al-`omriya min (30 ila 40 sana) ta’diyat al-khidma al-wataniya [Proposal allows the age group from 30 to 40 years to perform national service],” *Emarat Al Youm*.

## **“BEFORE RECRUITS PICK UP A WEAPON, THEY ARE IMMERSED IN AN ENVIRONMENT DESIGNED TO UNRAVEL PATTERNS OF ENTITLEMENT AND TO INSTILL OBEDIENCE TO A CHAIN OF COMMAND.”**

morning drills, which leave many coughing and some seeking treatment at the base clinic for dizziness and shortness of breath. Wherever they go, the men march in formation. Discipline is not just physical. Recruits are required to pray five times a day, either at the on-base mosque or wherever they are at the time. They must make their own beds, do their own laundry, and clean their own bathrooms—tasks that typically fall to domestic workers or female relatives in civilian life. As one national service commander said, “They’re used to waking up in the morning to the maid cleaning and picking up after them and doing everything . . . not here.”<sup>64</sup> The initial phase leaves many servicemen in “a state of shock.” As one conscript said, “In your private life, no one orders you around or yells at you.”<sup>65</sup>

### **Relationships**

Learning to live in diverse groups and work in teams is another key element of NSRA training. Conscripts report that bonds form fast. They grow invested in each other’s successes, in part, because rewards and punishments alike are meted out collectively. The severe limitation of phone use—doled out as a privilege in 15-minute doses—means that more free time is spent talking with comrades. Due to the intense social nature of the program, those who are shy or uncomfortable around new people find it hard going.<sup>66</sup>

Conscripts often report to the camp closest to their home, particularly those enrolling directly after secondary school. The resulting mix sometimes lacks geographic diversity, but makes up in socioeconomic diver-

64 *Every Emirati’s Son*, prod. Nomad Media, National Geographic Abu Dhabi.

65 Ibid.

66 Interview with group of national service recruits in specialist training, Zayed Military City, Abu Dhabi, May 23, 2016.

sity. Recruits with little exposure to other cultures may find themselves serving with Emiratis who grew up entirely outside the country. One recruit recalled of his fellow cadets, “Some of them didn’t know much Arabic so we had to help them with the translation of the orders.”<sup>67</sup> An Emirati from a leading family told a story about her male cousin who participated in national service and was reading an English self-help book in his downtime; and was bemused when a bunkmate asked him if he was reading the Holy Qur’an in translation.<sup>68</sup>

Some inductees view this as a rare opportunity to interact apart from the in-groups and hierarchies that stratify Emirati society. In one recruit’s words, “When we first arrived, everyone came in full of themselves, bragging about who [his family] is, but the military erases all that.”<sup>69</sup> This proximity, however, can also cast social and economic differences into relief. A level playing field offers temptation to the resentful. For example, lower-income participants have less money to leave the base on weekends and, reportedly, sometimes relish the ability to “ground” more privileged participants by triggering collective punishments.<sup>70</sup>

Overall, the NSRA has made social cohesion among conscripts a priority, with the aim of promoting the same cohesion outside the program. Just as the NSRA stressed equality in conscription duty, its leaders have vowed to treat conscripts

within the program equally—regardless of their connections or wealth. While difficult to confirm, Emirati interlocutors within and outside the program suggested in interviews that this has generally been the case—and not always to the enthusiasm of more privileged recruits.<sup>71</sup> The extent to which the UAE is able to maintain this equality will carry significant implications for the program’s evolution and success.

## Physical Training

The NSRA has an aggressive strategy toward improving the wellness and health of recruits. Recruits are issued “passports” with their vital fitness statistics; something NSRA officials hope will foster constructive peer competition. The NSRA health team dispatches weekly reports to higher authorities. Physical strength is not the only interest. NSRA strategists modeled their approach on the U.S. Army’s “total force fitness” matrix. This holistic framework encompasses physical health as well as psychological, spiritual, behavioral, social, and family health.<sup>72</sup>

The wellness program is ambitious in its goals and the UAE leadership is investing accordingly. A tour of the female national service volunteers’ exercise center showed gleaming new facilities, Olympic pools, and large halls for free exercise and jiu jitsu competitions. (In addition to daily exercises, conscripts take 60 jiu-jitsu lessons during basic training—a favorite sport of

67 Thamer Al Subaihi, “UAE National Service recruits learn life lessons in discipline, friendship, and sacrifice,” *The National*, April 21, 2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/uae-national-service-recruits-learn-life-lessons-in-discipline-friendship-and-sacrifice>.

68 Interview with senior Emirati official, Abu Dhabi, May 24, 2016.

69 *Every Emirati’s Son*, prod. Nomad Media, National Geographic Abu Dhabi.

70 Interview with civil society organization director, Ras Al Khaimah, May 22, 2016.

71 Interview with UAE-based academic, Dubai, May 21, 2016.

72 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016; for more on the U.S. total force model, see “Total Force Fitness for the 21st Century: A New Paradigm,” *Military Medicine* 175, Issue 8S (August 2010): 1–126.

# KEY DATES IN THE UAE'S CONSCRIPTION PROGRAM

## 2006

**MAY** UAE government passes law on reserve service in the UAE Armed Forces for military personnel and civilian volunteers

## 2008

Schools launch citizenship education and military skills for students which would come to be known as *Al Bayariq*

## 2009

**MAY** UAE government passes law on emergency mobilization, including mandatory enlistment in the armed forces for UAE citizens at the decree of the High National Security Council in case of attack or unrest

## 2011

**MAR.** The UAE sends 500 police officers to Bahrain amid Bahraini protests

**MAR.** UAE military participates in NATO operations to constrain regime of Muammar el-Qaddafi and later backs subsets of Libyan rebels

Mohammed bin Zayed.)<sup>73</sup> Health complexes offer diet and nutrition services and mental health services along with exercise equipment and a clinic.<sup>74</sup>

### Military Training

Undetermined is how much of a premium the UAE will place on conscripts' combat readiness. The NSRA provides all UAE national servicemen with basic military training covering essential skills such as weapons handling, marksmanship, and fieldcraft. Recruits learn to assemble and disassemble their personal weapon, an M-16, and must pass a timed test. Arms training progresses from a simulator with electronic weapons to a live shooting range and finally to practice in various field positions. Military training culminates with courses in fieldcraft that put recruits' endurance and resourcefulness

to the test. Conscripts learn survival skills on trips into the desert where they must dig their own sleeping trenches on overnight exercises, clear obstacle courses, and complete simulated missions.<sup>75</sup> These essential elements mirror other basic training programs.

Some who participated in the initial batches of national service were skeptical that the recruits were actually prepared for active duty. The training was short, the tasks were foreign to the recruits, and the general fitness levels were so low as to make it impossible to forge an effective force in only a few months, they said.<sup>76</sup> While the UAE military has fought effectively in Afghanistan, Yemen, and the Balkans, the Emiratis doing much of the fighting, particularly before Yemen, have been highly trained Special Forces teams rather than general-purpose forces.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> UAE National Service and Reserve Authority, "Physical readiness," UAE NSRA website (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2rvzweL>.

<sup>75</sup> Interviews with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 17–25, 2016; *Every Emirati's Son*, prod. Nomad Media, National Geographic Abu Dhabi.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Emirati academic, Dubai, May 25, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Hussein Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy," Arab Gulf States Institute of Washington, Issue Paper No. 4, April 2017, <http://www.agsiaw.org/uaes-evolving-national-security-strategy/>; Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*.

## 2014

**JAN.** UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan mandates the cabinet to draw up a law on mandatory military training for youth

**MAR.** UAE Federal National Council approves draft service law

**JUN.** Compulsory service enacted as federal law establishing the National Reserve and Service Authority (NSRA)

**AUG.** First class of male conscripts and first class of female volunteers report for training

## 2015

**MAR.** First class of conscripts in alternative service program report for training

**AUG.** Voluntary registration extended to children of Emirati mothers and non-Emirati fathers

**DEC.** “Aqdar” camps for secondary school students launched

## 2016

**FEB.** Voluntary service for men aged 30–40 announced

Basic training extended to 4 months from 3 months

**MAR.** Service obligation for secondary school graduates extended to 12 months from 9 months

National Service School of the Presidential Guard opens

**MAY.** First national service career fair held

**DEC.** NSRA-linked public health initiative “Your Body is a Responsibility” launched

## 2017

**MAR.** National Service Youth Council established

The difference in preparedness matters, because UAE forces are actively engaged in hostilities in Yemen. More than 157 Emirati soldiers are estimated to have died in the first nine months of operations in Yemen, and their deaths deeply affected the population.<sup>78</sup> The news that some conscripts had been deployed to Yemen came as a “shock” to families, ac-

cording to media reports. Some expressed the view that servicemen should not be expected to shoulder the same duties as professional enlistees and “should not be taken to hot conflict areas. They are civilians who are supposed to go back to their lives and work after finishing their service.”<sup>79</sup> The leadership says it has halted mandatory deployment of conscripts to

78 Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*.

79 Rori Donaghy, “Emirati families shocked as UAE sends conscripts into Yemen battle,” *Middle East Eye*, August 10, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-sends-conscripts-yemen-battle-leaving-emirati-families-shocked-and-angry-557104176>.

Yemen, restricting the service of volunteers to logistical support in Saudi Arabia.<sup>80</sup> Some Emiratis believe that “voluntary” service is not always voluntary.<sup>81</sup>

### Theoretical Courses

In addition to physical and military training, national service also has a classroom-based “theoretical” component that drills conscripts in a range of legal, civic, and national security subjects. Far from an afterthought, the theoretical component of national service is a key part of the civic education that the architects of national service see as its highest aim. The journal of the National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority—a key NSRA partner—emphasized the centrality of theoretical courses to the overall mission of national service in a 2014 feature:

*The ultimate goal of the National and Reserve Service isn't to increase the number of troops in the Armed Forces or the number of arm-bearers, although they would be called for duty when necessary . . . but to establish generations of young men and women armed with national values, principles and knowledge that would shield them against destructive beliefs and movements. Thus, they would become an impregnable fort against hostile movements and would be able to assume their responsibilities away from any dependency, indifference, or false appearances.*<sup>82</sup>

The NSRA has partnered with a wide range of actors for these programs: the UAE Marriage Fund for workshops on marital relations,<sup>83</sup> state religious institutions for religious education,<sup>84</sup> and a beefy unit on legal and security issues that the Ministry of the Interior developed.

A copy of the Interior Ministry curriculum shared with researchers offers some insight into the NSRA's approach. The worldview it lays out for conscripts is deeply conservative and implicates commonplace criminality and morality in harming national security. The curriculum invokes Emirati legal and Qur'anic views on everything from the security risks of illegal immigration and money laundering to the social ills of street-fighting, reckless driving, and substance abuse that “rot our national and social fabric.” Lessons on “moral crimes” stress men's responsibility to prevent sexual violence and harassment as well as premarital or homosexual relations. An entire unit is dedicated to traffic safety, with a long chart detailing driving violations and their accompanying penalties and lessons on “defensive driving.”<sup>85</sup>

While the partial aim of these courses is to discourage young men from legal or moral transgressions, it also trains them to understand that they represent a citizen vanguard against threats internal and external. For example, the unit on cybercrime offers practical advice on how to guard against exploita-

80 Interviews with senior National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 17–25, 2016.

81 Interview with Emirati academic, Washington, DC, July 11, 2017.

82 National Emergency Crisis and Disasters Management Authority, “National and Reserve Service...Honour...Loyalty...Sacrifice.”

83 “Hay'at al-khidma al-wataniya tuwwaqa'mudhakirat tafahum ma' sunduq al-zawaj wa ADNOC [The national service authority signs memorandum of understanding with marriage fund],” Emirates News Agency, March 16, 2015, <http://wam.ae/ar/details/1395278019932>.

84 “UAE Armed Forces Honor Islamic Scholars,” Emirates News Agency, April 11, 2016, <http://www.defaiya.com/news/Regional%20News/UAE/2016/04/11/uae-armed-forces-honor-islamic-scholars>.

85 UAE Ministry of the Interior, National Service curriculum on legal and security subjects.

# **“WHILE THE PARTIAL AIM OF THESE COURSES IS TO DISCOURAGE YOUNG MEN FROM LEGAL OR MORAL TRANSGRESSIONS, IT ALSO TRAINS THEM TO UNDERSTAND THAT THEY REPRESENT A CITIZEN VANGUARD AGAINST THREATS INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL.”**

tion online and reminds conscripts that dissident or critical political commentary online or calls for unauthorized protests or demonstrations count as cybercrimes under UAE law. Many chapters include toll-free numbers of authorities to whom recruits are encouraged to report violations.

The emphasis on both participation and obedience is reinforced by a unit on the “elements of citizenship.” It stresses that Emirati citizens’ identity is not defined merely by shared heritage but also by a set of behaviors. It defines “positive citizenship” as “an individual’s sense of belonging to the nation as represented by the undertaking of a positive role to confront ills” within society. It contrasts this ideal with “negative citizenship,” in which a sense of belonging “stops at negative criticism and does not offer any positive action”

and even “false citizenship” where “hollow slogans” of citizenship are belied by actions that “betray a lack of feeling and cherishment of the nation.”<sup>86</sup> The curriculum teaches that critical thinking, analysis, and problem solving make citizens more useful to the nation and calls for citizens to strive for a deeper knowledge of issues confronting the nation. At the same time, the instruction stresses that undiluted loyalty to the nation, spirit of sacrifice, and obedience to authorities remain prerequisites to all other expressions of citizenship.<sup>87</sup>

Theoretical courses generally take place in large lecture halls filled with hundreds of conscripts. Discussion questions are structured in a way that favors factual recall over reflection or an exchange of views. Conscripts are asked to cite facts from the text, quote the national leadership’s past

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

## “NSRA OFFICIALS WANT TO BUILD A RESERVE OF 100,000 OVER THE NEXT 10 YEARS.”

statements on a given issue, or recall relevant religious and legal edicts on a topic.<sup>88</sup>

Some second-stage recruits interviewed in the presence of NSRA officials described the national security lectures as a highlight of their experience. They expressed a desire to learn more about non-state actors in particular.<sup>89</sup> But not all are persuaded by the course’s directive tone. One Emirati whose sons had participated said that they found the security lectures “unconvincing efforts at brainwashing.”<sup>90</sup>

### Specialized and Applied Training

In the second and third phases of national service, recruits train for specific jobs. Recruits complete three months of specialized training in the armed forces or a participating government body, including the Ministry of the Defense, Ministry of the Interior, and the National Security Apparatus. The specialized training is followed by several more months of applied training—

essentially, an apprenticeship—in their assigned role. The specialization phase allows leaders to train recruits to perform specific skills in case of emergency. Many servicemen in the standard program will train for military roles.<sup>91</sup>

This part of the program also allows leaders to identify talent. After specialized training, noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are selected to be officers in the reserve.<sup>92</sup> Defense officials use this as an opportunity to groom talented conscripts for recruitment to the armed forces, including some of its most elite positions. In March 2016, Mohammed bin Zayed oversaw the opening of a new center for national servicemen performing their specialized training with the elite Presidential Guard, a body close to Abu Dhabi’s ruler.<sup>93</sup>

### Reserve Duties

One goal of national service is to expand the UAE’s reserve force, established in

88 Ibid.

89 Interview with group of national service recruits in specialist training, Zayed Military City, Abu Dhabi, May 23, 2016.

90 Interview with Emirati academic, Dubai, May 25, 2016.

91 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

92 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 19, 2016.

93 “Mohammed bin Zayed yaftatih madrasa al-khidma al-wataniya fi mu`askar seeh hafir [Mohammed bin Zayed opens national service school at Seeh Hafir camp],” Emirates News Agency, March 2, 2016, <http://www.emaratalyoum.com/local-section/other/2016-03-02-1.875393>.

2006. NSRA officials want to build a reserve of 100,000 over the next 10 years.<sup>94</sup> Conscripts who have completed their active service remain in the reserves until age 58, or 60 if they achieve officer status.<sup>95</sup> The NSRA plans to call up reservists for two to four weeks each year—divided roughly equally between general training and specialist instruction where they train for the same skills/job that they were assigned in national service.<sup>96</sup> Sustaining readiness—both in terms of physical fitness and technical competence—is a perennial challenge for forces that rely on conscripts because physical fitness often declines over time and warfighting has become technically more complex.<sup>97</sup> In addition, reserve service disrupts family life and reservists' business obligations.

The reserve force command, which will accommodate schedules but refuses to exempt men from duty altogether, has begun to grapple with the social challenges of reservist mobilization as the first NSRA graduates were called to reserve duty in late 2016 and early 2017. At least some reservists refused to return, resulting in the jailing of some.<sup>98</sup>

## Women's Program

The women's voluntary program in the United Arab Emirates has been more of a challenge and has met with only limited success. It began as a key part of the NSRA's public-facing image. State media covered the volunteer program extensively, and the program received steady advocacy from a number of esteemed male and female public figures. In practice, however, few females have been recruited into national service, and even fewer remained in the military after the program. By the NSRA's count, 849 women enrolled in program in the first three years following the introduction of national service, compared to some 50,000 men.<sup>99</sup> The head of the NSRA told a government audience in September 2014 that the inaugural class of female volunteers had included 150 recruits.<sup>100</sup> Later batches dwindled, and by mid-2016 NSRA officials put the size of the latest cohorts at 50–70.<sup>101</sup> New cohorts of female national service recruits are also inducted less frequently than their male counterparts; while the NSRA recruited for the sixth class of female national service trainees in August 2017, the eighth batch of male conscripts fanned out to four different camps for training.<sup>102</sup>

94 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

95 Ola Salem, "Benefits await Emiratis who complete military service," *The National*, March 4, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/benefits-await-emiratis-who-complete-military-service>.

96 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 25, 2016.

97 Stephen Van Holde and Lars Mjose, *Comparative Study of Conscription in the Armed Forces* (Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science, 2002).

98 Phone interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, September 19, 2017.

99 Ibid.

100 "Al-sheikh ahmed bin tahnoon khilal nadi al-mawarid al-bashariya: al-khidma al-wataniya tuaziz al-muwatana al-saliha wa qiyam al-wila' wa al-intima' [Sheikh Ahmed bin Tahnoon at human resources club: national service strengthens good citizenship, loyalty, and belonging]," September 28, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2wjcQSU>.

101 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016; Interview with senior Emirati military official, Abu Dhabi, May 19, 2016.

102 "Marakiz al-quwwat al-musaliha tastaqbal al-duf'a al-thamina min mujannadi al-khidma al-wataniya [Armed forces centers welcome the eighth wave of national service recruits]" *Emarat Al Youm*, August 6, 2017, <http://www.emaratalyoum.com/local-section/other/2017-08-06-1.1017052>.

NSRA officials contend the women's program mirrors the men's, but the governing rules differ. To volunteer, a woman must have her guardian's permission as well as that of her employer if she is working. Women train at the country's only military college for women, sharing the base with a much larger cohort of regular female soldiers numbering around 900 as of mid-2016. In addition to low recruitment, the women's program has suffered from relatively high attrition, something some NSRA officials are reluctant to discuss.<sup>103</sup> In 2016, some NSRA officials suggested that the problem lay partly in the motivations of women joining. Some officials dismissed the interest of many women joining as almost touristic and said some women seem to be seeking a weight-loss program. As a result, officials suggested, they have a lower tolerance for the military conditions. "They [dislike that] they are not allowed to wear makeup in the military," one official scoffed.<sup>104</sup>

Social barriers are a problem. Many women are expected to fill obligations at home (as either daughters or mothers), making time away from home difficult. A senior female government official noted that financial obstacles also can play a role, as some of servicewomen may be the only providers for their families. She suggested a deeper study of challenges to women's participation is needed.<sup>105</sup>

Challenges that Emirati women face in entering the workforce are not limited to military service, but within the program they are magnified by perceptions that the military is a male-dominated space. The NSRA leadership is developing strategies to



A recruit to the first class of female national service volunteers greets her family in September 2014. Photo courtesy of the UAE National Service and Reserve Authority.

engage women's families more effectively and trying to redesign the women's program to align with existing societal norms. One initiative under discussion seeks to prepare women for noncombat roles as medics, drivers, and logisticians. Yet, even among senior females in the NSRA hierarchy, the path forward is to create opportunities for women to do "women's work" within the military rather than create greater acceptance for women taking on nontraditional roles. One senior female NSRA official suggested that in response to low female interest in military service, the NSRA was considering incorporating "activities that women like to do . . . like baking."<sup>106</sup>

103 Interview with senior Emirati military official, Abu Dhabi, May 19, 2016; Phone interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, September 19, 2017.

104 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

105 Interview with senior Emirati official, Abu Dhabi, May 24, 2016.

106 Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

Redesigning the women's program along these lines will make it even less like the program for men and could increasingly marginalize female service from the goals of the NSRA. As it stands, masculinity is treated as a yardstick of male recruits' performance. Popular perceptions of national service increasingly highlight women's supporting roles as the mothers, wives, and daughters of servicemen. If the making of citizens primarily centers on the making of men, Emirati women's roles in national development could be diminished.

**Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Sheikh Nahyan bin Zayed Al Nahyan observe field training during a visit to Manama Camp in Ajman Province in 2014.**

Photo courtesy of the UAE National Service and Reserve Authority.



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## GOALS AND INNOVATIONS OF THE UAE'S PROGRAM

**A**s the UAE has designed its program for mandatory military service, it has drawn on a rich tradition of states that have viewed conscription as a tool to meet civilian as well as defense goals. Yet, even within this tradition, the UAE's aims for the military as a tool of social engineering are often surprising, and remarkably ambitious. In a number of areas—particularly with regards to civic education, workforce development, and public health—it is experimenting with innovative applications of the institution.

The UAE's embrace of conscription swims against a global tide away from the practice. Conscription has been on the decline for decades, as states increasingly viewed it as a costly and an ineffective means of providing for national defense. Compulsory service comes with substantial costs—training, feeding, and housing a large youth cohort is expensive, and economies suffer when able-bodied young people are taken out of the workforce. Conscription also means that

## “AS MODERN NATION-STATES CONSOLIDATED IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE NOTION OF THE MILITARY AS A ‘SCHOOL FOR THE NATION’ TOOK HOLD IN MANY PLACES.”

the militaries struggle to boost morale and battle high turnover.<sup>107</sup> Finally, a general shift away from fighting conflicts with large, general-purpose forces and greater emphasis on special operations and air operations reduced militaries' needs for mere troop strength and increased their needs for specialized expertise. A professional volunteer military provides that most effectively.<sup>108</sup> For these reasons, and with the end of the Cold War, many NATO members phased out conscription, as did many Western democracies. Today, it persists mostly in places where an acute threat endures.<sup>109</sup>

Still, the technical and budgetary aspects of conscription paint an incomplete picture of what conscription has meant to countries that once employed it, as well as those that continue to do so. As a rich literature on

conscription discusses, states have often justified and judged the utility of a military draft on nonmilitary grounds.<sup>110</sup> Since antiquity, there have been those who see military service as a means to strengthen group identity and cultivate particular attitudes, capabilities, and behaviors among populations.

As modern nation-states consolidated in the nineteenth century, the notion of the military as a “school for the nation” took hold in many places.<sup>111</sup> Proponents of that approach argued that the institution would serve both communal and individual purposes for nation-building. On the communal level, advocates argued that it would promote patriotism by making the abstract notion of the nation immediate, tangible, and personal. Militaries also were thought

- 107 Panu Poutvaara and Andreas Wagener, *The Political Economy of Conscription*, Institute for the Study of Labor Discussion Paper No. 4429, September 2009, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/35839/1/61324706X.pdf>.
- 108 Van Holde and Mjoset, *Comparative Study of Conscription in the Armed Forces*.
- 109 Panu Poutvaara and Andreas Wagener, *The Political Economy of Conscription*, Institute for the Study of Labor Discussion Paper No. 4429, September 2009, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/35839/1/61324706X.pdf>.
- 110 Anna Leander, “Drafting Community: Understanding the Fate of Conscription,” *Armed Forces & Society* 30, no. 4 (2004): 571–99.
- 111 Ronald R. Krebs, “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004): 85–124.

to promote social cohesion as they fostered contact and cooperation between individuals from different regions, varying backgrounds, diverse professional orientations, and disparate walks of life.<sup>112</sup>

The notion of military service as a forge from which national identity can be wrought can be observed in some of the cases studied by the UAE. Citizenship education is a strong feature of military education in Singapore and South Korea. In the former case, upon independence in 1965 the leadership viewed conscription as a vital component of its effort “to convert a society of transient immigrants into a community of permanent settlers.”<sup>113</sup> Singapore’s leaders themselves looked abroad for models, and called on representatives of another tenuous new republic—Israel—for help establishing a force that could both defend and help shape the new nation.<sup>114</sup> One of the best-known cases of universal conscription, Israel has made its military a pillar of its nation-building process from the state’s earliest years. Among other things, leaders looked to it as a vehicle for the integration of diverse groups, including waves of new immigrants.<sup>115</sup> Decades after South Korea established its modern draft system in the wake of independence

from Japan, conscripts still undergo weekly *jeongshin gyoyuk* or “spirit education” classes on national identity and security issues, chiefly the North Korean threat.<sup>116</sup>

Other states have looked to militaries as a tool to develop individuals, or in aggregate, the human capital of the state. The Meiji Restoration, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan, quite consciously used universal conscription as an instrument of social change and modernization.<sup>117</sup> When Arab states gained independence after World War II, many rulers sought to wield the military as a “modernizer” of largely rural populations.<sup>118</sup>

For the military to act effectively as an agent of political socialization, there must be a close alignment between martial and civic virtues. This alignment has diminished in the West as notions of citizenship have shifted and a shrinking percentage of the public has military experience.<sup>119</sup> The UAE has taken the opposite approach, seizing on the military template for socialization and embracing conscription as a force for nationalism and individual development.

Yet, it has done more than simply revive old ideas. A close study of the NSRA program design suggests that the UAE has set its sights far beyond what most countries

112 Ibid.

113 Jason Lim, “Popular Nationalism in the Wake of the 2011 National Elections in Singapore,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 02 (2015): 143–59.

114 Amnon Barzilai, “A Deep, Dark, Secret Love Affair,” *Haaretz*, July 16, 2004, <http://www.haaretz.com/a-deep-dark-secret-love-affair-1.128671>.

115 The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has had a designated Education and Youth Corps since 1957 that offers classes on the history of Israel and the IDF for soldiers, and programs for high school students. Israel Defense Forces, “Education Corps,” Blog, updated 2015, <https://www.idfblog.com/about-the-idf/idf-units/education-corps/>.

116 “[ROK Army] Republic of Korea Army Training Center full-length PR film,” YouTube, December 6, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi4o4omZ\\_yo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi4o4omZ_yo).

117 Krebs, “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might,” 85–124.

118 The classic exposition of the view of the military as a core of a new middle class is Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963). See also Florence Gaub, “Arab armies: agents of change? Before and after 2011,” European Union Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper No. 131, March 2014.

119 Leander, “Drafting Community: Understanding the Fate of Conscription.”

have sought to achieve through conscription in the last half-century. It has also been bold in identifying the ways it seeks to enhance the country's human capital, and it has made the national service program a linchpin of its far-reaching social agenda. For the UAE, the NSRA provides an opportunity to cut across many government portfolios and launch generational interventions. Yet, the scale, scope, and number of goals pinned to the program makes complete success elusive.

## NATIONAL EDUCATION

To a greater extent than many analogous conscription programs, the UAE NSRA takes a far-ranging and highly prescriptive view of citizenship education. It aims to leverage national service toward several important goals of the state in renegotiating the boundaries and expectations of citizenship. One is to reinforce a common Emirati identity. Another is to instill an understanding of citizenship as a performance, and not just an inheritance. This relates to the government's efforts in recent years to make the relationship between the state and its citizens more reciprocal, whereby the state is not merely the provider and protector. Citizens, through their efforts, build and protect the state as well.

A third aim of the UAE program's national education marks perhaps the clearest distinction from what most comparable programs have attempted. National service makes a concerted effort to socialize conscripts in the more mundane daily practices of citizenship. NSRA leaders report that their strategy to measure the program's impact

includes monitoring increases in positive civic behavior such as volunteerism, and reduction of negative behavior such as reckless driving.<sup>120</sup> Even divorce rates will be taken as an indicator. Tackling a rising divorce rate among Emirati couples could lead to improved family cohesion and might check the rise of Emiratis "marrying out" and taking foreign spouses.<sup>121</sup>

To a greater extent than comparable programs, UAE national service has taken a family-based approach to citizenship education. The theoretical curriculum from the Ministry of the Interior speaks directly to conscripts' family roles with advice on the role parents and relatives are expected to play in cultivating young people's Emirati identity and preventing them from falling victim to or perpetrating crimes. It rests with parents the responsibility of raising children to value the Arabic language and an Islamic tradition of "moderation," and to be well versed in the leadership's strategic doctrine, such as Vision 2021. It urges families to nurture social skills and connections so youth are not vulnerable to exploitation online. Parents are encouraged to teach children to reject consumerist values, which the curriculum cites as one driver behind financial crimes. Lessons address the rising issue of "runaway maids" and caution family members to teach children not to offer any kind of assistance to illegal immigrants.<sup>122</sup>

In some cases, the program goes out of its way to address taboo issues discreetly. Those with drug addictions are given an opportunity to attend rehabilitation at the government's expense as an alternative to legal procedures. Families are not noti-

120 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

121 See Shaker Nouri, "Marriage on the rocks in the United Arab Emirates," *Al Araby Al Jadeed*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/features/2015/1/13/marriage-on-the-rocks-in-the-united-arab-emirates>.

122 UAE Ministry of the Interior, National Service curriculum on legal and security subjects.

**“NSRA LEADERS REPORT THAT THEIR STRATEGY TO MEASURE THE PROGRAM’S IMPACT INCLUDES MONITORING INCREASES IN POSITIVE CIVIC BEHAVIOR SUCH AS VOLUNTEERISM, AND REDUCTION OF NEGATIVE BEHAVIOR SUCH AS RECKLESS DRIVING. EVEN DIVORCE RATES WILL BE TAKEN AS AN INDICATOR.”**

fied—“we tell their families that they are in training,” an NSRA official said.<sup>123</sup>

## **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

The UAE is explicit about the NSRA’s aim to prepare young men to be productive members of the workforce by instilling discipline, work ethic, time management, teamwork, and other core competencies. The program builds on recent efforts by the UAE government to rethink their approach to Emiratization—the drive to increase the presence of Emiratis in the workforce and

especially in the private sector. Past efforts targeted employers with a mix of carrots and sticks, creating incentives to hire Emiratis and establishing quotas for those who do not.<sup>124</sup> Emirati leaders now place greater emphasis on increasing Emiratis’ competitiveness. “Our effort now is not to intervene as a government so much as prepare youth better,” a senior official said.<sup>125</sup>

Leaders express hope that conscription will be a “major tool” in the transition from “the welfare approach” to “the empowerment approach.” In the words of a senior official working on employment, “National service

<sup>123</sup> Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 19, 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Mohammed A. Al-Waqfi and Ingo Forstenlechner, “Barriers to Emiratization: The Role of Policy Design and Institutional Environment in Determining the Effectiveness of Emiratization,” *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 25, no. 2 (2013): 167–89.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with senior Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization official, Abu Dhabi, May 24, 2016.

# CHANGES IN CONSCRIPTION PRACTICES AROUND THE WORLD, 1990–2017

These lists chart changes in conscription practices around the world from 1990–2017. The abandonment of conscription is defined here as both the formal legal repeal of conscription and the effective cessation of its practice within a given territory.

The introduction of conscription is defined as the imposition of the draft on populations not previously subject to mandatory military service obligations. This excludes the passage of conscription laws where those laws maintained a practice of compulsory service that had previously directed manpower to a federation or bloc before such an entity ceased to exist (e.g. in the former Soviet Socialist Republics after the fall of the Soviet Union, or in the former constituent republics of Yugoslavia).

## CONSCRIPTION ABANDONED

## CONSCRIPTION INTRODUCED

1990s	2000s	2010s 2010–2017
Belgium	France	Germany
Netherlands	Italy	Poland
Jordan	Spain	Serbia
Burkina Faso	Portugal	Sweden*
Ethiopia	Albania	Ukraine**
Somalia	Bulgaria	Lithuania
South Africa	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kuwait
Afghanistan	Croatia	Qatar
Cambodia	Czech Republic	UAE
Argentina	Hungary	South Sudan
El Salvador	Latvia	Sweden*
Honduras	Lithuania	Ukraine**
Nicaragua	Macedonia	
Peru	Montenegro	
Eritrea	Romania	
Sudan	Slovakia	
	Slovenia	
	Iraq	
	Kuwait	
	Lebanon	
	Morocco	
	Yemen	
	Ecuador	
	[none]	

\*Suspended in 2010 and reinstated in 2017  
 \*\*Repealed in 2013 and reinstated in 2014

Sources: CIA World Factbook, U.S. Library of Congress Federal Research Division, UN Commission on Human Rights, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, UK Home Office Country of Origin Service, War Resisters’ International, Child Soldiers International, Amnesty International, media reports.

will help us make our case to employers in the private sector” to employ Emiratis.<sup>126</sup> The NSRA leadership makes it clear that conscripts’ performance in national service is their employers’ business, providing reports upon request to employers on their staffers’ performance on metrics such as discipline, leadership, and commitment.<sup>127</sup> While national service is being discussed as a solution to workforce challenges in the UAE, in most countries that the UAE studied, conscription is viewed as a potential drag on men’s economic trajectories. Efforts to bring conscription more in alignment with career development have been efforts to mitigate this negative effect.<sup>128</sup>

A sense of entitlement among Emirati males is a widely reported challenge that affects career development. One way national service could help is by instilling the concept of merit-based advancement that has at times been difficult to apply in school systems. Many of the UAE’s elite are taught in private schools where expatriate teachers may feel pressure to not grade honestly. This pressure is compounded when students hail from powerful families—a phenomenon some foreign teachers have dubbed “Never Fail a Nahyan.”<sup>129</sup> Even in public schools, a

shortage of male Emirati teachers means that many boys are taught by expatriates, where a power imbalance exists.<sup>130</sup>

The U.S. military is quite explicit about linking performance to advancement, especially during training. The U.S. service academies maintain “order of merit lists” that explicitly rank cadets based on academics, physical fitness, military performance, and conduct, carefully evaluating both performance and potential.<sup>131</sup> Cadets can view their own rankings, which shape who will get the professional specialization of his or her choice. While the NSRA has an impressive data-gathering operation, it is not clear that it intends to rank its recruits so explicitly, or to publicly indicate failure. For the U.S. military, and many others around the world, objective judgments and a meritocratic order are much more important than the feelings of soldiers. In the UAE program, where so much of an emphasis is placed on fostering an emotional attachment between recruits and the military as a means to strengthen emotional attachment to the state, politeness may sometimes trump rigorous objectivity.

The problem of insisting that all Emiratis are highly qualified has been an obstacle to

126 Ibid.

127 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 25, 2016.

128 For example, in a 2013 study of Singaporean national servicemen, almost half of servicemen with outside jobs said that employers prefer to hire people who do not have national service obligations. In large part to address such concerns, the leadership undertook reforms to national service in 2014 following a national dialogue and a study of the Finnish and Swiss examples. Changes focus on strengthening the “value proposition” of national service in the words of the government by taking steps to ensure recruits learn skills that match with their career aspirations, creating more leadership/specialty opportunities, and making their value added more demonstrable to employers. They also added additional supports. See Jeanette Tan, “2 in 5 NSmen say employers rather hire staff with no NS commitments: survey,” *Yahoo News Singapore*, October 8, 2013, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/2-in-5-employed-singaporean-nsmen-feel-discriminated-against-in-hiring--survey-090009886.html>; Singapore Ministry of Defense, “Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS),” 2014, <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/strengthenNS/index.html>.

129 Liz Jackson, “Challenges to the Global Concept of Student-Centered Learning with Special Reference to the United Arab Emirates: ‘Never fail a Nahayan,’” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 2015, Vol. 47, No. 8, 760–73.

130 Interview with director of a civil society organization, Ras Al Khaimah, May 22, 2016.

131 See, for example, this rubric from the U.S. Naval Academy: U.S. Naval Academy, “Order of Merit: USNA Instruction 1531.51A,” [https://www.usna.edu/Academics/\\_files/documents/OOM.pdf](https://www.usna.edu/Academics/_files/documents/OOM.pdf).

persuading many to take work perceived to have low status. In the words of one Emirati research center director, “youth need to be taught an ability to follow as well as lead.”<sup>132</sup> Leaders hope national service can broaden young people’s perspective on their career paths beyond a narrow set of prestigious or coveted roles. As one official said, “National service could lead youth to jobs they may not consider otherwise. Someone may become a mechanic after learning aviation mechanics.”<sup>133</sup> Others agreed that the military can ennoble humble tasks. The research center director recalled a meeting where Emiratis were discussing their first jobs; one person mentioned that his had involved cleaning bathrooms, which prompted horror until he said he had been doing it in the army.<sup>134</sup>

At regular career fairs, the NSRA seeks to encourage recruits to implement what they have learned. At a May 2016 career fair attended by the authors, government entities took center stage, with more than a third of the floor space going to the armed forces, Abu Dhabi police, and Dubai police. There was great interest among attendees in the armed forces, the police, and interior ministry. Several private-sector employers quietly admitted that few recruits had interest in their offerings, favoring

government employment due to pay, work conditions, and the perceived low status of private-sector jobs.<sup>135</sup>

## PUBLIC HEALTH

The UAE’s program is distinct in using national service as a platform to stage a full-scale public health intervention among its young male population. Fighting obesity and diabetes, especially among youth, are growing priorities for the government. The percentage of the UAE population that is overweight or obese is double the world average, at 66 percent of men and 60 percent for women.<sup>136</sup> The rate of diabetes, the treatment of which believed to cost the UAE nearly 2 percent of its yearly GDP, is rising more rapidly than the global average.<sup>137</sup> Obesity and a lack of physical fitness explain, in part, why nearly one in five of the first 50,000 men called up for national service were placed in alternative service programs rather than military training.<sup>138</sup>

The UAE has promoted a wide variety of plans to address health broadly, and non-communicable diseases more specifically. UAE Vision 2021 set a goal to reduce childhood obesity to 12 percent and to cut diabetes prevalence to just over 16 percent by 2021.<sup>139</sup> The Ministry of Health launched

132 Interview with research center director, Dubai, May 22, 2016.

133 Interview with senior Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization official, Abu Dhabi, May 24, 2016.

134 Interview with research center director, Dubai, May 22, 2016.

135 Interview with two private-sector human resources executives, Abu Dhabi, May 25, 2016.

136 Anam Rizvi, “Special report: Obesity rate in the UAE double the world average,” *The National*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/health/special-report-obesity-rate-in-the-uae-double-the-world-average-1.74056>.

137 “A heavy burden,” *The Economist*, March 19, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21646810-government-wants-people-slim-down-heavy-burden>.

138 Phone interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, September 19, 2017.

139 Government of the UAE, “National Key Performance Indicators,” UAE Vision 2021, <https://www.vision2021.ae/en/national-priority-areas/nkpi-export-pdf>. Also see Immanuel Azaad Moonesar, “UAE National Agenda on Healthcare: Obesity among the Youth,” Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government, Policy Brief No. 42, May 2015, <http://www.mbrsg.ae/HOME/PUBLICATIONS/Policy-Brief-Policy-Note/UAE-National-Agenda-on-Health-care-Obesity-among-t.aspx>.



Crown Prince of Umm Al Quwain Sheikh Rashid bin Saud bin Rashid Al Mu'alla undergoes a physical exam as part of his registration for national service in October 2014. Photo courtesy of the UAE National Service and Reserve Authority.

school interventions with physical education, health classes, and meal plans in schools in Dubai and Ajman in 2009. In 2011, the government partnered with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to launch a wider effort. In recent years, national curricula have put a stronger emphasis on physical education.<sup>140</sup> These changes have made inroads, but structural and social factors have hampered effectiveness. Schools have struggled to cover a shortage of physical education teachers and proper facilities. Physical education teachers complain that most government schools lack indoor gyms.<sup>141</sup>

Physical fitness is a clear priority in the NSRA program. As one NSRA official said, "Na-

tional service is making getting fit a national duty."<sup>142</sup> It is also seeking to make fitness cool. The NSRA health center frames fitness in terms of a "warrior's readiness" and the language on the NSRA website plays up the military aspect of fitness, appealing to traditional ideals of masculinity.<sup>143</sup> Yet, officials realize that earlier and broader interventions are needed. According to NSRA officials, of the percentage of 2014 national service recruits who were overweight or obese closely mirrored the overall percentage in the UAE, about 68 percent.<sup>144</sup> To improve this baseline, the program is increasing its engagement of youth and families before their service with a physical activity and nutrition campaign, "Your Body Is a Responsibility," that covers topics including healthy eating during Ramadan, smoking, and vitamin D intake.<sup>145</sup>

Structural gaps in the UAE's health environment also are on the agenda. National service is being used to systematically improve data collection and to gain a better understanding of a public health baseline. As an NSRA official explained, "We are now discovering a lack of data standards, and it is a huge project to benchmark and create

140 "Public Health in the United Arab Emirates and Ras Al Khaimah," Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, 2015, <http://www.alqasimifoundation.com/admin/Content/File-1312201511130.pdf>.

141 Natasha Ridge, Susan Kippels, and Samar Farah, "Curriculum Development in the United Arab Emirates," Sheikh Saud bn Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, Policy Paper No. 18, April 2017, <http://www.alqasimifoundation.com/admin/Content/File-252017232925.pdf>. Afshan Ahmed, "Sports facilities and PE teachers 'unfit,'" *The National*, June 23, 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/education/sports-facilities-and-pe-teachers-unfit>.

142 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

143 UAE National Service and Reserve Authority, "Physical readiness," UAE NSRA website (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2rvzweL>.

144 Thamer Al Subaihi, "Drive for UAE military recruits to shape up," *The National*, December 25, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/drive-for-uae-military-recruits-to-shape-up>.

145 Ibid.

those standards.”<sup>146</sup> This includes psychological as well as physical health. The NSRA is working to station psychologists and social workers on military bases to study baselines for psychological needs. It plans also to collaborate with other entities on a whole-of-society approach.<sup>147</sup>

## CONSTRAINTS ON IMPACT

The complexity, multiplicity, and diversity of the nonmilitary goals that the UAE seeks to further through its national service is breathtaking. Some seem, at least at first, to be contradictory: some seek to increase individuals’ propensity to act as individuals, and some seek to increase their propensity to act in a group; some seek to elide differences between Emiratis, and some seek to encourage Emiratis to differentiate themselves. The program seeks to do several big things without consistently articulating priorities among them. Some goals may be more achievable than others—and not all goals are mutually reinforcing. Further complicating the matter, many are difficult to measure. And complicating the matter still further, military training has its own priorities and imperatives, and they do not necessarily mesh with the program’s social agenda.

Research on political socialization and developmental psychology indicates that the military’s power to shape values, attitudes, and behaviors is limited and subject to a range of factors.<sup>148</sup> Among those factors are the length of time spent in the military and the intensity of one’s military experience, including closeness to actual conditions of combat. The degree of conscripts’ exposure to outside influences during the service period also plays a role. In general, the military has been described as a “total institution”—where those experiencing it are separated from broader society for a significant period of time and subject to comprehensive rules governing space, time, and behavior, increasing their disposition to socialization.<sup>149</sup> Yet, many conscription programs fall short of the “total” environment with at least occasional exposure to friends, family, and media.<sup>150</sup> An assessment by Finland’s National Defense University in 2008 cited the length of service and regular contact with family and friends outside the military as a few factors behind its finding that “it is unlikely that a person with a well-developed personality and a set of values and experiences that contradict the military ones would have longstanding personality changes due to conscription.”<sup>151</sup>

Another key consideration is that conscripts do not receive the messages of the military

146 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

147 Ibid.

148 John P. Lovell and Judith Hicks Stiehm, “Military Service and Political Socialization,” Roberta S. Sigel, *Political Learning in Adulthood: A Sourcebook of Theory and Research* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).

149 The theory of total institutions is most closely associated with Erving Goffman. See Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor, 1961).

150 Ronald R. Krebs, “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004): 85–124.

151 Mikael Salo, “Determinants of Military Adjustment and Attrition during Finnish Conscript Service,” National Defense University of Finland, Publication Series 2, Research Report No. 21, 2008, <https://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/67908/978-951-44-7470-5.pdf?sequence=1>.

as “empty containers.”<sup>152</sup> Prior experiences, education, habits, and beliefs influence how a conscript experiences learning in the military setting. By the time someone enters the military, he or she has experienced more than a decade of schooling, and almost two decades in a home environment. In the U.S. military context, officials stress the importance of recruits’ baselines, including their motivation levels and prior environmental influences, to their training outcomes.<sup>153</sup> In the words of one U.S. officer, “Generally speaking, mommies and daddies have a much larger impact than drill sergeants.”<sup>154</sup> The UAE is staging its most vigorous intervention after many patterns of thought and behavior have been set. It has the advantage of establishing a single, accountable institution instead of the maze of educational and social institutions that young Emiratis encounter throughout their childhood, but the age of the intervention likely affects its impact.

Individuals’ capacity for independent learning may also mean that official messages are interpreted in a variety of ways.<sup>155</sup> Research indicates that what soldiers absorb in training is not merely a product of official messaging, but also the unofficial culture of a military environment and the way that recruits view their trainers.<sup>156</sup>

The transferability of lessons learned in military training to civilian life is also a

matter of debate. Military scholars have observed that behaviors and mindsets adopted in a highly constructed training environment—including discipline or attitudes toward people of different backgrounds—often do not translate consistently to veterans’ civilian life.<sup>157</sup>

Tensions between some of the program’s goals may also create some tradeoffs. One such tension arguably lies between the drive to create a militarily effective force on the one hand, and the drive to promote social cohesion on the other. Scholars of military organization suggest that social cohesion is not necessary for military effectiveness—that is to say, members of a unit need not like each other to be effective.<sup>158</sup> Prioritizing social cohesion and ensuring that everyone feels welcome and included may prevent units from acting against individuals who draw down unit performance. Tradeoffs may also arise between the military and economic aims of national service when it comes to reserve mobilization. Pursuing a high level of reserve readiness requires regular training to maintain standards and update capabilities, yet more frequent mobilizations come at the cost of greater disruption to the workforce.

152 Gal Levy and Orna Sasson-Levy, “Militarized Socialization, Military Service, and Class Reproduction: The Experiences of Israeli Soldiers,” *Sociological Perspectives* 51, no. 2 (2008): 349–74.

153 See U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), “Enlisted Initial Entry Training Policies and Administration,” TRADOC Regulation 350-6, March 20, 2017, <http://www.tradoc.army.mil/tpubs/regs/tr350-6.pdf>.

154 Interview with U.S. military official, Washington, DC, April 19, 2017.

155 Krebs, “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might,” 85–124.

156 Ekkhard Lippert, Paul Schneider, and Ralf Zoll, “The Influence of Military Service on Political and Social Attitudes,” *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1978, 265–82.

157 Edward A. Fitzpatrick, *Universal Military Training*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1945).

158 William M. Hix and Robert J. MacCoun, “Unit Cohesion and Military Performance,” in *Sexual Orientation and U.S. Military Personnel Policy: An Update of RAND’s 1993 Study*, National Defense Research Institute, 2010, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND\\_MG1056.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2010/RAND_MG1056.pdf).

**A recruit to the  
first class of  
national service  
trainees in fall 2014  
stands at attention.**

Photo courtesy of  
the UAE National  
Service and Reserve  
Authority.



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## RESULTS OF NATIONAL SERVICE

**T**he National Service and Reserve Authority inducted its eighth class of male recruits into basic training in August 2017, and its sixth class of female recruits in September 2017. Altogether, some 50,000 men have been called up as of September 2017.<sup>159</sup> Observations can be made about certain program impacts that have become visible, while measuring progress against some key program goals may be less self-evident.

The authors freely admit that it is hard to assess the candor with which Emirati interlocutors judged the program. Interviews with NSRA conscripts were conducted in the presence of senior NSRA officials, who also selected the conscripts to be interviewed. Other young Emiratis who had served were hesitant to discuss their experiences outside of officially arranged sessions. Even so, the interviews we did were helpful, and some trends can be imputed

41

159 “Armed Forces celebrate graduation of seventh batch of National Service recruits,” *Sharjah 24*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.sharjah24.ae/en/uae/215779-armed-forces-celebrate-graduation-of-seventh-batch-of-national-service-recruits>; Phone interview with National Service and Reserve Authority official, September 19, 2017.

# **“AS THE UAE GOVERNMENT HAS SOUGHT TO GAIN SUPPORT FOR CONSCRIPTION, IT HAS PUT FAMILIES AT THE CENTER OF THE EFFORT.”**

from additional interviews with Emiratis and expatriates who have had close relations with some who served, and also from discussions with a wide range of government, business, academic, and civil society actors possessing intimate familiarity with the UAE.

A common theme expressed in interviews is how widely the impact of national service is being felt. Everyone knows someone who has done national service, is doing it, or expects to do it. Younger Emirati teens and children are growing up watching their older siblings and cousins perform national service. They are also the subjects of outreach aimed at preparing them from a younger age for service.

Another point of consensus is that national service has been a priority at the highest echelons of the Emirati leadership. It was a top priority of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed's before being entrusted to Sheikh Ahmed, himself a member of the powerful Nahyan family. NSRA officials note that the chief of staff of the armed forces personally

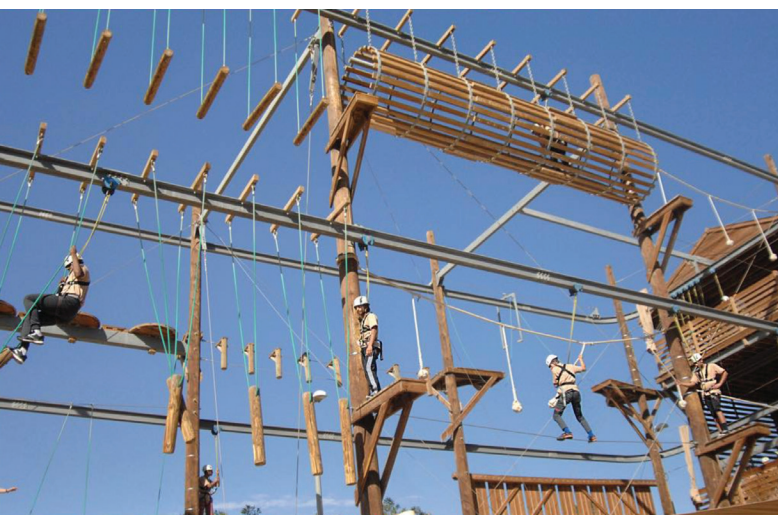
approved the NSRA strategy book, a rare degree of direct involvement. Three working groups have portfolios and report to the NSRA from security agencies, health and social authorities, and education authorities, presumably on orders from above.<sup>160</sup>

## **CULTIVATING A CONSCRIPTION SOCIETY**

While national service has been met with broad compliance, its announcement and rapid implementation did not pass without debate. In addition to the risks for conscripts, some voiced wariness at the societal repercussions of arming and training a generation of young men. At one of Sheikh Ahmed's outreach sessions at the Women's Union, one attendee said, "Why is there an endless war [in parts of the region]? Because everyone learned how to raise a weapon. . . . [I]t might be dangerous to put a weapon in the hands of everyone."<sup>161</sup> Among Emiratis liable for conscription, some were skeptical of claims about the

160 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

161 Haneen Dajani, "Benefits of national service outlined to mothers of Emirati recruits," *The National*, August 11, 2014, <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/benefits-national-outlined-mothers-emirati-recruits-064558967.html>.



Students complete an obstacle course as part of “Aqdar” adventure camps. Photo courtesy of the UAE National Service and Reserve Authority.

transformational power of military service. “They say they want to fix the spoiled Emirati rich kid problem,” one said. “But then they should only recruit those who are twenty and younger. It’s too late for us that have gotten used to all of this.”<sup>162</sup>

As the UAE government has sought to gain support for conscription, it has put families at the center of the effort. In the first stages of national service, families expressed distress at the opacity of the process. After the first batch of recruits reported to camps across the country for training in late 2014, relatives flummoxed by the phone embargo for conscripts bombarded the NSRA with requests for information about their whereabouts and wellbeing. Senior NSRA officials

recall watching in dismay as mothers took to the NSRA’s social media accounts to plead their cases and began trading among themselves what was intended to be classified information about their sons’ postings in the comments section.<sup>163</sup> The news that a national service recruit had suffered a fatal heart attack during the first month of basic training prompted a surge of anxiety and some rare criticisms.<sup>164</sup> The stakes seemed to rise as the UAE entered into its first large-scale combat operation in Yemen in 2015 with the deployment of some conscripts.<sup>165</sup>

The NSRA has invested in improving information access for families. The NSRA created an informational hotline for families and measures engagement more systematically.<sup>166</sup> In 2017, the NSRA invited parents of the seventh batch of recruits to visit camps where their young men were training and to get a full tour of the facilities.<sup>167</sup>

Numerous interviewees stressed that families will be key to the success of national service and some called for a more holistic approach to engaging them.<sup>168</sup> The NSRA so far has embraced public health outreach and programs for teenagers in the years before their service, and much focus also

<sup>162</sup> Isaac Oomen, “An army of the entitled,” *Mashallah News*, May 12, 2015, <http://mashallahnews.com/news/an-army-of-the-entitled-uae-conscripts/>.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

<sup>164</sup> Thamer Al Subaihi, “Family of dead national service recruit speak of their sorrow and sadness,” *The National*, September 15, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/family-of-dead-national-service-recruit-speak-of-their-sorrow-and-sadness>; comments later deleted from the NSRA Instagram account.

<sup>165</sup> Rori Donaghy, “Emirati families shocked as UAE sends conscripts into Yemen battle,” *Middle East Eye*, August 10, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-sends-conscripts-yemen-battle-leaving-emirati-families-shocked-and-angry-557104176>.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 25, 2016.

<sup>167</sup> “Parents see what UAE Armed Forces recruit training is like,” *Gulf News*, March 27, 2017, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/government/parents-see-what-uae-armed-forces-recruit-training-is-like-1.2001128>.

<sup>168</sup> Interviews with senior Emirati official, Abu Dhabi, May 24, 2016, and with civil society organization director, Ras Al Khaimah, May 22, 2016.



Secondary school students participating in “Aqdar” adventure camps perform shooting simulations in December 2015. Photo courtesy of the UAE National Service and Reserve Authority.

has been placed on the role of mothers. The NSRA’s health initiative “Your Body Is a Responsibility” has partnered with groups such as the High Council for Motherhood and Childhood to hold presentations on family nutrition and cooking demonstrations.<sup>169</sup> In 2017, the council partnered with the NSRA and the National Women’s Union to launch the Forum for Fathers and Mothers of NSRA Recruits.<sup>170</sup>

Efforts to embed national service in Emirati culture also involve engaging Emirati children. The Ministry of the Interior has rolled out camps for boys and girls called Aqdar (“I can”) that combine traditional activities such as rock climbing and rafting with military marching and drills. Their dual goals are to acclimate teens to na-

tional service expectations and to conduct baseline screenings for the medical conditions of youth who will enter national service a few years later.<sup>171</sup> Aqdar was piloted with 115 participants and has expanded to batches of around 1,000.<sup>172</sup> Participants in the female program include the daughters of Mohammed bin Zayed and Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah bin Zayed.<sup>173</sup>

## IMPACT MEASUREMENT

Measuring progress against the NSRA’s military and social goals is challenging for a number of reasons. Evaluating actual military readiness is difficult without deploying conscripts, which is politically sensitive. Reservist training may be the best way to test—and enhance—continued readiness. Yet, regular call-ups impose higher social and potentially economic burdens, with the frustration of some reflected in the refusal of some conscripts to return to reserve duty.<sup>174</sup> It is unclear how thoroughly and systematically the NSRA ranks conscripts by performance, but this could create at least relative baselines by which to measure absorption of learning outcomes.

169 “Hadiqat ‘um al-Emarat’ tastadhif warshat tathqif al-mar’a sahiyan [Mother of the Emirates garden hosts workshop on health awareness for women],” Emirates News Agency, April 15, 2017, <http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=22040&y=2017>.

170 “‘Al-ittihad al-nisa’i’ yastadhif al-multaqa al-awwal li aba’ wa umahat mujanadi al-khidma al-wataniya wa al-ihiyatiya [The women’s union hosts the first gathering for fathers and mothers of national service and reserve recruits],” *Al Watan*, April 27, 2017, <http://alwatannewspaper.ae/?p=171301>.

171 Interview with Emirati official, Abu Dhabi, May 23, 2016.

172 Ibid.

173 “Mohammed bin Zayed yashhad ihtifal takrij al-dawra al-saifiya al-`askariya al-oula lil talibat [Mohammed bin Zayed witnesses graduation ceremony of first summer military session for female students],” *Sharjah* 24, August 18, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2oFdsP7>.

174 Phone interview with senior National Service and Reserve Authority official, September 19, 2017.

Some immediate health outcomes are satisfyingly measurable—NSRA officials said in 2016 that men lose an average of 25 pounds in basic training.<sup>175</sup> Yet, the often-mentioned broader behavioral and attitudinal outcomes that the national service program seeks to produce are even more difficult to capture reliably than military readiness. Anecdotal accounts in official media and in interviews arranged by the NSRA repeatedly raised a common list of benefits: more seriousness, greater maturity, higher discipline, less entitlement. “Everyone told me that my personality changed,” one recruit said. “The training improved me mentally more than physically.”<sup>176</sup> Another joked, “Now when I say I’ll be somewhere in five minutes, I really mean five minutes.”<sup>177</sup> An Emirati woman from a leading family said that male relatives who had completed their service came back more grounded and humble: “They show more respect for rules.”<sup>178</sup> Outside of official settings, interlocutors relayed more varied experiences by young men and sometimes women they knew who had participated. Some spoke positively about the experience as a whole, while others came away unconvinced that it was valuable use of their time.<sup>179</sup> Peer

relationships were consistently cited as a high point for conscripts, including among those who reported a less-than-transformational overall experience.<sup>180</sup> Yet however comprehensive, research cautions against relying on self-evaluations to substitute for objective measurements.<sup>181</sup>

An internal performance evaluation form from the NSRA presented to the authors, albeit for third-stage recruits well out of their basic camp training, turned on subjective judgments of the assessing official.<sup>182</sup> U.S. military doctrine for performance measurement varies by branch but standardized and thoroughly delineated performance metrics both quantitative and qualitative are considered necessary to ensure standards are evenly set and maintained.<sup>183</sup>

The NSRA has shown a desire to quantify results more broadly, setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that center on civic behaviors including worker productivity, volunteerism, crime statistics, and divorce rates.<sup>184</sup> It claimed a victory with the Abu Dhabi Justice Department’s announcement in May 2017 of a 75 percent drop in crimes committed by Emiratis of conscription age since 2014, including violent confrontations, vandalism, swearing and insults,

175 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

176 Thamer Al Subaihi, “UAE National Service recruits learn life lessons in discipline, friendship, and sacrifice,” *The National*, April 21, 2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/uae-national-service-recruits-learn-life-lessons-in-discipline-friendship-and-sacrifice>.

177 Interview with group of national service recruits in specialist training, Zayed Military City, Abu Dhabi, May 23, 2016.

178 Interview with senior Emirati official, Abu Dhabi, May 24, 2016.

179 Interview with Emirati academic, Dubai, May 25, 2016.

180 Interviews with Emirati and expatriate academics, Dubai, May 21 and May 25, 2016.

181 Ronald R. Krebs, “A School for the Nation? How Military Service Does Not Build Nations, and How It Might,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004): 85–124.

182 UAE National Service and Reserve Authority, “Evaluation rubric for national service recruit,” obtained in 2016.

183 Chaitra Hardison et al., *360-Degree Assessments: Are They the Right Tool for the U.S. Military?*, RAND Corporation, 2015, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR998.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR998.html).

184 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

# **“SOME FEAR THAT THE EMPHASIS ON MILITARY AND GOVERNMENT RECRUITMENT—AND THE DISRUPTION THE NSRA POSES FOR THOSE ALREADY IN THE WORKFORCE—MAY UNDERMINE EMIRATIZATION EFFORTS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR.”**

and the issuing of bad or bounced checks.<sup>185</sup> Determining causality for such a complex web of metrics affecting so many aspects of behavior is likely an impossible task.

## **LABOR MARKET EFFECTS**

National service has been highly visible in the labor market. Although long-term impacts have yet to become clear, disruptions have occurred in the short term, largely from the drafting of men already employed. National service also created new recruitment pathways into the security forces, likely

drawing some of the most capable Emiratis away from civilian employment.<sup>186</sup> The Dubai police have promised to hire national service graduates in 10 minutes or less;<sup>187</sup> the Abu Dhabi police made national service a prerequisite for Emirati recruits to the police force and reduced training time at the police academy from four and a half years to three years.<sup>188</sup> In a group of highly educated, somewhat older, national servicemen interviewed in the presence of senior officers during their specialist training, around half said they would consider joining the military, although some caveats were given (One said, “If a good

185 Shireena Al Nowais, “National Service reduces UAE’s crime rate,” *The National*, May 30, 2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/national-service-reduces-uaes-crime-rate>.

186 “Al mu’asisat tatasabaq li tawdhif mujanadi al-khidma al-wataniya [Institutions compete to hire national service recruits],” *Al Bayan*, March 7, 2017, <http://www.albayan.ae/across-the-uae/news-and-reports/2017-03-07-1.2879310>.

187 “Shortat dubai tukhasis wadha’if li mujanadi al-khidma al-wataniya [Dubai police earmarks jobs for national service conscripts],” *Emirates News Agency*, March 6, 2017, <http://www.emaratayoum.com/local-section/other/2017-03-06-1.975758>.

188 “Taqlis al-darasa bi kuliyat shortat abu dhabi ila 3 sanawat [Reduction of study at Abu Dhabi police academy to 3 years],” *Al Ittihad*, February 14, 2017, <http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=9325&y=2017&article=full>.

enough offer was made.”)<sup>189</sup> Civilian government bodies also have tried to attract NSRA graduates.<sup>190</sup>

Some fear that the emphasis on military and government recruitment—and the disruption the NSRA poses for those already in the workforce—may undermine Emiratisation efforts in the private sector. Compliance issues among employers whose staff have been called up for service—including denial of benefits and payments during national service, or failure to provide the government with the requisite number of nominations among employees eligible for duty—have forced the government to intervene more actively.<sup>191</sup> The NSRA’s gradual transition to recruitment immediately following secondary school or, in select cases, university studies, will reduce these frictions. Even so, the complications foreshadow challenges that could arise in the case of more active reservist mobilization.

## EXPANDING GOVERNMENT SCRUTINY

Another important outcome of national service is the ability of the government to collect data on and monitor its young male population. Centralized surveillance abilities carry a number of implications. Through the initial screenings of recruits and the observation of conscripts intensively over a period of time,

national service allows authorities to systematically monitor young people for potential security—or political—threats. For example, the NSRA actively screens and monitors recruits for possible extremist sympathies. Recruits may be incorporated back into the program if they show signs of “rehabilitation” after engagements with state-approved clerics,<sup>192</sup> but presumably all are monitored closely throughout their time with the program.

NSRA also allows leaders to conduct needs assessments for more effective policy interventions. NSRA officials have spoken about their aim to create data benchmarks for public health through national service, for example. By the same token, it allows leaders to identify and cultivate talent, an important consideration given the need to effectively leverage the human capital of a small population.

How the UAE chooses to cultivate and process data inputs that it gathers from national service will be significant. For example, it remains unclear how closely information that the NSRA gathers on recruits is shared with other government bodies, what information is shared with the NSRA, and how it all is safeguarded. Notably, these data streams will cover only the male half of the population. Barring a dramatic increase in female recruitment to national service, the government will have a lopsided understanding of only the male half of its population.

189 Interview with group of national service recruits in specialist training, Zayed Military City, Abu Dhabi, May 23, 2016.

190 “Al mu’asisat tatasabaq li tawdhif mujanadi al-khidma al-wataniya [Institutions compete to hire national service recruits],” *Al Bayan*.

191 “National Service and Reserve Authority warns of legal action over work complaints,” *The National*, October 25, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/national-service-and-reserve-authority-warns-of-legal-action-over-work-complaints>; “Al mawarid al-bashariya: qarar jadid yuhadid mas’uliyat ikhtiyar tansib al-muwadhifin lil khidma al-wataniya bi hay’at al-khidma [Human resources: new decision rests the responsibility for selecting the nomination of employees for national service with the service authority],” *24 News*, June 6, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2pGvuAB>.

192 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 19, 2016.

**Emirati planes  
streak the colors  
of the national  
flag above Abu  
Dhabi as part  
of a live military  
demonstration in  
March 2017.**

KARIM SAHIB/  
AFP/Getty Images

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CITIZENS IN TRAINING



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## ANALYSIS AND BROADER IMPLICATIONS

**T**he nonmilitary goals of the UAE's national service have occupied the government for years. Since the UAE was founded, its leaders have sought to build national consciousness. They quickly realized the necessity of maximizing the human capital of the country's small population.<sup>193</sup> In recent years, the government has grappled with how to address challenges arising from rapid changes in UAE society that accompanied the country's pole vault into prosperity, including reliance on the state to provide employment and robust social benefits, as well as public health issues. Further, the desire to build its indigenous defense capacities aligns with efforts to position the UAE as a regional leader and to create a more independent capacity to ensure the country's security.

While the current national service builds on existing priorities, it also represents a departure from them. In particular, relying on a military paradigm to promote social change has both advantages and tradeoffs as well as potential risks.

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193 Ibish, "The UAE's Evolving National Security Strategy."

## EMBEDDING SACRIFICE IN GROWING NATIONALISM

National service is an important part of a broader and ambitious state strategy to cultivate an evolving Emirati identity. That identity increasingly has a military tinge as the UAE has adopted more assertive interventionist policies and sought to position itself as an important military player in the region. Related to this is the rise of a “martyrdom culture,” unprecedented in the UAE, in response to military deaths abroad. In 2015, just after 45 soldiers were killed in a bomb attack in Yemen, the government decreed Martyrs Day an annual public holiday and opened an office to manage aid to families of the soldiers who were killed. In 2016, a massive monument to the sacrifices of the UAE’s fallen sons was erected in Abu Dhabi squarely between the Sheikh Zayed Mosque and the headquarters of the UAE Armed Forces. Spanning more than 450,000 square feet and reaching 75 feet into the sky at its highest point, the monument is a striking physical marker of the growing importance of soldiers’ sacrifices in UAE nationalist discourse.<sup>194</sup> National service has helped make these events much less distant from citizens’ lives. The Yemen attack—the single greatest loss of life since the country’s founding—took place less than a week after the fourth class

of NSRA recruits began their basic training, and just days after one of those recruits suffered a fatal heart attack on base.<sup>195</sup>

National service also is part of a much broader effort to establish a more reciprocal relationship between the Emirati state and its citizens. Interestingly, it comes at a time when the state is asking citizens to play a more active and entrepreneurial role in the country’s economic development, while leaving unchanged its expectations for political loyalty and acquiescence.<sup>196</sup> The national service project both asserts the authority of the state and demands that its citizens serve it.

Conscription also aims to provide a common experience that can act as a leveler of Emirati identity and socialize youth in conservative values. The success conscription will have in socializing young Emiratis remains to be seen, and the institution alone cannot substitute for 12 or more years of educational inputs. It is also worth noting that the in-groups and excluded groups created by the program’s recruitment boundaries may matter as much or even more than the content of the training itself. For Emiratis judged to be political and security threats, it is unclear whether their exclusion from the process will drive them toward an effort to assimilate, or more deeply into alienation.

194 Jasmine al Kuttab, “A monument to heroic deeds in UAE,” *Khaleej Times*, November 30, 2016, <http://www.khaleej-times.com/national-day-2016/a-monument-to-heroic-deeds>.

195 “Sons and daughters of the Emirates enlist in the fourth batch of national service [Abna’ wa banat al-amarat yaltahiqun bil duf’ a al-raabi’a lil khidma al-wataniya],” Emirates News Agency, August 29, 2015, <http://wam.ae/ar/details/1395284779493>; Elham Al Dhaheri, “Family members of deceased national service recruit found out about his death via social media,” *The National*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/family-members-of-deceased-national-service-recruit-found-out-about-his-death-via-social-media-1.126505>.

196 See Carolyn Barnett, *Human Capital and the Future of the Gulf*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 12, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/human-capital-and-future-gulf>.

**“ALTHOUGH VOLUNTARY PATHWAYS FOR FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN THE PROGRAM EXIST, THE VERY LOW REGISTRATION NUMBERS MEAN THAT WOMEN ARE ALMOST SYSTEMATICALLY EXCLUDED FROM THE EXPERIENCE.”**

## **GENDERING CITIZENSHIP**

National service has important implications for the evolution of gender relations in the Emirates. Although voluntary pathways for female participation in the program exist, the very low registration numbers mean that women are almost systematically excluded from the experience. The dismissive comments of NSRA officials, including women, about the potential role of women in the national service program are a further indicator of their marginalization. The NSRA and other government partners largely view women's vital roles not as participants, but as crucial pillars of community support for the men's conscription program. Yet even as family members, Emirati women's relationship to conscription bears subtle but significant differences from that of men. While the opening of voluntary recruitment to the children of Emirati mothers and foreign fathers in 2015 marks a step toward inclusion, that these youth remain separate from the

pool that is legally liable for conscription reinforces the notion—enshrined in UAE citizenship law—that national identity is fundamentally patrilineal.

This situation illustrates broader complexities in changing women's roles in the Emirates. Many perceive that Emirati women are outperforming their male counterparts in the classroom and in the workplace, yet a combination of normative pressures, cultural expectations, and personal preferences often result in shorter careers and constrained opportunities to reach leadership and management positions. Most of the country's female superstars tend to hail from the elite and benefit from considerable financial resources as well as the encouragement of cosmopolitan families. Replicating their success among the broader population has proven more challenging. The gendered nature of national service likely will affect understanding of the roles of men and women in the UAE more broadly. Some research suggests that levels of nationalism among young Emirati wom-

en are as high or even higher than those of their male peers.<sup>197</sup> Yet, women may feel less connection to nation-building efforts if they do not feel they are the primary audience. One university professor in the UAE noted that her male students seemed notably more enthusiastic about nationalism education initiatives than her female students.<sup>198</sup>

After what some see as decades of progress, the NSRA seems to relegate women once again to supporting roles, including in the performance of citizenship. It also sends different messages about expectations for change among rising generations of Emirati men and Emirati women. The very premise of national service as a nation-building tool is a belief that aspects of young Emirati men's relationship to their communities and society need to be transformed, and that the government stands to succeed in realizing this transformation through an intensive intervention. The approach to women in national service so far does not suggest a conviction that the transformation of Emirati women's relationship to society is either desirable or achievable.

## MILITARIZING EMIRATIZATION

The NSRA sees itself as furthering Emiratisation goals by inculcating key workplace skills. Yet, it also draws young Emiratis into the world of government employment and seeks to keep the most capable there. If

one goal of the Emirati leadership is to replace foreign workers with capable Emirati counterparts, the national service program may be drawing the best and brightest to enhance state capacity at the expense of the broader labor market.

It need not be so. Finland's program includes a strong component of career development, and the service talks extensively with recruits about career aspirations and makes an effort to account for their preferences and strengths in assigning placements. Many universities and vocational schools grant credit for military training.<sup>199</sup> The Israel Defense Forces also have been successful in creating synergies with the labor market, particularly in cryptography, technology, and communications. In fact, Israeli tech companies have at times adjusted their locations to retain proximity to the military and ex-military talent pool.<sup>200</sup>

## BETTING ON HIERARCHY

Most broadly, the logic of hierarchy embedded in national service is in tension with some of the aims the country set out in Vision 2021 as part of its drive toward a knowledge economy. The attitudes and behaviors that national service seeks to instill encourage conscripts to excel in environments with a rigid vertical command structure where ideas tend to flow from above. The military instruction is "top-down," and teaching methods in the theo-

197 Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization*.

198 Interview with UAE-based academic, Dubai, May 21, 2016.

199 See Finnish Defense Forces, "Conscript 2016: A guide for you who are preparing to carry out your military service," [http://puolustusvoimat.fi/documents/1948673/2258487/MAAVE\\_Varusmiesopas\\_2016\\_EN/1c0dc0d4-4a8a-41cc-b020-5150ed88171e](http://puolustusvoimat.fi/documents/1948673/2258487/MAAVE_Varusmiesopas_2016_EN/1c0dc0d4-4a8a-41cc-b020-5150ed88171e); Curtis Gilroy and Cindy Williams, *Service to Country: Personnel Policy and the Transformation of Western Militaries* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

200 Orr Hirschauge, "Israeli Army Builds a Desert Outpost—Tech Firms Follow," *Wall Street Journal*, June 5, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/israeli-army-builds-a-desert-outposttech-firms-follow-1433525715>.

retical courses do not allow for discussion or debate. The drive for excellence through orthodoxy carries over to the metrics by which conscripts' performance is judged. Conscripts are evaluated on their performance in areas such as discipline, work ethic, and pro-social behavior. When asked whether the program aims to address psychosocial factors such as fear of failure, a senior NSRA official said simply, "We want to make youth better, not to change how they think."<sup>201</sup>

While these qualities align with recruits' expected political behavior at home, they do less to equip them to navigate the kind of innovative work environments that the government has stated it intends to foster. Vision 2021 commits the UAE to "cultivate a healthy risk-taking culture where hard work, boldness, and innovation are rightfully rewarded."<sup>202</sup> Such a culture requires the erosion of hierarchical controls rather than the entrenchment of them. It also requires an ability to collaborate laterally, sometimes in the absence of directive leadership from above. Globally, networks increasingly challenge the preeminence of hierarchies in the organization of people, commerce, and information. Through national service, the UAE is choosing to double down on hierarchy as an organizing principle at a time when it is simultaneously seeking to encourage greater creativity and entrepreneurship.

## COMMITTING FOR THE LONG HAUL

The final question over the national service program is the level of effort that the program will be able to attract—and sustain—over time. National service is a generational investment, and its ultimate impact will not surface in the first five years but over the course of the next 10 or 20 years. This experiment also is a whole-of-society venture whose success will depend on both how various power centers view it in relation to their interests and how the Emirati population perceives its legitimacy.

The full implementation of national service will depend on the leadership's sustained commitment to providing requisite resources, ensuring compliance, and working through the inevitable obstacles that will arise from competing priorities and changing circumstances. While the government is fully committed now, the current level of commitment may not be a good indicator of commitment in 10 years' time. Like many of its neighbors, the UAE has had a number of high-priority initiatives that were scaled back over time, from the efforts to create a "zero-carbon city" to building man-made islands off Dubai that replicate a map of the world.<sup>203</sup> The NSRA initiative does not exist in an economic or political vacuum, and it will need to adapt as circumstances change.

In addition, building political will across institutions will be necessary to build on initial gains, and NSRA officials are aware that

201 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 18, 2016.

202 Government of the UAE, "United in Knowledge: A Competitive Economy Driven by Knowledgeable and Innovative Emiratis," UAE Vision 2021, <https://www.vision2021.ae/en/our-vision/united-knowledge>.

203 Suzanne Goldenberg, "Masdar's zero-carbon dream could become world's first green ghost town," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/feb/16/masdars-zero-carbon-dream-could-become-worlds-first-green-ghost-town>; Jon Gambrell, "Floating home marks return to Dubai's man-made World islands," Associated Press, May 19, 2016, <https://apnews.com/31cee686308b4fe489c4911247a1e015/floating-home-marks-return-dubais-man-made-world-islands>.

broad institutional acceptance will depend on other ministries seeing it furthering their goals.<sup>204</sup> While there are clear synergies between the NSRA and Ministry of Health, relationships with other ministries, such as education and labor, are potentially more complicated. The NSRA may find it needs to navigate tensions if other players feel that the implementation or outcomes of national service are in competition with their own policy agendas.

Popular attitudes toward the program also will affect its durability. One enduring challenge is presenting a clear value proposition to conscripts. Recruits need to believe they are gaining skills that can apply to their careers or education. Conversely, if the experiences of other countries that conscript are any guide, concerns about being absent or disadvantaged in the labor market at a critical time for one's career create deep anxieties and generate resentments when left unaddressed. One Emirati academic suggested that the UAE government currently enjoys a "reservoir of support" among the population as a result of decades of economic growth, quality of life improvements, and domestic security.<sup>205</sup> With conscription, the government is tapping into this reservoir. Its replenishment will depend on sustained positive government performance.

There are two other factors that might undermine support for the NSRA program. The first is diminishing universality. Case

studies of conscription in Singapore, South Korea, Finland, and Israel suggest the importance of the burden of service being shared equally. When the powerful and well-connected are able to shirk their duty (as happened in the United States during the Vietnam War), public approval often drops.<sup>206</sup> There are already rumblings that the military burden falls heavily on poorer northern emirates such as Ras al-Khaimah, which has suffered a disproportionate number of military deaths.<sup>207</sup> Clear initial signs are that the program is indeed universal; sustaining that commitment needs to be an important government priority.

A second factor is a change in the broader strategic environment. Currently, Emiratis feel acute risk from Iran, and the country is at war in Yemen. Camouflage gear now comes out in force on UAE National Day—not only for little boys, but on girls' dresses and women's robes. Emiratis feel they are engaged in a struggle for national security, heightening the public's willingness to invest in security and to follow the leadership into arms. If this urgency declines, or if many in the public decide that military approaches are the wrong ones to pursue, Emiratis' support for sending their children into military training will likely diminish.

204 Interview with National Service and Reserve Authority officials, Abu Dhabi, May 25, 2016.

205 Interview with Emirati academic, Dubai, May 25, 2016.

206 For example, in South Korea, the ability of the elite and the well-connected to gain exemptions from mandatory service has dealt a blow to the institution's legitimacy. See Kim Tong-Hyung, "South Korean military seeks to end service exemptions," Associated Press, May 17, 2016, <https://apnews.com/750aecb1d23749dca3d466e75aa6da0f/south-korean-military-seeks-end-service-exemptions>.

207 Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking*. As of 2017, there was a disproportionate representation of the northern emirates among the hometowns of the fallen listed on the memorial's official "Heroes' Registry." See Martyrs' Families' Affairs Office, "Heroes' Registry," Wahat Al Karama website, <https://www.wahataalkarama.ae/martyrslist/>.

# **“[NATIONAL SERVICE] IS FAR MORE THAN A PROGRAM TO BUILD THE MILITARY. IT IS A PROGRAM TO BUILD THE SOCIETY FROM THE MILITARY.”**

## **CONCLUSION**

It is easy to underestimate the importance of national service to the future trajectory of the United Arab Emirates. Viewed casually, it is easy to dismiss national service as a frantic attempt by a small country to bolster its defenses in a dangerous neighborhood. Such a view completely misses what the program is about.

With its mandatory military service, the UAE is defining national security extraordinarily broadly and introducing discipline into a society that many Emiratis believe has gotten soft. It is far more than a program to build the military. It is a program to build the society from the military.

Thus far, the government has been able to capitalize on strongly resourced execution and exquisite timing, giving the program as strong a start as could be imagined.

Early indications are that the program has met some core initial goals. It has created one of the farthest-reaching platforms for socialization in the country's history. Although societal responses have not been

uniformly frictionless, acceptance is broadly high both for the program itself and a more martial approach to nationalism. While some Emiratis told us they were relieved to be beyond the age of conscription, we did not hear widespread complaints about program execution, and there appeared to be a broad consensus that the program was having the desired effect on its participants.

It will take years before the program's impacts can be judged fully, however. In the intervening time, the program will change, the context will change, and Emiratis will change. The program may become more intensive or less so, and larger or smaller numbers of Emiratis may pursue alternative service. Whatever happens, it will be hard to disaggregate what effects were direct results of the program, and what effects were due to other factors.

Right now, however, the program stands as the clearest sign yet of the UAE leadership's vision: how it diagnoses the strengths and weaknesses of its society,

what it sees as the strongest path forward, and where it is trying to go. The government is not using the national service program merely to turn sons into men. It also seeks to turn men into soldiers, citizens, and wage earners, and the population of seven emirates into a more unified whole. The goals it has set and the path it has chosen to accomplish them will have a profound effect not only on the Emirates, but also on neighboring countries that will draw lessons from the Emirates' example.

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**COVER PHOTOS** UAE NATIONAL SERVICE AND RESERVE AUTHORITY

*From top to bottom:* The fifth class of national service recruits report for basic training in Al Ain in January 2016; National service recruits march in a ceremony marking their graduation from basic training in May 2016.



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