In 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.

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INSIDE THE FULL REPORT

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