

Remembering Versus Imagining

By Jon B. Alterman

BRINGING BACK BABEL

To heal Iraq's divisions, politicians will need to find common ground—if only they could find a common language. While calling for negotiations with Baghdad, the new prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani, confessed his spoken Arabic was shaky—and promised to improve it “for the unity of Iraq.” Yet a limited grasp of Arabic represents the norm, not the exception, for the KRG's younger generations.

Arabic use in Iraq's Kurdish region never rebounded after the region gained autonomy from Saddam Hussein's regime in 1991 and reversed Saddam's repressive “Arabization” policies. Schools now teach Arabic as a second language, but curricula are heavy on grammar and light on communication skills. Many students are more interested in English. While Nechirvan Barzani's uncle and former KRG president Masoud Barzani used broadcast-quality Arabic to court allies, many younger Kurds struggle to converse.

Momentum for learning Arabic today lies among those motivated by prayer or pop culture. KRG authorities say demand for Qur'anic memorization schools which teach classical Arabic has increased fourfold in recent years. Meanwhile, fans of Arabic music and television—often women—cop the Syrian, Lebanese, or Egyptian accents of favorite stars as well as snatches of Iraqi dialect. Sometimes they wind up with a confused admixture.

The challenges posed by language barriers have been cast into relief by the influx of Arab Iraqis displaced by fighting as well as of Syrian refugees. More than a million Arab Iraqis remain displaced in the KRG, where they report language to be a key obstacle to their integration. As Iraq enters a new chapter, Iraqis all over the country have a lot to say. How their voices are heard—and understood—is a critical question. ■ MB



war memorials in the United States take different forms, but they are almost always built at the same time: When the veterans feel like their generation is fading away. Such memorials are, almost by definition, backward-looking. They are about shaping the relationship between the past and the present.

The recently built war memorial in Abu Dhabi is mostly about the present and the future. While nominally about memorializing those who gave their lives for the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the memorial—and the attached visitors' center—is an elaborate attempt by the country's young leadership to shape citizens' relationship to the nation. The Wahat al-Karama complex—“The Oasis of Dignity” in English—is more about teaching than remembering, and it fits into a broader UAE project to reshape the relationship between people and their government.

From a distance, the memorial itself is of universal appeal. Thirty-one large aluminum-clad panels stand in two lines along a narrow channel of water. The tallest panel is monumental, standing 75 feet high. The shortest is about 10 feet off the ground, and it leans heavily on a long narrow ramp on which the allegiance pledge of the UAE armed forces is inscribed. While the tall end panels are erect, all of the other panels lean on each other, symbolizing interdependence. From the tall end, the tops of the panels descend to form a gentle slope, and from the side they echo the strong triangular shape of the Iwo Jima memorial in Arlington, Virginia.

A closer view of the panels reveals their particularism. They are inscribed with poems and quotations from four preeminent thought-leaders in the UAE: the country's founder, Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan; the current UAE president, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan; the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum; and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The memorial serves to reinforce the rulers' authority and legitimacy.

Inside the visitors' center, the exhibit becomes even more didactic. Dark

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NEW REPORT: CITIZENS IN TRAINING: CONSCRIPTION AND NATION-BUILDING IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The CSIS Middle East Program has released a new report by Jon Alterman and Margo Balboni, “Citizens in Training: Conscription and Nation-building in the United Arab Emirates.” The report and accompanying podcast series examine the ambitious experiment underway in the UAE to use military conscription as a tool to shape a new kind of citizen for the future of the UAE. This report is the most extensive effort to date to define and understand the UAE conscription program—its successes, its failures, and its possible unintended consequences. The report outlines 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 for Emiratis and their future. Read the report and executive summary [HERE](#). ■

THE CITIZENS IN TRAINING PODCAST: UNPUBLISHED INSIGHTS

A podcast mini-series features diverse expert insights into the most pressing questions raised by the “Citizens in Training” report.

This six-episode series features interviews with and analysis by prominent experts on the UAE, the Gulf, and modern militaries in general. New episodes will be uploaded to the CSIS website every Tuesday featuring: Gregory Gause, Kristin Smith Diwan, Calvert Jones, Dave DesRoches, Elisabeth Braw, and Steffen Hertog. Explore the podcast [HERE](#).

IN THE MEDIA

“This trip may go down as Benjamin Netanyahu’s last hurrah.” Jon Alterman in [The Los Angeles Times](#) on the Israeli prime minister’s U.S. visit, 3/5/18.

Thomas Seibert quoted Middle East Notes and Comment in a piece for [The Arab Weekly](#) on U.S. Syria strategy, 2/25/18.

“Some rebel factions will likely fight to the bitter end.” Will Todman in [AFP](#) on the siege of East Ghouta, 2/20/18.

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CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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stone pillars outline the seven values that the Emirates seeks to foster: giving, dedication, bravery, sacrifice, tolerance, chivalry, and loyalty. Each pillar has, in Arabic and English, a quotation from one of the country’s leaders, a description of the value that the pillar represents, and some sort of relic exemplifying the value. Each description ends with a direct question about the value described: “What do you most value and what would you sacrifice for it?”, or “What inspires loyalty in you and how do you show it?”

Wahat al-Karama opened to the public just over a year ago, and it is part of a broader UAE effort to change citizens’ relationship to the state. In the 46 years since the UAE was founded, citizens have most often been the state’s beneficiaries. As in many rentier states—that is, states that derive much of their income through economic “rents” such as mineral deposits, rather than agriculture or industry—taxation has been low or nonexistent, government jobs have been nearly guaranteed for those who want them, utilities and fuel have been heavily subsidized, and services such as education and medical care have been free. The state has asked for little other than loyalty in return.

In the last five years, the equation has been changing. In part, the so-called Arab Spring was a sign that loyalty was no longer a given among young people. An ongoing war in Yemen has put Emirati soldiers in the line of fire, and about 100 are estimated to have died. But even more important than what has happened is a sense of what will happen: that the boom times of the previous years will come to a definitive end. Oil markets have shifted, populations have grown, and the cost of meeting rising expectations is expanding far faster than government revenues. Something has to give.

The UAE has been quicker than most to grasp this. Beginning in 2014, it instituted a conscription program targeted at every male citizen between 18 and 30. By law (and so far in practice), only narrow windows for exemptions exist, often based on a severe lack of fitness. The program does much more than teach self-defense and weapons handling. It emphasizes physical fitness, teaches loyalty and commitment, and forces young men to wake at dawn, march in formation, make their beds and clean toilets. The program is the focus of a new CSIS report, drawing on original research, available [HERE](#).

What is striking about the UAE program is just how ambitious it is. Building the armed forces is a benefit to be sure, but it seems even more focused on inculcating the rising generation with a new set of attitudes. In part, it is about building a sense of patriotism to overlay regional, tribal, and family identities, as well as deepening a sense of responsibility. A large part, too, is about creating the kind of self-discipline that many Emiratis complain is all too absent in young men, and which is necessary for success in a more competitive job market. Running through the program is an effort to instill conservative values, respect for authority, and gratitude to the country’s leadership.

Through Wahat al-Karama, conscription, and a host of other efforts, the UAE is trying to reshape the state’s relationship to its citizens. The state is not trying to open a dialogue with the public, but it is trying to lead. The early effects have been mixed. Judging from public comments, the conscription effort seems to have won wide acceptance, not least because family members appreciate the greater maturity of former conscripts.

Wahat al-Karama seems more of a mixed bag. The site was practically abandoned when I visited it one afternoon in February. None of the Emiratis I spoke with on that recent visit had seen it up close, and reciting the themes of the visitors’ center exhibit—giving, dedication, bravery, sacrifice, tolerance, chivalry, and loyalty—elicited something between disinterest and eye-rolling.

The UAE’s ambitions for its citizenry are clear. The citizenry’s ambitions for the UAE are less clear. The stakes are high, but the destination remains uncertain. ■ 3/13/2018