

Military Officers in the Gulf: Career Trajectories and Determinants

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The officer corps of any military hold most of the keys to understanding that force. After all, virtually all officers come from the nation whose military they lead and their training, ethos, and attributes reveal much about not just the armed forces as an institution but, more broadly, also about the state they serve. This point is especially pertinent to military officers in the armies of the Arabian Gulf where enlisted men are often non-citizens and a professional corps of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) is largely absent. Although the Gulf armies have benefited from the guidance and training efforts of many U.S., British, and other Western military advisors and instructors since independence, they – let alone their Gulf colleagues – seldom wrote about their experiences, thus the literature on many aspects of the militaries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), made up of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, is scant.

The purpose of this report is to contribute to a better understanding of the armies of Arabia, particularly its officer corps, virtually all of whose members are Gulf citizens. Two of the main socioeconomic splits in the Gulf – between very rich states (Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE) and more modestly endowed ones (Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia) on a per capita GDP basis and the marginalization or outright oppression of Shia by Sunni Muslim states particularly in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia – is also reflected in the composition and career prospects of military officers. Advancement in the officer corps up to the level of full colonel is virtually taken for granted by all but the most incompetent, one of the results of which is an extremely top-heavy, stovepipe-like rank structure. Although there are some, and perhaps a growing number of, outstanding Gulf officers, on a professional level, the vast majority of them would be considered, at best, barely competent in a Western army. The difference between the quality of elite units – say, the UAE Presidential Guard or the Bahrain Royal Guard – and ordinary ones is far larger than in the armed forces of the U.S., the UK, or Israel.

The mentality and professionalism of Gulf officers diverge greatly from their counterparts in the world's top armies. Striving for excellence takes back seat to playing it safe, not getting noticed – in positive or negative ways – and going with the flow. In military education, even at the very top institutions of Arabia, there is little critical thinking in part because the educational system of the region has rewarded memorization and rote learning instead. The report's closer look at pilot training reflects and confirms the trends observed in the more general context. Though many GCC officers study or train in Western countries, once they return to the Gulf they must play by the rules of their home environment, which causes the professional mindset and approach they acquired abroad to erode. The single most important problem of GCC armies remains their preference for individuals who hail from certain families, tribes, and social networks rather than for those who perform on a superior level: these institutions are not meritocracies. In order to understand these armies better, this report, then, focuses on the socio-cultural aspects of the Gulf officer corps, particularly their background, career trajectory, professional education, and the factors that influence their professional advancement.

Social Background

In terms of status, in the GCC there is a far greater divide among enlisted men and officers than in the U.S. or British militaries. Aspiring officers in most GCC states go through a rigorous vetting process that is focused more on political reliability – e.g., the proven allegiance of one’s relatives and clan to the ruling family – than on intellectual, physical, or psychological, suitability. Indeed, especially in the less well-off Gulf states one needs *wasta* (influence, clout, pull) to secure a spot in a military college. Officers, with very few exceptions, must be citizens of their countries (although some of them are naturalized). Most cadets come from at least a middle-class background. In the Gulf, as elsewhere, “military families” with second and third generation officers are quite common. Many future officers are recruited by family networks, through active-duty officers. In Bahrain, where the army is small and the security situation precarious, the regime wants prominent Sunni families to be represented in the military and so that these families would have a stake in the survival of the Al-Khalifa regime.¹ Still, in a small country like Bahrain, a relatively few extended families dominate the officer corps’ rosters: at a recent Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) course for lieutenants the 27 participating officers came from five clans.² Social connections throughout the Gulf tend to be an important if largely opaque part of the recruitment process.

Especially in the more affluent Gulf states, ordinarily people from less privileged backgrounds tend to choose the military as a career. Furthermore, cadets from small towns and rural areas tend to be overrepresented across the GCC. In Kuwait, for instance, in most years 150 officer candidates are accepted in military colleges from an applicant pool that may exceed 1,000. The majority of applicants come from Bedouin (tribal) backgrounds; no more than one-third share Hadari (town-dweller) origins. At the same time, the highest ranks are dominated by Hadaris owing to the government’s preference for them.³ The numbers, however, are somewhat misleading. In Kuwait, as in the UAE and Qatar, there is “massive demand for citizens in military colleges who are even marginally competent.”⁴ The acceptance rate is actually quite modest not only because of the dearth of candidates who satisfy the objective selection criteria but also because the recruitment of officers in Arabia is a politically sensitive process. Similarly to the British colonial armies’ recruitment practices, in contemporary Arabia the rulers have an explicit preference for officers from certain regions, tribes, and religious affiliations.⁵ Shia Muslim communities are the largest pool of potential recruits eschewed by security sector recruitment in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and increasingly in the UAE. In stark contrast, Shia in Kuwait face no significant discrimination in the armed forces: indeed, some of the most distinguished senior officers hail from the Shia community.⁶

Women have long worked in the GCC armed forces in administrative and medical fields and, in Bahrain and the UAE, have been among uniformed personnel since the 1980s. In the mid-2010s Kuwait and Qatar permitted female enlistment, with certain conditions like parental approval.⁷ Saudi Arabia joined their ranks in October 2019, allowing Saudi women to join the military within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030 that intends to empower women.⁸ There are still extremely few female officers in the Gulf, the most famous of them may well be Maj. Mariam Al-Mansouri of the UAE Air Force who, in 2014, participated in the coalition forces’ bombing campaign against ISIS in Syria.⁹ The first Omani female officers joined the Royal Army of Oman upon completing

their program at the Sultan Qaboos Military Academy in December 2011. In 2017 the first Bahraini woman, Sheikha Aisha bint Rashid Al Khalifa, graduated from Sandhurst.¹⁰

The Officer's Career¹¹

The education, training, and career trajectories of military officers in various Gulf countries are similar, but there are some variations, mostly owing to the size of the armed forces that allows for some specialties in larger forces (i.e., the Saudi or the Emirati) but not in the smaller ones. Let's take a look at the military education and expected career of a prospective Kuwaiti officer, from cadet to lieutenant general (the highest rank in the country).¹² I am including the average number of years and ages though, of course, there are variations – some young men join later, some training courses are not always available, and at times promotions are held back through no fault of the officer but, for instance, owing to manpower policy (i.e., drawing down of forces).

Cadet to Second Lieutenant/2-3 years/ages 18-21: After completing their secondary education (generally at the age of 18), boys apply to military college. Completing the coursework and training at the college takes a minimum of two and a maximum of three years depending on the branch of service. As in other armed forces, cadets learn about tactics, weapons, small-group leadership, principles of military life, are socialized into military culture, acquire discipline and participate in physical training, and become familiar with their chosen specialty (e.g., infantry, armor, air defense).

Second to First Lieutenant/3-4 years/ages 21 to 24-25: After graduating from the military college the young officers go to their assigned units in their area of specialty. In the second year in rank (as first lieutenants) they will take a basic specialist course that can take up to a year. They cannot be promoted without passing this course. Those already promoted to first lieutenant may take this course – if it was not available earlier – but captains may not.

First Lieutenant to Captain/4 years/ages 24-25 to 28-29: At this stage the officer generally takes a number of relatively short specialized courses both in their specialty and outside. So, an infantry officer could take a parachutist course, while a person in the special forces might take an counterterrorism course offered by the Ministry of Interior. Occasionally, the courses would be of longer duration – for instance, a signal officer would take a nine-month course. They could expect to be promoted to captain after seven (sometimes eight) years of service.

Captain to Major/4-5 years/ages 28-29 to 32-34: This is a period of transition in the career of the young officer, where the focus is placed on becoming more creative and independent and on practicing leadership skills for relatively small units. Ordinarily at this stage the army emphasizes their participation in exercises with their units. Officers do not take many courses in this period; instead, they have to take one critically important advanced course that takes four to nine months based on their specialty; top officers in their cohort might be permitted to enroll in a higher level and more demanding joint advanced course where they learn coordination between land, naval, and air forces. During this period many officers complete a university degree (generally at one of the local colleges, such as Kuwait University).

Major to Lieutenant Colonel/4-5 years/ages 32-34 to 36-39: The professional life of a major revolves around practicing his command and preparing for the next stage of his career, leading a battalion, which generally requires promotion to lieutenant colonel. There is additional training and education at this stage as well. The most important is the one-year long staff course – stressing leadership, decisionmaking methods and strategies, how to run organizations and plan/execute/manage campaigns, working as a part of a joint services/coalition environment, in addition to some civilian courses (such as domestic and international law, business management). Majors – owing to the large number of students, increasingly lieutenant colonels in the last decade – ordinarily take the staff course at the Mubarak Al-Abdullah Joint Command & Staff College. Exceptional students then are often sent abroad (e.g., to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas or the British Joint Services Command and Staff College in Oxfordshire) to deepen their knowledge in new environments.

Lieutenant Colonels to Colonels/4-5 years/ages 36-39 to 40-44: At this point the officer can take command of a full battalion or squadron in the combat services. Here, however, the time periods are frequently expanded and promotions are delayed owing to size-of-manpower issues. It is important to note that more than 90 percent of the cadets we met over two decades ago will become colonels. The rate of attrition, thus, is minimal and while highly qualified officers will likely make it to colonel some years earlier, all but the most incompetent or egregiously undisciplined will do so as well.

Colonels to Brigadiers/5-6 years/ages 45 to 51: Most colonels will complete their careers and retire – leaving after 25 years of service, at full benefits – before they would be promoted to brigadier. At this stage, the rank pyramid narrows sharply partly because the modest size of the armed forces cannot accommodate too many officers at this rank.

The decision to promote to brigadier rests with the 10 or 11 members of the Military Defense Council, made up of the Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff, and other most senior officers of the armed forces. At any given time, there are about 50-60 brigadiers in Kuwait's armed forces. In a handful of cases brigadiers are promoted to major general; there are usually 10-11 officers holding that rank in Kuwait, they serve as assistant chiefs of staff for logistics, intelligence, and other specialties.¹³ The ultimate rank in contemporary Kuwait is lieutenant (i.e., three-star) general, held by the Chief of Staff and his deputy. In Kuwaiti armed services the mandatory retirement age is 60. In rare instances, when one's continued service is deemed critical, the defense minister can grant up to five one-year extensions, but the law says that no one may serve beyond age 65, and by all accounts, no one does.

A couple of additional comments might offer further clarification and broaden the context. First, the Kuwaiti stovepipe-like rank structure is said to be changing; efforts to improve the professional quality of officer corps target the sharp reduction in the number of colonels. Like all other Gulf militaries, the Kuwaiti is top heavy with far too many officers relative to the size of enlisted ranks. The Kuwaiti military education system graduates proportionately many more officers than the country needs. In the UK, with an (active) armed forces of 148,350, 750 officers are graduated annually; in Kuwait whose armed forces are one ninth of that, nearly 300. Although the initiative appears to be serious, it is accompanied by political costs, thus implementation should not be automatically assumed.

Second, it is possible to become an officer following the completion of post-secondary (tertiary) studies. The Ministry of Defense (as well as the Interior Ministry) offers the opportunity for recent university graduates to join the military; these young men take a six-month program – a combination of basic and specialized training – and graduate from it as first lieutenants.

Third, in Kuwait there are no recruitment offices nor military personnel specialized as recruiters. In the past, most young men who wanted to become soldiers or officers have been welcomed with open arms and few questions asked. First, finding sufficient numbers of able-bodied Kuwaiti citizens who desired to serve in the military was difficult. Second, in a country where the state employs more than 80 percent of the labor force, the military, as the old saying goes, can become “dressing the (likely-to-be) unemployed in uniform.” On Gulf military bases one gets the sense that there are far more people with little if anything to do than people actively engaged in some pursuit.

The majority of Gulf officers – and virtually all the competent ones – participate in various training courses abroad at different junctures during their careers. Some of the most distinguished officers I met took multiple degrees abroad, generously supported by their home country. Formal education is highly valued in Gulf militaries. Those who earn degrees from prestigious universities are held in high regard and are often respected more than an officer of senior rank with less impressive educational credentials. A British instructor for the Kuwaiti air force told me that the pilots he was training to fly Apache helicopters became far more deferential when they found out that he completed a master’s degree at the Department of War Studies in London’s King’s College. American trainers in the UAE related to me stories of getting increased attention and esteem from their charges who appreciated the value of their education at top universities.

The career sketch of Kuwaiti officers broadly resembles that of their GCC colleagues. Let’s look at what some of the differences are between officer education in Kuwait and the UAE, the military that has made the most impressive improvements in recent years. High school graduates in the Emirates start with a one-year program at Zayed Military Academy in Abu Dhabi. Some of the entering cadets might have taken their secondary studies at a military high school abroad or, more likely, at the one in Al-Ain that opened its doors in 2004.¹⁴ Many then are sent to Sandhurst, Royal Britannia, or Sudanese or Pakistani military colleges for 8-12-month programs. As in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Gulf (and further afield) there are clear time and grade requirements for officers, i.e., they spend a set amount of time in rank (e.g., 3-4 years as first lieutenants, 4 as captains, 5 as majors, etc.). While in the U.S. military there is a three-year window to be promoted from any rank, it is longer in the UAE, where one might be in rank 5-6 years before one is eligible for promotion. For instance, the time requirement for colonels to be promoted to brigadiers is almost twice as long in the UAE than it is in the U.S.; on the other hand, the chance of being promoted to such high ranks is better in the Gulf.

Officers’ fates in the UAE are decided every six months when they receive their new assignments (new assignment lists come out in June and December). Nobody knows in advance what one’s new position is going to be, but generally the process of selection is utilized to reinforce loyalty and personal bonds. For this reason, cultivating, developing, and nurturing personal relationships is a critical component of a successful career. This should not be taken as a calculating, pragmatic,

let alone manipulative nexus of the officer to his mentors – there is often a genuine closeness between the officer and his patron; they often share a tribal and religious background. A chummy relationship with one's boss may result in good assignments but can also reinforce the general tendency to cautiousness and restraint: "I'm only going to do what my superior wants" since the boss is unlikely to go out on the limb for his underling because he is also worried about not being reprimanded by his superior.

Officer Education in the GCC and Abroad

Basic officer education in the Gulf is conducted in military colleges generally organized by branches of service. For instance, the Khalifa bin Zayed Air College (UAE), established in 1982 and since 1995 located in Al-Ain trains fighter and helicopter pilots and experts in aerial vehicle technology. (Among its graduates are the aforementioned Mariam Al-Mansouri and astronaut Hazza Al-Mansouri.) The most prestigious and oldest Saudi institution for undergraduate military education – the Royal Saudi Land Force's King Abdul Aziz Military Academy, (established in 1935) in Riyadh – however, trains officers for different branches of the Saudi armed forces. Its 77th class graduated in May 2019 with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in attendance.¹⁵ Although there is a wide spectrum of quality among these institutions most of them are far closer to that of an American trade school than to West Point, Sandhurst, or Saint-Cyr. Much of the instruction is what my interlocutors, both Western and Arabian, described as "Egyptian-based," that is, "the more you can memorize and regurgitate the better."

Since the mid-1990s in several GCC states established staff academies in order to offer training to mid-level and senior officers in the region. Some of these, such as the Mubarak al-Abdullah Joint Command and Staff College (MAJCSC, established in 1995) in Kuwait opens its doors to students not just from the Arab world but from further afield. Others, like the UAE's National Defense College (founded in 2013) in Abu Dhabi trains only senior military officers and civilian servants (all UAE citizens). The NDC does a thorough job selecting capable students many of whom secure choice assignments following graduation. Considered some of the best and brightest of their cohort, they still demonstrate major shortcomings in critical thinking, chiefly because their earlier education discouraged it.¹⁶ Western instructors at the Saudi War College and elsewhere in Arabia largely echo the same opinions.

The MAJCSC's curriculum, based on the British model of higher military education, is a mix of strategic studies and leadership courses where deep thinking and deliberation is especially valued. The MAJCSC's student body enters the program after 15-18 years of experience in the officer corps (most of them are majors) and they are selected for upper level command and management positions.¹⁷ In 2018-2019, for instance, there were 113 students from 24 countries. From the Muslim world, Jordanian, Moroccan, and Pakistani participants tend to have the best reputation – they are motivated, professional, and well-prepared – while Egyptians tend to have the worst as they are widely perceived to be not just incompetent but arrogant to boot.¹⁸

A recurring theme in top level military education across the GCC is that when new colleges are first established, the instructors they hire are overwhelmingly British and American officers (retired or not) and academics with extensive experience in the Arab world (and especially in the Gulf). The language of instruction is English. Things go well for several years, in fact, so well,

that the (local) commanders and politicians decide that it is time to hire local instructors to teach in Arabic to accommodate prospective students unable to study in English. In every single case I have heard about – colleges in Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia – standards begin to slip and the level of education suffers.¹⁹ Qatar’s Joaan bin Jassim Joint Command and Staff College entered into a partnership with King’s College that the British side decided not to renew because it saw no way to guarantee academic standards.²⁰ Even in the NDC in Abu Dhabi a separate Arabic-language course has been proposed for those with inadequate English facility but, according to a founding member of its faculty, “[t]his could also present challenges to the College mission to instill patterns of strategic thinking in its participants and help the UAE adopt the system of military reflection.”²¹ Language of instruction apparently makes an important difference in both the quality of courses and the quality of students. Officers who can take courses in English usually have studied abroad, are more open-minded, and tend to have better critical thinking skills.

The majority of Gulf officers train and study in the West on multiple occasions (aside from attending military academies and schools elsewhere in the GCC) during their careers. Most do so in the U.S. and the U.K. where there are a variety of first-rate programs and where geographic conditions permit large-scale training. For instance, many GCC fighter pilots train in air force bases and training schools in Arizona and elsewhere in the American west. For narrower specialties, Gulf officers are also sent to places where they can get the best training (e.g., many naval officers spend time in Germany). The UAE, in the spirit of its decades-long drive to build a top military force, now regularly sends outstanding officers to earn doctorates in the United States.²² Many experts fear, however, that the recipients of this training may not be able to take full advantage of their education because once they are back in the Gulf, cultural constraints discourage them from “showing off” their newly acquired skills which then gradually fade.²³ DeAtkine made the broader point that in the Arab world at large, the impact of foreign trainers – whether French, British, Soviet, or American – disappears soon after those instructors leave.²⁴

Gulf officers are also sent to military education institutions in the Arab world, primarily in Egypt. The several GCC officers I interviewed regarding the training they received in Egypt were uniformly disparaging. A senior officer who participated in a year-long program at Cairo’s Nasser Higher Military Academy – Egypt’s top military educational institution – in around 2010 called the quality of instruction and the school “a piece of shit.” He claimed that the course was taught with World War II era maps, the preparation of instructors – “colonel and up” – was abysmal even though “many had PhDs but, as you know, you can buy a doctorate in Egypt cheaply if you know whom to pay off.” An Egyptian officer had to receive the top marks in the program while the second-best student was a Saudi who seldom showed up but bribed academy administrators.²⁵ Gulf officers I talked to who were sent to Egypt for training – it was not a preferred assignment for any of them – were resentful that, for political reasons, their countries wasted money and their time on useless “education.” Some prospective GCC officers are also trained in Sudan; in 2017, for instance, its military college in Khartoum graduated 46 Kuwaiti soldiers.²⁶

How well do Gulf military officers perform in their foreign courses? They tend to be all over the spectrum: a few excel, most do alright, and some are kicked out.²⁷ The key for their superiors is that cadets and officers who are sent abroad do their best even if they may not be near the top of their classes. Training programs are expensive, so it is important that officer-students do not waste the military’s money by not showing up or taking their responsibilities lightly. In fact, those who

are dismissed from their programs for indiscipline or negligence are compelled to reimburse the state for their tuition.²⁸

Professional Prestige and Remuneration

In most of the Gulf – and especially in the three GCC states where citizens are not, by definition, affluent – the position of a military officer is held in high esteem owing to job security, the officers' privileged status, attractive pay and bonuses, and excellent benefits. Just like in most other militaries, in the Gulf armed forces too, there are different levels of prestige attached to service in different branches of the defense establishment. In most GCC countries the air force is more highly regarded than the army while the navy is somewhere between the two. Special forces generally have an edge over the others.²⁹

Nevertheless, different degrees of status accompany branches of the armed forces across the Gulf. In Kuwait, for instance, those to whom the regimented life in the security sector appeals often opt for service in the Ministry of Interior because it tends to go with better benefits, more *wasta* – after all the officer is interacting with the civilian population and in the position to make contacts and deliver favors – and business opportunities. Still, there can be disagreements about such matters even by local experts: two retired Kuwaiti generals, one army and the other National Guard, considered service most prestigious in the Ministry of Interior versus the regular army, respectively.³⁰ Neither viewed serving in the Kuwaiti National Guard (KNG) as having much cachet because the function of the KNG is essentially to help out the military and the police. In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, however, service in the National Guard or, even more so, in the Royal Guard – organizations with highly selective recruitment processes and above average perquisites – is distinctly more prestigious than in the regular army or navy. In terms of military personnel's political rights there are differences among GCC states. In Bahrain, the BDF is the only institution that requires its members to vote in National Assembly elections, as commanders are supposed to make sure that all the men in their units vote “correctly.”³¹ In Kuwait, however, members of the military and police (in contrast to National Guard personnel) are not allowed to vote or run for office until they are retired.³²

In the Gulf armies, “prestige” or “status” is understood rather differently than in their Western counterparts. For instance, in a Western army serving in combat is generally desired by officers because that is what they had trained for, that is where they can excel and show their mettle, and because combat duty is good for their career prospects. In most Gulf armies, however, being sent to combat, like the ongoing Yemen conflict, is not prestigious: the prestige lies in some higher-up telling the officer that he is *needed* in Yemen. Another example: a British or American special forces officer would consider a transfer to an administrative slot as a major demotion. In a GCC army a move to administration – and, therefore, closer to the seat of power and better placed to build up more *wasta*, would be viewed as an improvement in one's fortunes.³³ This point underscores the more general point: in the Gulf employment as a military officer is widely considered just another public sector job.

The majority of male university students in Kuwait I talked with viewed a career in the military as an unattractive option. They told me that their country had faced no existential threat and besides, their army “could not save anyone,” and recognized that the U.S. military was the ultimate

guarantor of their security. As one of them jokingly told me, “we tested the U.S. military in 1991 and it was up to the task!” They regarded the lives of their peers who chose the military as a career boring and pointless: “they are isolated in their barracks and do nothing all day but smoke cigarettes, drink tea, and play with PlayStation.”³⁴ Their Omani counterparts, however, held the military profession in much higher regard and generally thought that serving in Sultan Qaboos’s armed forces was an honorable and worthwhile career.³⁵

The state takes extremely good care of those who become officers, especially in the three richer states: they receive a substantial housing stipend and generous education and health benefits for their families. They are also very well paid. The monthly salary for a full colonel in the UAE was around 100,000 dirhams (about US\$27,000) in 2018 exclusive of allowances. When they travel on business, they collect US\$1,000/day spending money; those having the rank of lieutenant colonels and above fly on business or first class.³⁶ Military officers can retire after 30 to 35 years of service (depending on the country). In the UAE retiring colonels receive their full salary for two years and an excellent retirement package with further perquisites helping them transition to civilian life (e.g., start businesses). In addition, many military officers have business ventures on the side. These are their own private, usually small-scale ventures, that, in the UAE for instance, they are permitted to run or be engaged with a specified number of hours a week.

Although their salaries would seem high for officers of Western armies, these are normal upper-middle class (but not elite) level incomes in rich Gulf societies.³⁷ What is important to note that in the last dozen years or so, GCC states significantly improved the remuneration of their security professionals. Emirati military salaries had been raised six-fold between 2008-2018 while in Qatar salaries grew by 120 percent.³⁸ Not coincidentally, many of these pay increases took place after the 2011 unrest in the region.

Pilot Training

Pilots, especially fighter pilots, possess exalted status in most militaries and the GCC’s are no exception. One of the key variables of proper pilot training is having sufficient flight time to establish and improve skills which often becomes a question of resources. In wealthy Arabian air forces, spending time in the air is generally not a problem, or not a financial problem. Attitudes toward flight training, however, are quite different from Western air forces. The Saudi Air Force, for instance, “does not require the kind of sustained training, with mandatory monthly flying hours” the U.S. demands of its air force and navy pilots. This results in serious performance inadequacies, as for instance when “many Saudi pilots were unable to fly low” in the early stages of the Yemen campaign dropping their bombs from higher altitudes and causing massive civilian casualties.³⁹ Where Gulf pilots come up short, according to their American instructors, is often rooted in their cultural background: lacking initiative, shunning even calculated risks, and not departing from what is routine and anticipated.⁴⁰

One of the several troubling issues with regard to the training and performance of GCC pilots is instructor replacement. For instance, while Saudi pilots are trained primarily in the U.S. – there is no decent flight course in Saudi Arabia – those Saudi pilots who get their wings from these programs will not become instructors precisely because (in a peculiar turn of “logic”) the training takes place abroad.⁴¹ This notion, then, perpetuates dependence on foreign trainers and limits the

accumulation of indigenous Saudi practice and expertise.⁴² Another problem is related to the notion that Saudi flyers have trouble tolerating criticism or even politely offered suggestions. In combat exercises, especially with U.S. squadrons, their execution is usually borderline inadequate – nonetheless, it is “understood that the low overall performance of Saudi pilots is not to be discussed with the Saudi, or anyone else. Junior American officers get irked by this, but it’s career suicide to disobey order on this point.”⁴³

There are sharp differences in pilot and aircrew quality across the GCC: the UAE’s pilots are widely acknowledged as the best in the Gulf whereas “the Saudi Air Force lags behind the others in operational effectiveness in spite of its excellent equipment and facilities.”⁴⁴ In spite of major advances in training, cultural issues continue to affect the performance even of the UAE’s military aviators. As several training instructors of fighter jet and attack helicopter pilots explained, the pilots do reasonably well when faced with fixed targets but they are far less adept against dynamic ones. Some instructors also complain about the pilots’ physical shape, stamina, as well as about general command and control issues, logistics, and maintenance.⁴⁵ Told to “fly to destination X and release their payload,” Gulf pilots do reasonably well, but if they encounter something unexpected they often freeze up and fail to execute. Most GCC pilots are similar to Arab pilots more generally insofar as “in all kinds of missions... [they] proved to be rigid, unaggressive, unimaginative flyers who could only employ simplistic tactics...” and “...demonstrate poor dogfighting skills and fare badly in air-to-air engagements.”⁴⁶

When I discussed the issue of pilot training effectiveness with Gulf experts, I repeatedly heard the question of “what are the wash-out rates in pilot training?”⁴⁷ The answer, to a considerable extent, hinges on who wants to become a pilot. I have heard repeatedly that “if someone from the royal family wants to be a pilot, one way or another, he *will be* one.” Attrition rates in the GCC are affected not just by capability and performance but also cultural issues. The pilots being tested are considered representatives of their tribes and clans and being dismissed from pilot training means tremendous humiliation. As a result, corners are often cut and training suffers.⁴⁸ Hard numbers are difficult to come by – many prospective pilots have the desire but not the aptitude, others the other way around – but I have repeatedly heard of a 30 percent pass rate for fighter pilots and that a large majority of those who begin pilot training will end up flying *something*.⁴⁹ By comparison, in the Israeli Defense Forces 7-8 percent of candidates who begin training actually become pilots: some may be dismissed in the last week of training (perhaps they are psychologically unfit or their trainer notices something that makes them an iffy prospect) – something that would be utterly unthinkable in the Gulf.⁵⁰

It is “very difficult to wash out a Saudi pilot who is well connected;” the majority will be allowed to stay in a squadron “as long as they can take off and land.”⁵¹ Those who absolutely cannot hack flying fighter jets are transferred to attack helicopter training or, failing even that, assigned to fly cargo planes (and eventually can pilot commercial airplanes). Pilot error is never admitted in the Gulf – at least I have yet to hear of a case – the cause in media reports (if the media reports crashes or accidents at all) is invariably some “technical glitch” or something that does not call the flyer’s expertise into question.⁵² As in other contexts in Arab culture, saving face is of paramount importance: it is easier to report to one’s tribal brethren that instead of flying F-16s one is flying Hercules cargo planes than to admit that one is out of pilot training altogether.

Career Determinants and Characteristics

The career of most officers in the Gulf is typified by a high degree of risk aversion. They know there are disincentives to thinking outside the box, and playing it safe is how to advance in the ranks. Officers from all six GCC armies have repeated the same point to me: the greatest predictor of one's rank is time served, "unless you do something really stupid, you're going to make colonel." Individuals who entered the officer corps at the same time are usually promoted at the same time, though members of the ruling family as well as truly exceptional officers may be fast-tracked. Among the Gulf militaries, the UAE resembles most closely the meritocracy that Western armies tend to be though it, too, has a long way to go. For example, in 2017 the grandson of the UAE's president was a second lieutenant, he was fully expected to adhere to time and grade requirements like everyone else; a Colombian helicopter instructor was unaware that one of his charges was an Al-Nahyan prince until it was pointed out to him by a colleague. The point is that one only meets generals in their twenties among Bahraini and Saudi royals: in those two countries the very idea of meritocracy is incompatible the military (and political) life.⁵³

Gulf officers, especially ones identified by their superiors as holding promise, participate in a great deal more foreign training and serve abroad longer – often seconded to or working with militaries of friendly states – than Western officers. Geographic, infrastructural, organizational, and political reasons are behind this phenomenon. Such frequent and lengthy foreign study and training is especially true for naval and air force officers. For instance, a senior Kuwaiti naval officer's three-decade long active-duty career included, chronologically, a year with the Royal Navy in Britain; two years in Singapore; six months in the South China Sea based out of Inchon; South Korea; three years of "spying on the Polish Navy" (while based in Flensburg Germany during the Cold War), and earning degrees from an Australian university and from King's College (London) in defense studies.⁵⁴

The leadership of the GCC armies is comparatively old because of the stovepipe-like rank structure and because there are few incentives to retire early. At the top levels there is a great deal of stagnation caused by a generational bulge that thwarts new thinking, flexibility, and dynamism. When this bulge becomes too large or difficult to deal with, special incentive programs are introduced for colonels and brigadier generals to retire. One such "voluntary redundancy" program was put into place in Kuwait in 2015 and resulted in hundreds of people (from all branches of the security apparatus) taking retirement. In most Gulf militaries officers retire after thirty years of service; every year of service in war or conflict area (until recently a rare occurrence) is counted by defense ministries as 1.5 years.⁵⁵ Importantly, highly capable GCC officers are often assigned across branches of the military and government departments – the fact that they are needed is, in itself, a great honor. For instance, a retired Omani general's three-decade service included 12 years in the Royal Army of Oman, followed by 10 years in the Internal Security Service (the national security agency of the Sultanate), and concluded with eight years in the Palace Office (the top security-intelligence governmental body).⁵⁶

Socio-cultural factors – most importantly tribalism – continue to have a major influence on the careers of Gulf officers. Tribalism is directly responsible for the enduring weakness of formal institutions; it has undermined meritocracy and has sapped the armed forces' effectiveness. Tribalism shapes personal interactions and relationships and affects directly or indirectly everything from job assignments and promotions to how members of the military are treated by their peers and superiors. Having personal benefactors and mentors, superior officers who look out for a favored subordinate, is a boon for junior officers everywhere. In the GCC, and in Arab armies more generally, where institutional ties pale in comparison to personal ones, cultivating good relations with one's boss is imperative. A sympathetic superior may be able to request good assignments for his underling at the Office of Human Resources though that expectation itself has a negative aspect as it fosters risk aversion ("I'm only going to do what my boss wants").

Understanding tribalism is key to comprehending social interactions in the Gulf. One of the most important points about the "workings" of tribalism is that they are, especially in military affairs, hardly ever transparent (particularly for outsiders), direct, or fixed. Tribalism's manifestations are usually behind closed doors, unwritten, discrete, and sensitive, that is why it is so difficult to get a handle on or "measure" its effect. How does tribalism actually "function" in everyday military life? Let me mention a few actual recent examples that were related to me.

- In the mid-2010s the UAE armed forces introduced physical condition standards but most people expected them to be soon rescinded because tribal chiefs would not let their tribal members (serving in the military) be dismissed.⁵⁷ Incidentally, obesity, and the health problems it engenders, is a major concern in most GCC armies. A 2013 Saudi study found that 40.9 percent of active-duty Saudi military personnel were overweight while 29 percent were downright obese.⁵⁸
- A GCC colonel wanted to get rid of some of his lazy and incompetent sergeants. In response, the NCOs got in touch with their tribal leader who informed powerful politicians who then prevented the officer from firing the sergeants or even reassigning them, because that too would have meant embarrassment and losing face.⁵⁹

The point is that even though there is a normal administrative chain of command, tribal chiefs can and do get involved, go around the hierarchy, get in touch with some politician from the same tribe or a senior officer who is indebted to them, and get the grievance redressed. Tribal chiefs can get things done, they have *wasta*, that's why they are often more powerful than high-ranking officers or politicians.

- In military units everywhere in the Gulf, soldiers and officers alike treat those – regardless of rank – who come from a preferred/powerful tribe deferentially. A sergeant from the right tribe and with the right personal networks might well be able to get things done that a brigadier general cannot.

The point is that someone from a top tribe – easily recognizable by one's surname – has *wasta*, that is, access to important people and their resources. Understanding personal networks is often more telling about how and where decisions are being made than understanding the organizational charts. In other words, and, at the risk of being redundant, personal connections trump institutional relationships.

- Even in top-level military colleges (Mubarak al-Abdullah Joint Command and Staff College in Kuwait, National Defense College in the UAE, etc.) students from ordinary backgrounds would not think of being late for class or not doing assignments. Students who are members of distinguished or powerful tribes, however, may be tardy and unprepared with impunity. Furthermore, while Western instructors may abhor this phenomenon, local ones and other students consider it perfectly normal.⁶⁰

The overwhelming majority of appointments – some say *every* consequential appointment – is based not on merit but on tribal identity and status. At the same time, it is important to note that there are built-in mechanisms so that the military can get the best candidates available *under the circumstances* or, at the very least, steer clear of entirely incompetent or unsuitable candidates. How does this work?⁶¹ Again, it is important to remember that virtually all of these exchanges and negotiations take place unofficially and with near-zero transparency. Selecting the most fit candidate for a job from the tribe where he must come from – to satisfy the imperative of tribal balancing – is obviously a challenge for the authorities so it is customarily up to the tribal chief/elder to suggest a person or persons. If the candidate the tribe puts forward is clearly incompetent, the hiring unit asks for a second or even third person from the same tribe. In the unlikely event that no suitable candidate can be identified, the job goes to someone nominated by a second preferred tribe while the first tribe will be mollified with another appointment or favor.

Some experts suggest that tribes are becoming more rather than less important in Gulf societies. In some ways, tribes may be thought of as shadowing and filling the vacuum left by official institutions. For those who are unable to acquire the resources, jobs, or perquisites from formal (state) institutions, tribal channels are a fallback option. As tribal leaders deliver, they become more legitimate and can count on more loyalty. The most prominent tribal leader may not necessarily be the one whose father was also a chief or the one who is the richest, but the one with the largest network, the most *wasta*; that is, the person who can arrange for the most valuable (i.e., most difficult-to-obtain) favors for his brethren.

Conclusion

What are the takeaways from this look at Gulf military officers? First, the differences between the three rich Gulf states and the three more modestly endowed ones are consequential for the socio-cultural aspects of military affairs. The more affluent countries are set apart by the relative disinclination of their citizens to serve in their armed forces – which is one of the reasons they introduced mandatory military service – even as career officers owing to the more appealing alternatives open to them.⁶² Second, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia effectively banish certain segments of their citizenry from the armed forces based on their religion thereby robbing themselves of a pool of potentially excellent soldiers. At the same time, given the radicalization of many youths in these countries – caused to a large extent by state policies – security considerations make setting these constraints prudent.

Third, the career of the average Gulf officer is quite predictable: nearly everyone makes it to colonel, and the best predictor of success is not merit and performance but conformity and personal loyalty. Striving for excellence is not encouraged or valued: the system rewards those who do not

“stick out” or “rock the boat.” Fourth, tribalism continues to exert a deep influence in social interactions in Gulf societies and is behind a myriad of personnel decisions and is a direct cause of inefficiency in many different social spheres. Tribalism undermines formal institutions and meritocracy. Fifth, and most importantly, formal and informal education and learning in Gulf societies promote behavioral patterns ill-suited for success on the battlefield or, indeed, in any environment where initiative, creativity, competitiveness, accountability, hard work, and learning the lessons of past mistakes is valued and rewarded.⁶³ These cultural patterns underscore and explain many deficiencies of military training and performance.

Naturally, the differences among the GCC states manifest themselves in the developmental trajectory of their armed forces. Culture, including military culture, is not static and, owing to internal and external influences in time some armed forces improve, others stay in place, and still others deteriorate. The UAE is the only state in the region that has significantly improved the quality of its forces as a result of investment in education, nationalist indoctrination, hiring top instructional talent from abroad, and major investments in military infrastructure and hardware. Although the UAE armed forces leadership have still a lot of ground to make up in terms of operational planning, strategic thinking, and a general commitment to excellence, compared to other GCC armies, the UAE’s military is more of a meritocracy, it trains its personnel more professionally, and some of its elements (especially the Presidential Guard) have become excellent.⁶⁴ In the past couple of decades the UAE has emerged as a regional force to be reckoned with but it still exhibits the problems associated with Gulf armies – though, admittedly, to a lesser degree – and its massive reliance on mercenaries gives one pause in regarding its future trajectory.⁶⁵ Overall, the most important problem of Gulf officer corps and, more broadly, of GCC armies, is that they are not meritocracies. As long as family/tribal background and connections trump competence, they will not return the investment these states make in their armies, no matter how much money they are throwing at them.

Notes

¹ See Zoltan Barany, "The Bahrain Defence Force: The Monarchy's Second-to-Last Line of Defense," Burke Chair Report, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 14 December 2016, 17-18.

² Interview with a GCC officer (Kuwait, May 2019).

³ Interview with a Kuwaiti social scientist (Kuwait City, May 2019).

⁴ Interview with a senior Qatari officer (Doha, October 2017).

⁵ See, for instance, J. 'Bayo Adekson, "Ethnicity and Army Recruitment in Colonial Plural Societies," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2:2 (1979): 151-165; and Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, "Recruiting the 'Martial Races': Identities and Military Service in Colonial India," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 46:3-4 (2012): 232-254.

⁶ Interviews with Shia senior officers, National Assembly members, and academics (Kuwait, December 2016 and May 2019). See also, Toby Matthiessen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 18-33. Shia make up about 25-30 percent of Kuwait's citizenry though some estimates are higher ("30-40 percent"); see, for instance, "International Religious Freedom Report," U.S. Department of State, 2019; <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2002/14005.htm>, accessed on 21 September 2019.

⁷ On this issue, see Zoltan Barany, "Why Have Three Gulf States Introduced the Draft? Bucking the Trend on Conscription in Arabia," *RUSI Journal*, 162:6 (December 2017): 18.

⁸ "Saudi Women Invited to Join the Ranks of the Armed Forces," *Arab News*, 3 October 2019.

⁹ Heather Saul, "One of the First Female UAE Fighter Pilots Leads Attacks against ISIS in Syria," *Independent*, 25 September 2014; Karen Zraick, "Arab Woman Led Airstrikes Over Syria," *New York Times*, same date; and "'Lady Liberty' fliegt Luftangriffe auf Dschihadisten," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 September 2014.

¹⁰ "Bahrain Commander Honors 1st Sandhurst Female Graduate," *Bahrain News Agency*, 4 May 2017.

¹¹ In December 2017 colleagues running the International and Civil Security master's degree program at Abu Dhabi's Khalifa University invited me to participate in a workshop led by two noted Gulf security experts, David Des Roches (National Defense University) and Hussein Ibish (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington). To my query of "what questions did scholars who studied Gulf armies ignore," Des Roches responded that career trajectories of Gulf officers were not well understood. So, in my interviews afterwards I paid special attention to this issue.

¹² Interview with Brigadier General Talab Al-Fleej (Kuwait 21 May 2019).

¹³ The Kuwaiti Armed Forces are made up of 17,000 active duty personnel and a 23,700-strong reserve force. See *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019), 352.

¹⁴ See <http://mhschool.ae>.

¹⁵ "Saudi Crown Prince Attends Graduation Ceremony of King Abdulaziz Military College," *Ajel*, 2 May 2019.

¹⁶ Interviews with NDC faculty members (Abu Dhabi, May 2018).

¹⁷ Interview with MAJCSC Commandant, Major General Abdullah Dashti (Kuwait, 14 December 2016).

¹⁸ Interviews with MAJCSC instructors (Kuwait, December 2016 and May 2019).

¹⁹ Interviews with seasoned British experts and instructors with Gulf-wide experience (Doha, December 2012; Muscat, May 2017; Abu Dhabi, December 2017).

²⁰ Jean Loup Samaan, "The Strategy Behind New Gulf War Colleges," *Sada* (CEIP), 5 March 2019.

²¹ Nathan W. Toronto, *How Militaries Learn: Human Capital, Military Education, and Battlefield Effectiveness* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 76

²² Interview with Jamal Sanad Al Suwaidi, Director General of The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (Abu Dhabi, 10 December 2017).

²³ Interviews with U.S. and British military attachés (various Gulf capitals, 2012-2019).

²⁴ Norvell B. DeAtkine, "Western Influence on Arab Militaries: Pounding Square Pegs into Round Holes," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 17:1 (Spring 2013): 20-21.

²⁵ Interview in the Gulf after 2012 (any more specificity would jeopardize the identity of the officer).

²⁶ "Forty-Six Kuwaitis Graduate from Sudan Military College," *Kuwait News Agency*, 14 February 2017. See also the college's website: <http://www.karary.edu.sd/en/colleges/military-college/>.

²⁷ Not surprisingly, those who stand out receive public attention. See, for instance, Kerry McQueeney, "UAE Cadets Graduate from Prestigious Sandhurst Academy," *National*, 11 August 2017.

²⁸ Interview with a British instructor at a Kuwaiti military educational institution (May 2019).

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- ²⁹ Interviews in Kuwait and the UAE (Kuwait City, December 2016; Dubai, December 2012; Abu Dhabi, December 2017).
- ³⁰ Interviews in Kuwait City (May 2019).
- ³¹ Interview with retired BDF officers (Manama, 5 December 2015).
- ³² Interview with Ghanim Al-Najjar (Kuwait, 14 December 2016).
- ³³ I am grateful to Athol Yates who first called my attention to this point (Abu Dhabi, December 2017) that a number of GCC officers had subsequently confirmed.
- ³⁴ Conversations with male university students at Kuwait University and Gulf University for Science and Technology (Kuwait, May 2019).
- ³⁵ Conversations with students at Sultan Qaboos University (Muscat, February 2018) and with young Omani men (Salalah, February 2018; and Nizwa and Sur, May 2017).
- ³⁶ Interviews with U.S. and British experts (Abu Dhabi, May 2018).
- ³⁷ Florence Gaub, *Guardians of the Arab State: When Militaries Intervene in Politics, from Iraq to Mauritania* (London: Hurst & Co, 2017), 35.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-36. See also Gwen Okruhlik, "Rethinking the Politics of Distributive States," in Kjetil Selvik and Bjørn Olav Utvik, eds., *Oil States in the New Middle East: Uprisings and Stability* (London: Routledge, 2015), 18-38.
- ³⁹ U.S. defense officials cited by Helene Cooper in "Attacks Expose Flaws in Saudi Arabia's Expensive Military," *New York Times*, 19 September 2019.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with a retired U.S. Air Force colonel with long experience in training Gulf pilots (Abu Dhabi, May 2018).
- ⁴¹ Interviews at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (Tel-Aviv, 26 October 2017).
- ⁴² Interviews with American and British flight instructors (Kuwait, May 2019 and Abu Dhabi, May 2018).
- ⁴³ "Murphy's Law: Why Arabs Need Their Foreign Mercenaries," *Strategy Page*, 17 March 2011, available at <https://www.strategypage.com/htm/htmurph/articles/20110317.aspx>, accessed on 25 September 2019.
- ⁴⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf Military Balance: Vol. I: The Conventional and Asymmetric Dimensions* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield/CSIS, 2014), 49.
- ⁴⁵ Interviews with Western and Latin American fighter jet and helicopter training instructors (Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, 2012-2019).
- ⁴⁶ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 26.
- ⁴⁷ For two studies on U.S. completion and attrition rates in military pilot training, see Michael D. Hays, "The Training of Military Pilots: Men, Machines, and Methods," M.A. Thesis, School of Advance Airpower Studies, Air University (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, June 2002); and David Schulker, et al., *Understanding Demographic Differences in Undergraduate Pilot Training Attrition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018).
- ⁴⁸ Interview with a retired U.S. Air Force colonel (Abu Dhabi, April 2018).
- ⁴⁹ Interviews with Western flight instructors (Abu Dhabi, May 2018, and Kuwait, May 2019).
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Nachum Shiloh (Tel-Aviv, 26 October 2017).
- ⁵¹ "Murphy's Law," *op. cit.*
- ⁵² See, for instance, Habib Toumi, "Bahraini F-16 Fighter Jet Crashes in Saudi Arabia," *Gulf News*, 30 December 2015.
- ⁵³ Al-Nahyan is the ruling family of Abu Dhabi. Interviews with British, Latin American, and U.S. military advisers (Abu Dhabi, December 2017 and May 2018).
- ⁵⁴ Interview in Kuwait (December 2016).
- ⁵⁵ Interview with Major General (Ret.) Abdulwahab Al Roumi, former head of military justice affairs (Kuwait, 12 December 2016). The state-set retirement age in the GCC is lower than in most Western states; in the UAE, for instance, after incremental increases, it was raised to 50 (!) in 2017. See Shuchita Kapur, "UAE Retirement Age Set to Go Up from February-End," *Emirates* 24/7, 24 February 2016. In Saudi Arabia it is 60 years for both sexes after the recent increase for women from 55 to 60. See Eman Al-Khattaf, "Saudi Arabia Raises Women's Retirement Age to 60," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 6 August 2019.
- ⁵⁶ "Interview with a retired general (Muscat, 17 May 2017). The head of the last organization has the title of Minister of the Palace Office and Head of the Office of the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.
- ⁵⁷ Interview with a Western military adviser (Abu Dhabi, 9 December 2017).
- ⁵⁸ See Ghalib Bin Horaib, et al., "Prevalence of obesity among military personnel in Saudi Arabia and associated risk factors," *Saudi Medical Journal*, 34:4 (2013): 401-407. See also, Shu Wen Ng, et al., "The Prevalence and Trends of Overweight, Obesity and Nutrition-related Non-communicable Diseases in the Arabian Gulf States," *Obesity Reviews*, 12:1 (January 2011): 1-13.

⁵⁹ Interview with a GCC officer (Muscat, Oman, May 2017)

⁶⁰ Interviews with instructors and course participants at these institutions (Kuwait, December 2016 and May 2019; Abu Dhabi, December 2017 and May 2018).

⁶¹ Interviews with sociologists, journalists, and military officers in Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (2012-2019) as well as with Gulf experts at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel-Aviv University (October 2017).

⁶² On this issue, see Zoltan Barany, "Soldiers of Arabia: Explaining Compulsory Military Service in the Gulf," *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 8:1 (July 2018): 118-140.

⁶³ Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 511.

⁶⁴ Interview with Western experts in Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE (December 2012).

⁶⁵ See Muhammad Hussein, "Is the UAE the Gulf's 'Little Sparta' or a Mercenary Outpost?" *Middle East Monitor*, 17 March 2018.