



A service man talks with a child during a military show to celebrate the 43rd anniversary of the founding of the UAE in Abu Dhabi on 1 December 2014.

“Emiratization of Identity”: Conscription as a Cultural Tool of Nation-building by Eleonora Ardemagni

In 2014, the United Arab Emirates introduced compulsory military service for nationals. However, this new requirement will not change the fundamental factors shaping the UAE’s security reality. First, Emiratis comprise a tiny percentage of the country’s total population, representing only 20 percent of the UAE’s total inhabitants. Secondly, persistent coup-proofing strategies remain fundamental to preserving regime stability. The Emiratis maintain a small army that is directly controlled by Abu Dhabi’s royal family and contains a mix of *‘asabiyya*-based officers and foreign manpower. In addition to a strict military rationale, the government’s plan for conscription has a deep cultural intent: the “Emiratization of identity.” Emiratization is “a policy of national unity”,¹ and with the introduction of the military draft, the government aims to enhance the collective national Emirati identity, which remains fragmented by different tribal affiliations, emirate-specific identities, social classes, and the overwhelming numbers of expatriates in the country. In recently-unified states, conscription has often helped central institutions to build a national political discourse.² National identity, as a dynamic set of shared beliefs and historical legacies, is a theoretical concept, but at the same time it is an incessant social construction.³ Looking at post-colonial state-building in Arab republics, compulsory military service was a driver of nationalism and enhanced regime security. In a time of multidimensional challenges, the UAE’s conscription and military engagement abroad may be seen as practical devices to forge a recognizable group identity and a modern

and effective national discourse.

From a federation towards a nation

The UAE federation-building process has succeeded through top-down policies, even if state-centralization is still ongoing. In the 1970s, the UAE's state-building process was primarily rent-driven, but armed forces became late federation-building drivers from the 1990s onwards.⁴ In 1997, Dubai integrated its military system into a federal one. The modern integration into a single force allowed Abu Dhabi to include members from the northern emirates, which was important because at least 61 percent of Emirati nationals live in the north.⁵ However, this did little to expand national identity, as the step was primarily used to expand Abu Dhabi's neo-patrimonial leadership over the whole federation. Today, nation-building is still a "work in progress."

This work in progress is geared towards nurturing a national *mythomoteur* built on perceived myths, memories, and symbols. For example, the Bedouin mythology is a fundamental heritage, although it is sometimes stereotyped.⁶ But it alone

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has not been successful in conveying a sense of belonging among contemporary young Emiratis. The politics of militarization has gradually differentiated the UAE from its neighbors. Emirati foreign policy is currently driven from a geopolitical and security viewpoint. As a matter of fact, the security sector has recently become a pillar of the UAE's institution-building. The UAE's military engagement in Yemen represents an unprecedented effort in terms of regional security, and economic diversification projects target the defense sector more and more, as confirmed by the development of Abu Dhabi's military industrial complex.

Conscription and geopolitics

In the UAE, compulsory military service involves male citizens between the ages of 18 and 30. The service is optional for women, who can serve for nine months with the consent of their parents. Federal Law 6/2014 has extended national service from nine to 12 months for high school graduates, while it remains two years for nationals with lower levels of education. The 2015-2017 Emirati Strategy for the National Service establishes three batches each year of between 5,000 and 7,000 total recruits. The first phase of national service is about study, exercises, and lectures on patriotism.⁷ Recruits then join the Presidential Guard for practical training.

The Emirati government's decision to introduce conscription as a tool of nation-building has to be framed in a specific geopolitical context. Currently, the Middle East is marked by several intertwined variables of insecurity which have a direct impact on national identity. First of all, the Arab uprisings have introduced into the Emirati public debate ideas such as active citizen participation in the decision-making process and government accountability.

Secondly, the phenomenon of *jihadi* transnational networks, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, challenges Arab states, suggesting the physical presence of the imagined *umma*. The objective of these non-state actors is to erode the political legitimacy of traditional states, labeling them "un-Islamic" and contesting established boundaries. Such challenges press state

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institutions to implement intricate counter-narratives. In the UAE's case, military service symbolizes the rhetoric of a nation that citizens want to proudly defend.

Thirdly, the political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional hegemony, where sectarianism is a tool of power politics, exacerbates national spirits, prompting states to choose alliances and produce counter-alignments. With regard to the Yemeni conflict, the UAE aligned with Saudi Arabia from the beginning despite considerable economic interests with Iran, the presence of a remarkable Iranian diaspora within the federation, and Dubai's traditional commercial and cultural relations with Tehran. The mission, which serves geopolitics and nation building, took precedence over other important interests.

The Yemeni laboratory: militaries as identity-mobilizers

The UAE's military intervention in Yemen has bolstered a sense of national identity among Emirati citizens. The federation has been operating in Yemen since March 2015, participating first in airstrikes against Shia militias, then heading *de facto* ground operations in the southern regions, with a specific focus on counterterrorism (anti-AQAP operations) within Aden, Mukalla and the Abyan region. In the summer of 2015, Abu Dhabi's Presidential Guard and some drafted soldiers were deployed to Yemen, and more than eighty Emirati soldiers have lost their lives in Yemen so far. On September 4, 2015, forty-five Emirati soldiers were killed by a Houthi attack near Mareb, an unprecedented number of single-day military casualties for the federation.

Since the beginning, UAE official declarations and media coverage framed the unexpected event through a patriotic lens: the 'collective mourning' was immediately juxtaposed with references to the 'epic of sacrifice' and the 'celebration of the Nation,' evoking the "soldiers martyred in Yemen."⁸ To commemorate what happened in Mareb, a day of National Celebration was established on November 30. The day also emphasizes the novel nature of the UAE's military commitment abroad, which transcends traditional internal security tasks and marks a "paradigm shift" for Gulf military forces.⁹ The 'heroic militaries' have enhanced a 'rally around the flag' feeling. They might become identity-mobilizers, the government's best example of Emirati identity. By analyzing the recent Federal National Council's elections, we see that military prestige has started to play a mobilizing role in the electoral competition—of 341 candidates, 46 came from a police or military career,¹⁰ as well as five out of the 20 who were eventually elected. One of those elected, former Dubai chief of the police Matar bin Amira Al-Shamsi, campaigned with the slogan "military service and patriotism."¹¹ Soldier Khalifa Al-Hamoodi from Fujairah, injured in Yemen, received extensive media coverage while he was at the electoral poll to cast his ballot.¹² The government hopes that Emiratis will develop communal bonds and an in-group awareness by looking at their soldiers, a mindset that would modernize and bolster the Emirati *mythomoteur*. Moreover, the "mediatization" of the militaries sheds light on their new social role, which also includes a counter-radicalization message against the phenomenon of foreign fighters. From this perspective, the *shahid* is the heroic soldier or pilot who sacrifices himself to protect the nation, not the suicide bomber who kills "the infidels."

Conclusion

It is possible to identify a circular relationship between the UAE's armed forces and the domes-

tic realm. Militaries contribute to a sense of federal belonging and national consciousness. At the same time, the country's institutions are attempting to maximize this bottom-up popular phenomenon, introducing top-down measures, such as military conscription, aimed to shape a shared collective identity and cope with rising internal security threats. Through military service, the federal government aims to promote nationalism above Islamism, the Muslim Brotherhood, and jihadism.

For the UAE, yesterday's challenge was passing from 'many tribes' to a 'unified federation.' Nowadays, the aspiration is instead to construct 'the Nation,' where identity generates social cohesion and nurtures state legitimacy.¹³ The geopolitical context is highly unstable, and the UAE has also been confronting the domestic effects of globalization—among them expatriate communities which claim for naturalization—raising fear of identity dilution and, to a lesser extent, cultural assimilation. Bedouin ancestry and *khaleeji* culture are essential pillars of the UAE's national identity. Nevertheless, the national *mythomoteur* seeks new symbols, beliefs, and shared myths to face post-modernity, especially now that the Arab Gulf region is marked by growing and sometimes competing nationalisms. Therefore, in line with the government's aspirations, conscription is not only a military institution, but rather a cultural tool of nation-building and the Emiratisation of identity.

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 - ² See for instance the case of Italy. Vanda Wilcox, "Encountering Italy: Military Service and National Identity during the First World War", *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, Vol.3, No.2, 2011, 283-302.
 - ³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
 - ⁴ Eleonora Ardemagni, "United Arab Emirates' Armed Forces in the Federation-Building Process: Seeking for Ambitious Engagement," *International Studies Journal* 47, vol.12, no.3, Winter 2016, pp.43-62.
 - ⁵ Victor Gervais, "Du pétrole à l'armée: les stratégies de construction de l'état aux Émirats Arabes Unis," Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'Ecole Militaire (IRSEM), *Études de l'IRSEM* 8, 2011.
 - ⁶ Ronald Hawker, "Imagining a Bedouin Past: Stereotypes and Cultural Representation in the Contemporary United Arab Emirates," Beirut Institute for Media Arts conference paper, Lebanese American University, 2013.
 - ⁷ Samir Salama, "National service will reinforce patriotism, national identity, says FNC Speaker," *Gulf News*, 16 June, 2014.
 - ⁸ "UAE salutes 45 soldiers martyred in Yemen," *Khaleej Times*, 5 September, 2015; *The National*, "UAE news in review 2015: A year of sacrifice and honour for Armed Forces," 30 December, 2015.
 - ⁹ On this topic, refer to David B. Roberts, "A New Era for Gulf Military Forces," *Gulf Affairs*, Oxford Gulf & Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum, University of Oxford, Spring 2016, pp.6-8.
 - ¹⁰ Samir Salama, "Revealed: Names of 341 FNC poll candidates," *Gulf News*, 31 August, 2015.
 - ¹¹ "Profiles: Meet the preliminary 20 newly elected FNC members," *The National*, 4 October, 2015.
 - ¹² "FNC Election 2015: as it happened," *Gulf News*, 3 October, 2015.
 - ¹³ Mehran Kamrava, "Weak States in the Middle East," in *Fragile Politics: Weak States in the Greater Middle East*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-28.