

The UAE and the Rise of a New Military Power

By **David Roberts**

Series Introduction

In the past few years, many things have changed in the Gulf region. Oil prices have collapsed since mid-2014, the United States has redefined its policy towards the region and Turkey is emerging as the dominant power in the Middle East. Against this background, the aim of the UAE series of papers is to provide a comprehensive, interdisciplinary understanding of how the country is responding and adapting to the new reality. The papers cover different aspects of the UAE such as the economy, demographics, society, technology, foreign policy and security.

Abstract

Although the armed forces of the Gulf monarchies are festooned with the most advanced weaponry money can buy, the general impression is that they are paper tigers. But several UAE military operations, including a complex, large-scale amphibious landing in Aden in 2015, challenge this notion. Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the country's de facto ruler, achieved such results by implementing unique policies — for example, frequent overseas military deployments and the use of foreigners in influential military roles — to build local capacity. The UAE is now a key regional power that can use military assets to exert influence across the Middle East and North Africa.

The Arabian Peninsula bristles with weaponry. The six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have spent over US\$1.5 trillion on their military forces since record-keeping began. Their arsenals are vast, comprising over 700 combat aircraft, including 450 modern jets, nearly 2,000 main battle tanks, over 3,000 armoured personnel carriers, over two dozen sizable naval craft and 374,800 active service personnel.¹ Several monarchies are in the process of acquiring the most advanced US missile defence system, Thaad, to boost their existing arsenal of Patriot missile batteries. Such a bounteous mountain of weaponry vastly outmatches, in any kind of conventional sense, the weaponry found across the Gulf in Iran, the notional key adversary of the monarchies. Yet, for decades, existing wisdom has argued that the GCC military forces were paper tigers. They might have looked the part, but nearly all analysis explain that they struggle to translate some of the largest defence budgets on earth into meaningful military power.²

¹ Anthony H Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, “The Gulf Military Balance in 2019: A Graphic Analysis”, Centre for Strategic & International Studies, December 2019.

² Kenneth M Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Kenneth M Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press 2019).

Such conclusions reflect a pragmatic assessment of Gulf militaries. Oman needed substantial assistance from the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s against a domestic insurgency; Saudi Arabia needed US guarantees and support against threats from Yemen in the 1960s; all monarchies required US assistance to protect their shipping in the 1980–1988 tanker war; Saudi Arabia requested the US-led coalition to deter Iraq in 1991 and the Kuwaitis needed these international forces to retake their state. Since the 1990s, almost all GCC states have rooted their security on the presence of huge US (but also British, French and Turkish) military bases on their territories. When the Saudis went at it alone in 2009 against Houthi forces in Yemen, they were ignominiously grounded to a stalemate by irregular forces assembled at a mere fraction of the cost of the Saudi military.

Scholars have marshalled a litany of rationales to explain poor performance in Gulf militaries. Some argued that the systematic coup-proofing practices undertaken by political leaders, in order to ensure that their armed forces were in no position to challenge them was a factor.³ Policies like inhibiting communication between the army, navy and air force as well as within each service — lest anyone was able to corral a critical mass of military forces as opposition — had the knock-on effect of deeply undercutting the ultimate efficacy of the forces.⁴ Another strand of critique argued that Gulf forces, or even Arabs as a whole, were culturally disinclined or unable to mobilise effectively. As odd and anachronistic as such ideas sound, they remain prevalent in the literature.⁵

The case of the UAE military clearly challenges these views. Examining a range of vignettes involving the UAE military in recent years highlights that the small state has amassed a genuinely potent military, able to achieve operational and strategic results in hostile, challenging and complex campaigns, often far from home bases and supply lines. This paper explores in detail precisely what the UAE did to buck the wider trend. Not only does the UAE provide a potential pathway for deriving military capability as the first Arab state ever to demonstrate an ability to conduct complex military operations successfully, but it is also critical that we look at the broader implications of this change in regional status quo.

An Unusual Military

A variety of vignettes highlights how the UAE military — or at least key segments of it — has managed to develop regionally atypical levels of military effectiveness. The most substantial evidence comes from the UAE’s campaigns in Yemen. These began in mid-2015 when UAE forces retook Aden, the principal port city in the south, from the Houthis. To accomplish this capture, the UAE undertook an amphibious operation of such complexity that even most Nato nations would have struggled to accomplish by themselves.⁶ After building large bases in nearby Eritrea from scratch, the UAE inserted its special operations forces (SOF) to work with local partisans to secure a landing ground. Then using their landing craft and a swiftly acquired hybrid transport catamaran, the HSV-2 Swift, they proceeded to land the majority of their heavy armour in Aden. With their own air support and air evacuation, the UAE SOF and comprising elements from the Presidential Guard managed the phased expulsion of the Houthis from Aden. With the city retaken, UAE forces then pushed north and pivoted into a counterinsurgency operation (COIN) in the east.⁷

³ Stephanie Cronin, *Armies and State Building in the Modern Middle East: Politics, Nationalism, and Military Reform* (London: IB Tauris, 2013).

⁴ Brooks, “Civil Military Relations in the Middle East”, 141–43; Barry Rubin, “The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 1 (March 2001).

⁵ Pollack, *Arabs at War*; Pollack, *Armies of Sand*.

⁶ David B Roberts and Emile Hokayem, “Reassessing Gulf Security: The War in Yemen”, *Survival* 58, no. 6 (2016).

⁷ Michael Knights, “The UAE Approach to Counterinsurgency in Yemen”, *War on the Rocks* (23 May 2016). <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/the-u-a-e-approach-to-counterinsurgency-in-yemen/>; Nicholas A Heras, “‘Security Belt’: The UAE’s Tribal Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen”, The Jamestown Foundation, June 2017.

There are many caveats to note. The Houthis were unwelcomed interlopers in the south, so the UAE enjoyed some local support in taking them on there, but UAE forces soon became bogged down further north, failing to make any significant ground in other Houthi-held cities such as the capital Sana'a or Hodeida. In addition, we must wait many years yet to see whether lasting gains will follow from the initial successes of the COIN operations in the east, which did manage to rid several towns of al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula (AQAP). Nevertheless, the shock of these successes and the levels of technical sophistication demonstrated by the UAE were a complete surprise. The retaking of Aden could easily have descended into a pitched, asymmetrical urban battle against a highly trained and experienced militia.

Other examples further highlight some unique Emirati capabilities. Both in Yemen and elsewhere, UAE jet pilots have demonstrated unusual skills. In Yemen, Emirati pilots flew low enough to minimise collateral damage, unlike their Saudi counterparts. In Afghanistan, UAE pilots were the only non-Nato nation trusted to undertake close-air-support missions for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).⁸ In the arena of special operations, UAE forces have flown in the same helicopters as their US SOF counterparts, indicating that they are on par with their American counterparts. As small as these examples may seem, they are, nevertheless, profoundly unusual and serve to further highlight unique features of the UAE's military.

An Unusual Leader

Extensive interviews in the UAE and the wider Gulf consistently revealed the core driver of these unusual policies was Abu Dhabi's crown prince and de facto leader of the UAE today, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.⁹ Although one needs to be careful not to omit the importance of organisational factors, the Gulf is one region where specific leaders are widely recognised as having a decisive impact on the shape of a country's policies. In fact, certain leaders — the late Sultan Qaboos of Oman and Mohammed bin Zayed himself, for example — become synonymous with their states such that their personalities seem to be virtually translated into state norms and policies. Therefore, it is not surprising that an energetic, powerful and emerging leader would come to define a state-wide approach to security and defence matters. After the shock of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, Mohammed bin Zayed was already one of the most influential men in the UAE's military and ruling apparatus. By the end of that decade, he would come to be seen as the UAE's de facto leader in, at the very least, security and defence matters, and by the mid-2000s the de facto leader in every respect. From this position of influence, the concerns that passionately animated Mohammed bin Zayed became transposed to the emirate of Abu Dhabi and the broader federation. Thus the abiding fear of Islamist forces and various Iranian threats came to characterise both the man and the state.¹⁰

Partly motivated by such concerns and an intense desire not to be in Kuwait's position — where decades of assiduously arranged external relations designed to boost the state's security came to naught on 2 August 1990 when the state was overrun in hours — Mohammed bin Zayed set about, with purpose, drive and dedication, to forge effective military forces. In doing so, he enacted a range of policies and approaches that remain unique to this day. He procured mostly from France and the United States, eschewing a strategy often seen in the Gulf to "spread bet" and acquire from as many sources as possible.¹¹ To test his forces in the field, he actively sought to deploy UAE military forces as often as possible in international missions of escalating importance and complexity — in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya and

⁸ Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles US in Yemen", *The New York Times*, 13 March 2016; Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Sales to Saudis Leave American Fingerprints on Yemen's Carnage", *The New York Times*, 25 December 2018.

⁹ David B Roberts, "Bucking the Trend: The UAE and the Development of Military Capabilities in the Arab World", *Security Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2020.1722852>.

¹⁰ David Kirkpatrick, "The Most Powerful Arab Ruler Isn't M.B.S. It's M.B.Z.", *The New York Times*, 2 June 2019.

¹¹ David B Roberts, "Securing the Qatari State", Arab Gulf States Institute Washington, Washington DC, June 2017.

Yemen. Most unusually, he hired a foreigner, the former head of Australia's Special Air Service Regiment (SAS), Mike Hindmarsh, to design from the ground up and run a new force, the Presidential Guard, roughly equivalent to the US or UK marines. Foreigners in Gulf militaries are nothing new. But in the UAE, a new kind of foreigner — one who was empowered and meaningfully influential — came to the fore, heading military institutions such as a new airpower service, the Joint Aviation Command, and one of the country's military colleges. These unique policies meant that the UAE Presidential Guard, supported by elements of the wider UAE forces, was the first Arab military to undertake complex, coordinated military operations, at distance and into hostile territories.¹²

Now What?

While the UAE has at its disposal arguably the most capable military forces in the Arab world, the implications need to be measured. The UAE does have an impressive set of capabilities in its Presidential Guard but there is not enough evidence to draw similar conclusions about the capabilities of the wider forces such as the army. Nonetheless, even to get to this stage, the UAE has shown that it is a state willing and able to deploy a range of forces beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Notably, the UAE deployed its fast jets to attack targets on behalf of its client, General Haftar, in Libya in 2014.¹³ On a larger scale, the UAE has begun to expand its influence in the Horn of Africa region. Not only has it established its own large military bases in states like Eritrea, but it has also begun to train militaries in federal areas of Somalia as well as establish a smaller military presence on islands in the Arabian Sea. The point is the UAE has emerged as a fairly new form of military actor in the Gulf and wider Middle East, and North African region. As noted, in places like the Horn of Africa, UAE forces could even be described as the preeminent military power.¹⁴

The UAE's aims are relatively straightforward. The state remains concerned about the spread of Islamist forces and will consistently do what it can to counter such threats. Often linked to this concern, it actively pushes back against Iranian proxy forces. Specifically, in the Horn region, the UAE's extensive military operations are also ranged against the re-emergence of piracy as a transnational concern, something that threatens the UAE considerably as a state whose revenue depends mostly on water-borne trade. Many, if not all, of these strategic goals are aligned, or at least not antagonistic, to the goals of international organisations and the wider international community. In that sense, the significant increase in the scope of the UAE's activities could be interpreted as a boon to pre-existing efforts in these areas.

However, the UAE is a new actor in a complex system, and has its own, often headstrong, ways of doing things. UAE policies in Libya are a case in point. From the available evidence, the UAE appears to consistently support General Haftar, often with significant arms and other forms of military support, much to the chagrin of international institutions that seek to promote the capabilities of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).¹⁵ Thus, while everyone wants the same ultimate end — a stable Libya — different priorities and approaches, as well as the fact that each supports a different local actor adding friction, undermining stability. Similar concerns are already evident in the Horn region. Intra-Gulf politics is adversely affecting Somali politics, with Qatar and Turkey heavily supporting the government in Mogadishu and the UAE supporting Somalia's outlying regions, adding to pre-existing centrifugal pressures on the struggling federal state.

The UAE announced it was withdrawing from Yemen in mid-2019. The conflict took a high toll on Emirati deaths and casualties. There are, therefore, few expectations that the state will be launching any Yemen-based operations in the near future. But regional calculations need to shift and grapple with

¹² Roberts, "Bucking the Trend".

¹³ Ian Black, "UAE's boldness in Libya reveals new strains between west and its Arab allies", *The Guardian*, 26 August 2014.

¹⁴ "Why are Gulf countries so interested in the Horn of Africa?", *The Economist*, 19 January 2019.

¹⁵ Jason Burke and Patrick Wintour "Suspected military supplies pour into Libya as UN flounders", *The Guardian*, 1 March 2020.

the reality that a new actor has emerged that is far more willing to use military force as a tool of diplomacy and state.

About the Author

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