

CITIZENS IN TRAINING

Conscription and Nation-building in the United Arab Emirates

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2014, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) embarked on a bold experiment: It began drafting young men into the military. This move was not only a departure for the Emirates, it was a departure from world trends. Governments have been moving away from national service requirements for decades as military missions have changed and governments have sought to create highly skilled all-volunteer armies. But the UAE move to press young men into military service was meant to build the country, not just the army.

Several factors contributed to the decision to adopt conscription. One was a deeply unsettled regional environment. Another was a drive to promote a stronger sense of shared Emirati identity. A third was a growing fear that young Emirati men were becoming lazy and “soft” just as the government eyed an increasing imperative to shape its workforce for a world less centered on oil. A fourth consideration was the UAE’s resolve to blunt the forces that contributed to the Arab uprisings in 2011. Staring down all of these factors, the UAE leadership decided a bold intervention was needed. The leadership constructed a program combining intensive physical fitness training with military training, national education, and character education. It did not only reach 18 year-olds. Everyone 30 years of age and younger is required to register, pulling men from their jobs and families to live with their peers in barracks, perform predawn calisthenics, and clean toilets. Those lacking the fitness for military training—nearly one in five—are not exempted, but rather are trained for civilian roles in vital sectors.

The UAE drew from careful studies of other national service programs around the world—especially in Finland, Singapore, and South Korea—and had indirect knowledge of Israel’s program. Compared to these countries, the UAE has made innovations in its approach to citizenship education, workforce development, and public health. Women can volunteer, but fewer than 850 have done so, compared to 50,000 male conscripts. Women are cast largely in a supportive role as relatives of conscripts.

While the program has been broadly met with acceptance, some of the longer-term impacts—and potential unintended consequences—are unclear. Will the program make Emiratis more militaristic? Will a program

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that closely links the making of citizens to the making of men magnify an already large gap between men and women in the UAE? Does socializing young men into a hierarchical military system prepare them for entrepreneurial jobs in a highly networked world? Will the program be sustained at a high enough level for long enough to have the desired impact?

Right now, though, the program stands as the clearest sign yet of the UAE leadership’s vision: how it diagnoses the strengths and weaknesses of its society, what it sees as the strongest path forward, and where it is trying to go. It is far more than a program to build the military. It is a program to build the society from the military. The goals it has set and the path it has chosen to accomplish them will have a profound effect not only on the Emirates, but also on neighboring countries that will draw lessons from the Emirates’ example.

SWIMMING AGAINST A GLOBAL TIDE

Changes in conscription practices around the world, 1990–2017

These lists chart changes in conscription practices around the world from 1990–2017. The abandonment of conscription is defined here as both the formal legal repeal of conscription and the effective cessation of its practice within a given territory.

The introduction of conscription is defined as the imposition of the draft on populations not previously subject to mandatory military service obligations. This excludes the passage of conscription laws where those laws maintained a practice of compulsory service that had previously directed manpower to a federation or bloc before such an entity ceased to exist (e.g. in the former Soviet Socialist Republics after the fall of the Soviet Union, or in the former constituent republics of Yugoslavia).

Sources: CIA World Factbook, U.S. Library of Congress Federal Research Division, UN Commission on Human Rights, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, UK Home Office Country of Origin Service, War Resisters' International, Child Soldiers International, Amnesty International, media reports.

1990s

Belgium
Netherlands
Jordan
Burkina Faso
Ethiopia
Somalia
South Africa
Afghanistan
Cambodia
Argentina
El Salvador
Honduras
Nicaragua
Peru
Eritrea
Sudan

2000s

France
Italy
Spain
Portugal
Albania
Bulgaria
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Croatia
Czech Republic
Hungary
Latvia
Lithuania
Macedonia
Montenegro
Romania
Slovakia
Slovenia
Iraq
Kuwait
Lebanon
Morocco
Yemen
Ecuador
[none]

2010s

(2010–2017)
Germany
Poland
Serbia
Sweden*
Ukraine**
Lithuania
Kuwait
Qatar
UAE
South Sudan
Sweden*
Ukraine**

* Suspended in 2010 and reinstated in 2017

** Repealed in 2013 and reinstated in 2014

CONSCRIPTION ABANDONED

CONSCRIPTION INTRODUCED

INSIDE THE FULL REPORT

This report is the most extensive effort to date to define and understand the UAE conscription program—its successes, failures, and its possible unintended consequences. The report will outline 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 on Emiratis and their future.

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