



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
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June 23, 2020

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#3

2020

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About the Author

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Executive Summary

The six monarchies of the Gulf region, though still somewhat marginalized in general studies on the Middle East and North Africa, have become arguably the most politically, economically, and strategically consequential countries in the Arab world in recent decades. The militaries of these states have continued to expand and some – especially those of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – have become active participants in regional conflicts.

The evolution of the Gulf Arab armies is best understood by highlighting some of their key formative moments and sociocultural foundations. This paper examines six of these – tribalism, King Abdulaziz al-Saud and the Ikhwan, the British legacy, the formation of the UAE and its United Defense Force, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the Arab Spring uprisings – and assesses their relevance for the present and future.

Introduction

Contemporary military and security affairs in the Gulf Arab states are difficult to understand without attention to some of the fundamental issues and turning points that are integral parts of the region's political background. These historical moments in the Gulf states' evolution are critical for a full understanding of the region's modern armies and the historical, social, and political contexts in which they exist.

This paper explores six issues that are essential to the comprehension of military politics in the Gulf Arab states. The first is tribalism, which is integral to understanding these societies. The second is the atypical military force, the Ikhwan, that the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz al-Saud, developed to conquer much of the territory that became the region's largest country. The third is the British role in influencing the Gulf states' security sector. The fourth is the creation of the United Arab Emirates and its military force, which has become arguably the best in the region. Finally, the paper probes two formative moments in recent history: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the country's liberation by a U.S.-led coalition, and the military-security dimension of the Arab uprisings that began in late 2010 and have influenced subsequent related developments.

Tribalism

Before colonial penetration in the 18th century societies in the Arabian Peninsula were organized in three types of communities among which movement was quite free: in oases along the eastern edge of the peninsula; in town-like settlements on the coast; and as nomads, mostly bedouins who traveled the desert in search of water and pasture.¹ These societies were based on the tribes that have been the fundamental organizational units in the Arabian Peninsula for millennia. Calvin Allen defined tribes as “a clan or a group that is usually organized around a common ancestor, although there is no formal determinant of whom that ancestor must be.”² Tribal relationships, Ibn Khaldun wrote in the 14th century, are based and

¹ Muhammad Rumaihi, *Beyond Oil: Unity and Development in the Gulf* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1986), 27.

² Calvin H. Allen, Jr., *Oman: The Modernization of the Sultanate* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 7.

depend on “group feeling,” that is, groups behaving “as if compelling ties of obligation bind them together.”³ Tribes may be large or small, may dominate a large area or a small valley. Tribes are not stagnant, archaic constructs but change with the times. New tribes are formed by interest and regional identity or based on ethnic identity while old ones can disappear or blend into extant ones. The degree of cohesion between tribes can also vary widely: Some are tightly knit headed by a highly influential sheikh, or tribal leader, while others are “little more than a loose federation of autonomous subsections.”⁴

A critical issue germane to any discussion of tribalism is the geographical boundaries of territories of both settled and nomadic tribes.⁵ By the first half of the 20th century only Kuwait (1922) and Saudi Arabia had clear boundaries, owing to British treaties, and even these two states had a Neutral Zone between them on the Gulf coast. Until independence (for Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE) many tribal conflicts were rooted in the imprecise demarcation of tribal lands and one of

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the main functions of sheikhs was to prevail in frontier disputes. With the discovery of oil deposits in the region, sorting out boundaries became an urgent task. Although most borders have been consolidated, some disagreements, rooted in the 19th century, still persist.⁶

Though tribes have remained distinctive, they have become integral parts of the new nation-states that gradually emerged beginning in the second part of the 20th century. Tribal confederations play an important role in interest aggregation and representation. Some of the most significant are the Hinawi and the Ghafiri tribal confederations – with members intermingled throughout Oman – that originated with the southern and northern tribes, respectively. In what is today’s UAE, the Qawasim tribal confederation emerged during the 18th century and became an influential coastal maritime power. The Bani Yas confederation – originating in the Najd region of Saudi Arabia’s interior – has become even more powerful and enduring and spawned the ruling families of both Abu Dhabi and Dubai. They are, therefore, distinct from the contemporary ruling families of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, all of whom stem from the Anaza tribal confederation.⁷ Although tribal confederations tend to endure, like tribes themselves, their membership rosters are not perpetual; member tribes occasionally leave them while others join.

³ Cited by Dale F. Eickelman, “Tribes and Tribal Identity in the Arab Gulf States,” in *The Emergence of the Gulf States*, ed. J.E. Peterson (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 225. For Ibn Khaldun’s thoughts on tribes and group feeling, see Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 95-99.

⁴ J. E. Peterson, “Tribes and Politics in Eastern Arabia,” *Middle East Journal* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 298.

⁵ See, for instance, J. B. Kelly, “Sovereignty and Jurisdiction in Eastern Arabia,” *International Affairs* 34, no. 1 (January 1958): 16-24; and J.C. Wilkinson, “Traditional Concepts of Territory in South East Arabia,” *The Geographical Journal* 149, no. 3 (November 1983): 301-15.

⁶ For instance, Saudi Arabia has still some outstanding issues vis-à-vis Oman and the UAE. See Husayn M. al-Baharna, *The Legal Status of the Arabian Gulf States* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968); and Noura Saber Mohammed Saeed Al-Mazrouei, “UAE-Saudi Arabia Border Dispute: The Case of the 1974 Treaty of Jeddah” (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, October 2013).

⁷ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The United Arab Emirates: Power, Politics, and Policymaking* (London: Routledge, 2017), 17-20. See also, Frauke Heard-Bey, “The Tribal Society of the UAE and Its Traditional Economy,” in *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*, ed. Ibrahim Al Abed and Peter Hellyer (London: Trident Press, 2001), 98-116.

J. E. Peterson traced the evolution of tribal regimes in the Gulf region in three phases. The process began with the rise of influential tribes – generally those that tended to be more cohesive and endowed with strong central leadership – to political prominence. This process was complemented by the founding of small coastal settlements. They gradually moved from nomadic to seminomadic lifestyles with parallel changes in their occupations (i.e., from herding and date cultivation to fishing and pearling) that, at the same time, afforded increased trading opportunities and thus exposure to the outside world. These transitions also required a firmer allegiance to tribal leaders and, on the tribal sheikhs' part, gaining support for their position by bolstering extant tribal alliances into permanent federations. In the second stage (roughly the 1830s to 1970), the sheikhs accrued autocratic powers due in some measure to British activities and interests in the Gulf littoral, more specifically, their wish to deal with stable, long-term tribal leaders who enjoyed and “exercised political authority over all residents of their settlements.” In the third stage, in which the discovery of and drive for oil necessitated the legal delineation of territorial boundaries, the sheikhs of the Trucial States (what was to become the UAE) completed the shift from tribal leaders to autocrats.⁸

In the modern age, the quality of tribal leaders has also become more important. In the past, sheikhs needed to be charismatic and respected but often their standing was little more than the first among more or less equal tribal elders considered wise by their peers. Sheikhs were selected by tribal members suggesting that their status was neither inherited nor transferable. Ordinarily, the sheikh was not acting like a head of state but more like a manager or a chairman with limited authority.⁹

According to Nazih Ayubi, “Power in small tribal communities was perhaps more ‘hegemonic’ than ‘coercive’ in the sense that it was more ‘social’ than ‘political.’”¹⁰ In terms of succession, the rule of primogeniture did not apply; the accession to leadership was often settled after intense family competition, “with murder and bloodshed; fratricide and patricide” as “almost regular features of the pattern.”¹¹

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Recognition extended by the British representatives as the leaders and representatives of the tribes carried enhanced prestige for tribal sheikhs. This distinction made a major difference in their standing and their expanded authority allowed for their offspring to inherit their position. By the late 19th century, tribal sheikhs increasingly adopted the title of *hakim* (ruler) and at independence, that of *emir*, “combining the attributes of ruler, commander, and prince.”¹²

⁸ J. E. Peterson, “Tribes and Politics in Eastern Arabia,” *Middle East Journal* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 299-302.

⁹ J. E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 187.

¹⁰ Nazih N. M. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 244.

¹¹ Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 5.

¹² J. E. Peterson, “Tribes and Politics in Eastern Arabia,” *Middle East Journal* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 298.

Tribes are not created equal: There is a clear demarcation between tribes. At the top of the tribal hierarchy is the “super-tribe” of the ruler and his family. The ruling family’s position is absolute and unassailable. Not only the ruler and his heir, the crown prince, but also those heading most important ministries and the armed services typically come from this family. Other ministers and holders of sensitive jobs may come from other families of the same tribe and, occasionally, from among the sheikhs of different but closely allied and “elite” tribes. Just as in the European monarchies of old, the ruling family safeguards and maintains its status through tribal allegiances and alliances through financial subsidies and the distribution of various perks, including important jobs, to preempt coup attempts. Another crucial method of status perpetuation and elevation is intermarriage – between the children of leading tribal sheikhs as well as between ruling families in the Gulf region.

King Abdulaziz wrote that the government “has been established in this wild desert ... by virtue of the social teachings of religions ... which made all the desert tribes within the lands under our control.”¹³ Ernest Gellner thought that the tribe was a political solution to a political problem, “an alternative to the State,” which was certainly true until Gulf states became independent.¹⁴

Tribal leaders and the tribes they represent are the main support columns on which the ruling family's authority rests.

The emergence of the nation-state is a very recent phenomenon in the Gulf region, but this process certainly did not signify the fading away of tribes. In fact, as Mas’ud Dahir wrote, “the process of transition from tribe to state may not mean the demise of the previous tribal foundations, but rather a broadening of them. In the conditions of Arabia, the movement has been from ‘pastoral nomadism to petroleum tribalism.’”¹⁵

The Gulf states were born as tribal states and their societies remain tribal, with the state superimposed over the tribal structure. The tribal nature of these states is still “central to national leadership and presented by that leadership as part of the national construction.”¹⁶ In the patrimonial states of the Gulf, tribalism is essential in the lines of relationships between the ruler and the ruled. Tribalism, citizenship, and statehood are combined; one way to view the state is to consider it a big tribe. Generally speaking, relationships between institutions are dominated by relationships between elites, and elites are virtually coterminous with tribal elites. Tribal leaders and the tribes they represent are the main support columns on which the ruling family’s authority rests. In turn, they are supported and subsidized by the rulers; in Oman, for instance, tribal leaders receive an annual government stipend in return for their loyalty and for mobilizing their tribes for the state and its projects.

¹³ Bahgat Korany, “Defending Faith Amid Change: The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia,” in *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, ed. Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (Boulder: Westview, 1991), 317.

¹⁴ On this issue, see, Siniša Malešević, “Where Does Group Solidarity Come From? Gellner and Ibn Khaldun Revisited,” *Thesis Eleven* 128, no. 1 (2015): 85-99.

¹⁵ Mas’ud Dahir, *Al-Mashriq al-‘arabi al-mu’asir min al-badawa ila al-dawla al-haditha* [The Contemporary Arab Levant from Nomadism to the Modern State] (Beirut: Ma’had al-Inma al-‘arabi, 1986), 15-51; cited by Nazih N. M. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 125-26.

¹⁶ Neil Partrick, “Nationalism in the Gulf States,” in *The Transformation of the Gulf: Politics, Economics, and the Global Order*, ed. David Held and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 51.

Modernity does not mean that “the tribe is going anywhere,” rather modernity comes with and is absorbed into tribalism. The quintessential institutions incorporated into Gulf governments are based on tribal customs and concepts. These include the *majlis*, the public assembly, and the *shura*, the process of consultation with tribal and community leaders.¹⁷ In Kuwait, where meaningful elections are held, tribes act as “semiautonomous corps” that prepare for the vote by deciding on their candidates in tribal primaries before standing openly for elections; in other states (e.g., Saudi Arabia and Oman) tribal corps are semiformal on the local level. The UAE is at the other end of the spectrum where “tribal corps is regarded as a state institution whose position in the political system is virtually stipulated by law.”¹⁸

Tribalism remains an integral part of everyday social, political, and economic-commercial interactions. Parents teach their children at an early age how to recognize their tribesmates from their last names and attire. People tend to patronize the merchants and service providers who share their tribal identity. Some young Emirati women would prefer to marry a foreigner – and lose their citizenship – than to marry an Emirati man from a lower status tribe. “Tribal class is more important in my family,” one said, “Money goes but family name will stay.”¹⁹ In other words, coming from the “right” tribe – one as close to the ruling family as possible – has a tremendous impact on one’s destiny. Although much can change in life, tribal bonds remain. No one expressed this point more clearly than Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president of Yemen – the Gulf society where tribal identity endures especially pervasively: “As an army officer I can be sacked, just like any government employee can be sacked. As a member of my tribe, however, I remain forever.”²⁰

Tribalism is equally important in the military sphere. Tribal identity continues to be a key “qualification” of professional soldiers and tribal “balancing” – ensuring that tribes receive attention proportionate to their standing – remains an important part of personnel policy. Tribal background has traditionally been a serious consideration during the entire career of military officers from the selection of officer candidates to the nomination and appointment

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to key military positions. Tribal chiefs allied with the ruling family can also be expected to persuade young men of the tribe to join the armed forces. At the same time, tribal leaders can advocate for tribal members already in the armed forces – their intercessions on their behalf influence personnel decisions. For instance, a UAE army colonel related that he wanted to fire or at least retire a number of incompetent sergeants working under him. He could not do so: The noncommissioned officers got in touch with their tribal leader who went to top politicians who, in turn, told the colonel to find another solution to his problem.²¹ Tribal

¹⁷ J. E. Peterson, “Tribes and Politics in Eastern Arabia,” *Middle East Journal* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 299.

¹⁸ Nazih N. M. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 243.

¹⁹ Miriam Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 45.

²⁰ Cited in Khaled Fattah, “A Political History of Civil-Military Relations in Yemen,” *Alternative Politics*, Special Issue 1 (November 2010): 25.

²¹ Author interviews in Abu Dhabi with retired Emirati military officers (December 2017 and May 2018).

grievances – such as when a tribe’s candidate for a certain position is not selected for that job – are always expressed behind closed doors, in part because airing a candidate’s unsuitability publicly would be humiliating to him, his family, and his tribal leaders.

Tribalism in the military, as in other walks of life, does not exert the same force on all personnel. For instance, in the UAE, the primary social network of military officers hailing from Abu Dhabi and Dubai – the two most modern, urban, and commercial emirates – is not always their tribe or clan but networks developed during their education, business endeavors, or other activities. In contrast, many of those from the less-developed northern emirates still consider fellow tribe members their principal social contacts. In Oman, too, tribalism – including the role of tribal councils and other informal institutions – is far stronger in the south than in the more “modern” and developed north. Overall, however, the “pull of the tribe” is still the essential social force for military personnel, as it is for other Gulf citizens.

Tribal hierarchies of course affect the military as well. In the Gulf monarchies, those from the ruling family’s tribe receive priority treatment and, logically, the better positioned a tribe, the more likely that its members will do well by the rulers. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the members of the National Guard – a force that is separate from the Saudi armed forces and functions not just as an internal security force but also as the de facto protector of the ruling family – come mainly from Najd, the Saudi interior, from tribes allied with the royal family. In fact, after many decades of modernization and notwithstanding the acquisition of the latest and most sophisticated weapons, the “Saudi military forces remain[ed] tied to the tribal and regional bases of the Saudi royal family.”²²

In the mid-1980s, Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Said began to recruit in theretofore disadvantaged tribes to diversify his armed forces and in hopes of gaining their loyalty. While this policy was certainly unusual, it paid off as Qaboos was able to rely on these tribes when he successfully curbed upheavals in 1994 and 2004-05.²³ These conflicts were often handled by security officials inviting tribal and clan leaders accompanied by the culprits who then were asked to swear in front of the assembled that they would cease their objectionable activities.²⁴

King Abdulaziz and the Ikhwan

There are few countries in the Middle East where state-building began later and on more flimsy foundations than what became, in 1932, Saudi Arabia. Aside from the absence of the most basic monetary, educational, administrative, and military structures, sectarian differences, and often conflict-ridden tribal relations impeded state development. Furthermore, the two imperial powers in the region, the Ottomans and the British, had no interest in promoting state-building. Most of the region was never colonized: The Ottomans controlled the Hijaz (the area bordering the Red Sea to the west), Najd (the interior of Saudi Arabia to the east), Transjordan (contemporary Jordan to the north), and Asir region (to the south) and its largest

²² Stephanie Cronin, *Armies and State-Building in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 207.

²³ See, Lori Plotkin Boghardt, “The Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf: Prospects for Agitation,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 10, 2013; Marc Valeri, “Something Stirring Under the Still Waters of Oman: Tightening the Grip or Revitalizing the Monarchy?,” *Arabian Humanities* 14 (2007): 105-16.

²⁴ Author interviews with Omani political analysts (Muscat, May 2017 and Salalah, February 2018).

city Jeddah, and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, through local tribal chiefs and urban leaders. They also oversaw Yemen and, in the late 19th century, the al-Ahsa region (much of eastern Saudi Arabia). The British, on the other hand, supervised the Gulf littoral – what became, more or less, contemporary Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE, and, after World War I, the Hashemite kingdoms of Jordan and Iraq.

Nonetheless, the first iteration of a proto-state in Najd appeared in the mid-18th century when a minor princeling, Mohammed ibn Saud, and the theologian and religious leader Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab (who advocated a strict and puritanical kind of Islam²⁵) formed a politico-religious alliance formalized with the marriage of Wahhab's daughter to Mohammed ibn Saud's son, Abdulaziz. By the end of the 19th century, the House of Saud lost its domination over Najd to its rival, the Rashids, who enjoyed the support of the Ottoman Porte and Egypt. Still the Saud-Wahhab leadership – although weakened by internal feuds – maintained a deep appeal among the people of Najd, many of whom were enthusiastic to hear, in the early 1900s, that Abdulaziz had dedicated himself to regaining his ancestral land and uniting the Arabian Peninsula. His capture of Riyadh, the center of the Najd, heralded the renaissance not only of the Al Sauds but also of the Wahhabi movement.²⁶

Until 1912, Abdulaziz's force was composed mostly of his own clansmen and bedouins who joined them for a limited time to participate in raids and received a portion of the spoils. Abdulaziz understood that for the army he needed, these were unsuitable and inadequate foundations. He had, in essence, two extant alternative groups to staff his army that would become the instrument to unify the peninsula. One option, the townspeople of Najd, were generally devout Wahhabis as well as loyal and reliable soldiers, but they could not easily be pried away from their shops and lands for extended military campaigns far away. The other choice, the nomadic bedouins in the region, were often undependable and undisciplined, with easily shifting allegiances.

That Abdulaziz achieved his goal was in good part the result of his great military innovation, the creation of a new kind of fighting force, the *Ikhwan* (loosely translated, "brethren").²⁷ The *Ikhwan* was composed of formerly nomadic bedouin tribesmen who were persuaded – by missionaries through religious instruction and the material assistance of Abdulaziz – to break with their nomadic lifestyle, sell their animals, and settle in subsidized semireligious-military-agricultural communities.

²⁵ For a primer on Wahhabism, see Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam from Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publ. House, 2010). For the complex relationship between Wahhabism and Salafism, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From the Extremists* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005); and Ahmad Moussalli, "Wahhabism, Salafism and Islamism: Who is the Enemy?," Conflict Forum Monograph, January 30, 2009.

²⁶ Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 73.

²⁷ Like many other issues in Saudi history, the origins of the *Ikhwan* is also not free of controversy. Some suggest Abdulaziz did not create but utilized an already established fighting force. See, for instance, Abdulaziz H. Al-Fahad, "The 'Imama' vs. the 'Iqal': Hadari Bedouin Conflict and the Formation of the Saudi State," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, ed. Madawi al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 35-76; and Sebastiano Andreotti, "The *Ikhwan* Movement and Its Role in Saudi Arabia's State-Building," in *State Formation and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Kenneth Christie and Mohammed Masad (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 87-112.

The Ikhwan were Wahhabist fanatics.²⁸ Indeed, the most common attribute noted about the Ikhwan is not just their religious fervor but their eagerness to die in battle on behalf of God and Islam.²⁹ Abdulaziz's companion, the noted scholar, Hafiz Wahbah, described the Ikhwan as bedouin people "who left the Bedouin life and who agree to fight for God and the raising of his word."³⁰ The Ikhwan were motivated not just by religious devotion but also by the loot they acquired by vanquishing their enemies. Importantly, Abdulaziz confiscated the lands of defeated tribes and turned them into "state" lands; only a limited proportion of the cultivated lands that were not originally part of the Saudi "core" remained in private ownership.³¹

Abdulaziz established the Ikhwan in 1913. For the next 12 years he and his fighting force won every major battle they fought and succeeded in unifying much of the Arabian Peninsula under his leadership. In 1926, Abdulaziz was proclaimed the king of Hijaz and, after the annexation of Asir from the Idrisis in 1930, the conquests ended, and he became the king of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

The conclusion of the conquest-by-arms in 1925 spelled the end of the Ikhwan as a reliable and loyal fighting force for Abdulaziz. For the Ikhwan, Abdulaziz's prohibition of raids in the border areas of Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan – new countries with frontiers newly drawn and guaranteed by the British and respected by Abdulaziz – made no sense. After all, the populations of these areas were not Wahhabists and therefore infidels and legitimate targets. The Ikhwan, used to action and excitement, were now forced into idleness in their settlements with little to do aside from praying and basic chores. They were also resentful that Abdulaziz halted the practice of tribal tributes being enforced on the weaker tribes but "forced Najdis to pay not only Islamic alms-tax but also commercial, nonreligious taxes."³² Moreover, the puritanical Ikhwan believed that Abdulaziz himself became a heretic when he failed to force the Shia of al-Ahsa to convert to Wahhabism and adopted modern devices such as the telephone, telegraph, and automobile.³³

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Once the campaigns were over, the Ikhwan, who played a key role in the establishment and expansion of the state, became "an impediment to the consolidation and centralization of power."³⁴ Despite several meetings between Abdulaziz and Ikhwan leaders, disputes between

²⁸ David Commins, *Islam in Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), especially 40-48.

²⁹ John S. Habib, *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Saudi Kingdom, 1910-1930* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 29.

³⁰ Cited in John S. Habib, *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Saudi Kingdom, 1910-1930* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 17.

³¹ Ghassan Salama, *Al-Siyasa al-kharijiyya al-sa'udiyya* (Beirut: Ma'had al-Inma al-'Arabi, 1980), 113-14, cited by Nazih N. M. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 128.

³² Nazih N. M. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 130.

³³ John S. Habib, *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Saudi Kingdom, 1910-1930* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 6.

³⁴ Sebastiano Andreotti, "The Ikhwan Movement and Its Role in Saudi Arabia's State-Building," in *State Formation and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Kenneth Christie and Mohammad Masad (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 87-112.

them continued throughout the late 1920s along with the Ikhwan's transborder raids. The conflict was brought to a boil when, in spite of Abdulaziz's repeated and explicit ban, the Ikhwan declared a jihad against Iraq. The Ikhwan revolted against their erstwhile commander whom they now met on the opposing side of the battlefield. On March 30, 1929, Abdulaziz's forces – made up of townsmen from Najd, allied tribal fighters, and bedouins – with the effective help of British air support, defeated the Ikhwan.³⁵ After their subjugation, the Ikhwan remained a weighty politico-religious factor in Saudi Arabia.

Abdulaziz's quelling of the Ikhwan in 1928-30 allowed him to consolidate his power and begin the building of the state that became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Abdulaziz succeeded against daunting obstacles against the wishes of two imperial powers while taking advantage of the changing political environment, creating and inspiring a military force that suited his objectives, and also subduing that very force when it threatened to undo his achievements. But Abdulaziz and his Ikhwan also left more specific legacies. One is the royal families' deep-seated distrust of the armed forces as an unconditional supporter of the state. This skepticism led to the creation of rival military forces in the Gulf monarchies. The regular armed forces are

complemented by more elite and, from the ruling family's perspective, more trusted military organizations whose primary purpose is the protection of the monarchical regime. The national guards

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of the Gulf region are usually smaller, more selective (i.e., open only to loyal supporters and tribes), better trained, better provided for, and, as a result, generally more capable and more reliable than the regular forces. Royal guards are even more exclusive elements, charged with protecting the ruling family and they engage in operations on its behalf.

Another enduring legacy of Abdulaziz and his forces is the notion that personal fealty trumps institutional bonds in the present-day Gulf armies. This preference for personal relationships instead of institutional rules, norms, and structures has been a constant theme in the region's political and military affairs. The primary allegiance of individuals is to those from whom they received their appointments and are tied not to an institution but to the head of the royal family.

British Protection and Its Legacy

British interests in the Gulf originated in the late 17th century, but there was only one actual British protectorate on the Arabian Peninsula, the Aden Protectorate. Britain's objective was to secure a safe environment for maritime commerce. British acknowledgment of the standing of local tribal leaders served to legitimate the latter's claim to their positions and create a bond between the two parties. The main method of ensuring British interests was making treaties, generally maritime truces, with Gulf tribal leaders, which "curbed the seafaring activities of the people of the Trucial Coast and so restricted their main channel of communications."³⁶

³⁵ Mohammad Talaat El-Ghoneimy, "The Legal Status of the Saudi-Kuwaiti Neutral Zone," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1966): 694-97.

³⁶ Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Origins of the United Arab Emirates* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 2.

The first of these, for a 6-month period, was signed in 1835; they were regularly renewed until 1843 when 10-year truces were agreed upon. Once they expired, Britain persuaded the sheikhs to consent to a “Treaty of Perpetual Maritime Peace.”³⁷

In 1892 a network of truces was signed motivated by Britain’s growing awareness that the sheikhs of the Trucial States – i.e. the “Trucial Sheikhs” – exercised political authority over all residents of their settlements. This was an important development because, prior to the 20th century, the authority of the ruling sheikhs seldom extended beyond the towns they governed.³⁸ The 1892 treaty, an exclusive agreement between the rulers of six Trucial States (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, and Umm Al Quwain) and Bahrain, precluded their contacts with foreign states other than Britain. Seven years later Kuwait and, in 1915 and 1916, Oman and Qatar, respectively, signed similar accords. The last group of major treaties between London and the Trucial States was signed between 1913 and 1922 and awarded oil concessions to British companies.³⁹

World War I enhanced Bahrain’s strategic importance when it was used as a military base during the British invasion of the Ottoman Empire via Basra in 1914.⁴⁰ Friction between traditional elites and colonial administrators and officers occasionally flared up, but in the end the latter prevailed. The British played a key role in the modernization of the protected states – local elites were reluctant to impose reforms – in areas such as customs, commerce, and administration, especially beginning in the 1920s. When necessary, the colonial authorities closely involved themselves in domestic politics. The British did not want to overturn the existing order in the Gulf region but to make it stable, predictable, and manageable, at least from their own standpoint. Following the discovery of oil, local rulers became richer and more influential – until then, their revenue was mostly limited to custom duties – and, correspondingly, colonial administrators became more solicitous.

Granting independence to India in 1947 obviated the necessity of continued military deployment in and commitment to the Gulf region. Nonetheless, giving up the empire was a difficult process: It required a change in the centurieslong practice of thinking in global and imperial terms and a careful case-by-case assessment of the long-term implications of shedding responsibilities. Moreover, the process of imperial drawdown was further hindered by the near constant involvement of British forces in one or another crisis east of Suez.⁴¹ As British power and influence gradually waned, the United States began to step into the vacuum and, occasionally, on its old ally’s toes.⁴²

The timing of the creation of the Abu Dhabi Defense Force in 1965 and Bahrain Defense Force in

³⁷ J. E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 12-13.

³⁸ Ash Rossiter, “Britain and the Development of Professional Security Forces in the Gulf Arab States, 1921-71: Local Forces and Informal Empire” (PhD dissertation, University of Exeter, February 2014), 285.

³⁹ Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 10.

⁴⁰ Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama Since 1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 113.

⁴¹ J. E. Peterson, *Defending Arabia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 77.

⁴² For a history of this process, see James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: Britain’s Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2018.)

1968 is largely explained by increasing British encouragement of the Trucial States to organize their own military forces and by the impending withdrawal of the British from the Gulf region. In the two decades following the end of World War II, Britain was militarily involved in several ill-fated conflicts, including the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Yemeni civil war (1962-70), which compelled the government in London to reassess the United Kingdom's involvement in the Arabian Peninsula; the withdrawal of British troops was set for the end of 1971.⁴³

Britain's close engagement in the Gulf region lasted well over a century and left positive and negative marks. The British influence is most readily observable in the areas in which they were heavily involved: administration, security affairs, and foreign policy. The imposition of the treaty system through Britain's India Office, and the usually light-handed but ongoing involvement in the Trucial States' domestic affairs served to freeze the political arena as it existed at the time.⁴⁴ British policy encouraged the concentration of political power in the hands of the tribal sheikhs who became the rulers and remain absolute monarchs. After the United Kingdom's withdrawal, this notion required comprehensive state-building, which was accomplished with the help of mostly British advisors.

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The deepest British legacies, however, are clearly in the domain of military-security affairs. Similar to the recruitment practices of British colonial armies, in contemporary Gulf states, the rulers have an explicit preference for soldiers and officers from certain regions, tribes, and religious affiliations.⁴⁵ A related British legacy is the widespread use of foreign contract soldiers particularly from the Muslim regions of South Asia.⁴⁶ Another heritage in the military realm is the importance attached to professionalization. Perhaps the most critical British legacy in Gulf security affairs is in the area of civil-military relations. The notions that military officers should unquestioningly obey civilian authority and not participate in political and economic life are ideals that Britain has implemented and propagated for centuries.

The Founding of the UAE and Its United Defense Force

Following the British announcement of the coming withdrawal from the Gulf region, Bahrain, Qatar, and the seven emirates that were not fully independent recognized their vulnerability without the United Kingdom's protection. They also realized that they might face future challenges to their stability and security more confidently if they surrendered a measure of their newly found sovereignty and entered into some sort of federal arrangement. Toward

⁴³ See Asher Orkaby, "The Yemeni Civil War: The Final British-Egyptian Imperial Battleground," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 2 (2015): 195-207.

⁴⁴ J.E. Peterson, "The Age of Imperialism and Its Impact on the Gulf," in *The Emergence of the Gulf States*, ed. J.E. Peterson (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 146.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, J. 'Bayo Adekun, "Ethnicity and Army Recruitment in Colonial Plural Societies," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 2 (1979): 151-65; and Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, "Recruiting the 'Martial Races': Identities and Military Service in Colonial India," *Patterns of Prejudice* 46, no. 3-4 (2012): 232-54.

⁴⁶ See Zoltan Barany, "Foreign Contract Soldiers in the Gulf," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, February 5, 2020.

that end, already in 1952, London set up a Trucial State Council, which laid the basis for future collaboration.

Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi, was the chief driver of the federation process. Next to King Abdulaziz, Zayed may well have been the most important and respected statesman in the region. He earned valuable administrative experience as the governor of the Buraimi Oasis while his older brother, Shakhbut bin Sultan al-Nahyan, ruled Abu Dhabi from 1928-66. Oil was discovered off the coast of the emirate in 1958 and two years later in the mainland as well, soon resulting in enormous revenue. Zayed, though deeply knowledgeable of the desert and respectful of its tribes, was keen to exploit Abu Dhabi's economic potential and, with British support, replaced his brother – a strong adherent to the traditional ways of life and averse to development – in a bloodless coup.⁴⁷ He began an ambitious investment campaign; by 1970 Abu Dhabi's economy grew three times faster than Kuwait's.⁴⁸ Just as importantly, he also cultivated relationships with the less well-endowed emirs of the Trucial States and even shared some of Abu Dhabi's oil revenue with them.

The first major step toward the United Arab Emirates was the dual federation formed in 1968 between the two long-term rivals, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which was later offered to all erstwhile Trucial States and Qatar. Until late 1969 it appeared that the United Arab Emirates would include nine members, for both Bahrain – considered a Trucial State after 1931 and anxious to protect itself from Iran – and Qatar appeared interested in joining the emerging federal state. In the end, the leaders of the two decided to establish their own sovereign states. Thus, when the United Arab Emirates was declared on December 2, 1971, it was composed of Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Sharjah, and Umm Al Quwain. On the following day, the new state signed a Treaty of Friendship with Britain and joined the Arab League and the United Nations. A seventh emirate, Ras Al Khaimah, concerned about the overpowering political influence of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, joined on February 10, 1972.

The federation experienced a number of challenges early on. The most important external stresses stemmed from the shared borders with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi King Faisal pursued disputed boundary issues as a matter of principle and held up official recognition of the UAE until they were resolved. The eventual settlement, with U.N. mediation, reached in Jeddah in August 1974, helped to consolidate Zayed's authority and strengthened his position as the federation's one indispensable leader.⁴⁹ The conflict with Iran concerned three small but strategically important islands between the two countries (Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs) Iran seized in 1971 and has controlled ever since.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 93. After living in exile in Beirut for several years, he was allowed to return to Abu Dhabi where he died in 1989 at age 83. On his preference for gold, see Andrew Critchlow, "Global Economic Termites are Eating Away Gold Price Foundations," *The Telegraph*, July 24, 2015.

⁴⁸ Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 93.

⁴⁹ Abdullah Omran Taryam, *The Establishment of the United Arab Emirates, 1950-85* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 220-21. The UAE has yet to ratify the agreement.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Kourosh Ahmadi, *Islands and International Politics in the Persian Gulf: Abu Musa and the Tunbs in Strategic Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2012).

Intra-UAE conflicts affected the federation's viability even more seriously. Most quarrels originated in disputes over two key issues: the degree of central versus local authority and the amount of funds emirates were to contribute into federal coffers. Zayed preferred to move toward a highly centralized federation while Dubai's rulers wished to carry on with the original loose federal arrangement. Underlying most of the tensions was the dominant political role of oil-rich Abu Dhabi that the commercially more successful, though financially weaker, Dubai – the key spoiler of further centralization efforts – had difficulty accepting. In 1971, Zayed installed Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan as his crown prince, a new position that seemingly guaranteed his future succession. Upon Zayed's death in 2004, Khalifa became the UAE's president.

In 1976, at the end of his first term, Zayed threatened to resign over a number of nagging issues but was such a central figure in the federation that his forewarning about refusing

to serve a second term could have had dire consequences, perhaps even the dismantling of the then-fragile union.⁵¹ After a 4-month crisis, the UAE Federal Supreme Council – the country's highest constitutional authority – moved to unify

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the military by abolishing Article 142 of the UAE Constitution, which allowed the establishment of local forces. Still, two years later, when Zayed appointed his son, Khalifa, as the Union Defense Forces' first commander-in-chief, the ruler of Dubai, Rashid bin Sayed al-Maktoum, said that his and three other emirates might secede from the federation. The crisis was resolved with a clearer outline of the commander-in-chief's prerogatives.

What eventually turned the tide in the centralizers' favor was the fact that by the mid-1990s Dubai was running low on oil and had to accept Abu Dhabi's supremacy. Zayed's genius lay in his willingness to find and pursue compromises, his ability to persuade his often-critical fellow emirs to be patient, and his readiness to sacrifice, if need be, his own emirate's interests in order to strengthen the federal state. His principal task was to induce the unenthusiastic Al Maktoums to embrace the UAE project. To that end, the distribution of federal leadership positions came to reflect both the Al Nahyans' primacy and the Al Maktoums' status as the UAE's second family.

The Evolution of the UAE Armed Forces

Not surprisingly, the most difficult institution to federalize was the armed forces. Creating the federal military was a sensitive issue because emirs who maintained their own forces considered holding on to them the last bastion of their sovereignty. Zayed wanted a military distinct from the Trucial Oman Scouts; he thought that if Abu Dhabi's forces grew around the Scouts' nucleus they would remain under British influence.⁵² From its inception, foreign

⁵¹ Christopher M. Davidson, *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 220.

⁵² Ash Rossiter, "Britain and the Development of Professional Security Forces in the Gulf Arab States, 1921-71: Local Forces and Informal Empire" (PhD dissertation, University of Exeter, February 2014), 226.

soldiers and officers played a key role in the Abu Dhabi Defense Force. In 1972, Zayed's goal was to shape an officer corps with 40% British, 40% Pakistani, 10% Jordanian, and 10% *Khaleeji* (Gulf Arab) officers, but he soon introduced Arabization and later Emiratization in the security sector. The Sea Wing, formed in 1971, was the first maritime force among emirates and about 80% of the personnel were Omanis.⁵³ Zayed merged the Abu Dhabi Defense Force into the Union Defense Force in 1978 and named his son Khalifa as its supreme commander. The Union Defense Force became the foundation of the consolidated United Arab Emirates Armed Forces in 1996 under Khalifa's command. Many in the UAE consider 1996 the true beginning of the union, when Dubai's ruler, Maktoum bin Rashid al-Maktoum acknowledged the reality of Dubai's secondary role in the federation by approving the permanence of the federal constitution and giving up command of the Dubai Defense Force and merging it into the UAE Armed Forces.⁵⁴

Building a united force meant harmonizing and streamlining command structures, military education, and training; spreading investments; and placing facilities across the country. The recently introduced mandatory military service in the UAE has explicitly stressed the equitable implementation of the program across the country.⁵⁵ The emphasis on the *nation* and the federal state is an omnipresent feature not only in the conscription program – one of its direct purposes is to create a more *national* mindset among the country's young men and women – but in military affairs, more generally. When discussing the country's military successes, challenges, and sacrifices, the UAE's political and military leaders seldom single out individual emirates; they speak of the federation and the nation.

Zayed's early recognition of the importance of building military power has led to singular results within the region. The UAE Armed Forces has become the most professional and ambitious military in the Gulf states. It has distinguished itself by its participation in numerous international campaigns starting as early as 1976 in the Arab Deterrence Force in Lebanon. By the time the UAE's army had assumed its current form, it had already taken part in other multinational operations, including in Kuwait in 1990 as part of the Peninsula Shield Force and in Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1993. The UAE Armed Forces has become increasingly active beyond the Arabian Peninsula and has been widely acknowledged as the most effective military in the region; as such, the UAE acquired the moniker "Little Sparta."⁵⁶

⁵³ Much of this paragraph relies on Athol Yates, "Building a Navy from Scratch in Just a Decade: The Abu Dhabi Experience (1966-1976)," in *Middle Eastern Naval History*, ed. John Dunn and Donald Stoker (Solihull: Helion, 2019).

⁵⁴ For an excellent recent study on this issue, see Athol Yates and Cliff Lord, *The Military and Police Forces of the Gulf States Volume 1: Trucial States and United Arab Emirates, 1951-1980s* (Warwick: Helion, 2019), esp. 48-58.

⁵⁵ Zoltan Barany, "Soldiers of Arabia: Explaining Compulsory Military Service in the Gulf," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 8, no. 1 (July 2018): 118-40.

⁵⁶ See, for instance, "The Gulf's 'Little Sparta': The Ambitious United Arab Emirates," *The Economist*, April 6, 2017; Muhammad Hussein, "Is the UAE the Gulf's 'Little Sparta' or a Mercenary Outpost?," *Middle East Monitor*, March 17, 2018; and C. Raja Mohan, "Little Sparta of the Gulf," *The Indian Express*, June 26, 2018.

The Invasion of Kuwait

On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded the oil-rich, and militarily weak, Kuwait, starting a war that it planned to expand to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf Arab states.⁵⁷ Despite Iraq's several months long and intensifying saber rattling, Kuwait was entirely unprepared.⁵⁸ Iraqi troops wrested control over the country on the first day of their well-executed 2-day operation. By then the emir of Kuwait, Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, and two-thirds of the approximately 700,000 Kuwaiti citizens and many of the 1.5 million foreign workers living in the country had already escaped to Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.⁵⁹ Many Kuwaiti civilians who stayed behind put up a spirited resistance against the Iraqi occupation forces that executed hundreds of them during their 6-month stay.⁶⁰ The invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War was, in several respects, a formative moment in the politico-military history of the region.

A number of lessons of the invasion for the military-security sphere remain germane. The invasion proved Kuwait's military inadequate even to pose a modest challenge to the Iraqis. The leaders of Kuwait and the other Gulf Arab states were faced with the stark reality that their armies were poorly trained: They were not prepared to fight and were, by many accounts, ignorant about the capabilities and maintenance requirements of their own weapons.⁶¹ A large component – as many as 80% – of Kuwaiti military personnel was made up of *bidun*, the marginalized descendants of northern bedouin tribes who never received citizenship. Perhaps not surprisingly, few of them were willing to sacrifice themselves for the emir. This point may be extended to much of the region: Why should Gulf soldiers be loyal to and fight for the monarchical families when their citizenship could be revoked?⁶² These were, after all, not national armies, but the armies of royal families; their primary *raison d'être* was to ensure the continued rule of their princes. This recognition, in turn, has led several Gulf states since the invasion of Kuwait to purposefully develop *national* sentiments in their citizenries and especially in the native members of their armed forces.

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Iraq's war on Kuwait and confrontation of Saudi Arabia also clearly demonstrated to the Saudi royal family that after decades of massive defense outlays – some \$300 billion in the previous

⁵⁷ Lee Smith, *The Strong Horse: Power, Politics, and The Clash of Arab Civilizations* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 121.

⁵⁸ Author interview with Ahmad Al-Sadoun (Kuwait, December 15, 2016); See also Ali A. Dashti, *Sergeant Over One Week* (Kuwait: BookSurge, 2007).

⁵⁹ There are no firm figures on these; these estimates come from Kuwaiti scholars and retired military officers. For different numbers, see Joseph Sassoon and Alissa Walter, "The Iraqi Occupation of Kuwait: New Historical Perspectives," *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 4 (Autumn 2017): 611.

⁶⁰ Judith Miller, "Standoff in the Gulf; Atrocities by Iraq in Kuwait: Numbers Are Hard to Verify," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1990. For a more comprehensive analysis, see Sassoon and Walter, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Author interviews with Kuwaiti security experts and retired military officers (Kuwait City, December 2016).

⁶² Author interview with Mohammad Al-Rumaihi (Kuwait City, December 15, 2016).

quarter century⁶³ – its army was nowhere near capable of defending the kingdom. According to Ayubi, the invasion “illustrated that these states could not (or would not) defend themselves on their own or with exclusively Arab help.”⁶⁴ After the war the Saudi high command admitted that Iraq’s elite forces, the Republican Guard, could have occupied the kingdom’s 200,000 square mile oil-rich al-Ahsa governorate in six hours.⁶⁵ On August 9, 1990, in a televised speech, King Fahd bin Abdulaziz conceded that Saudi Arabia needed the protection of “fraternal Arab forces and other friendly forces,” in an unprecedented acknowledgment of the Gulf’s reliance on outside support.⁶⁶ Following the war, the Saudi air force, one of the best equipped in the world, was unable to uphold U.N. Security Council Resolution 688, which enforced a no-fly zone over Iraq.⁶⁷

In 1990-91 the poor performance of the Gulf armies put their shortcomings in sharp focus. First, desertion among Kuwaiti and Saudi troops was not uncommon though not as widely reported as that of Iraqi soldiers.⁶⁸ The inexperienced Kuwaiti, Saudi, and other troops were principally trained to respond to domestic security challenges and, faced with and greatly outnumbered by a far more professional enemy, many likely felt their situation was desperate. At the other end of the rank spectrum, Saudi generals failed to take responsibility for their actions, blamed others for their own errors, lacked initiative, and were unable to make independent decisions. For instance, during Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Iraqi forces occupied the town of Khafji in northeastern Saudi Arabia after Saudi troops had evacuated it. General Khalid bin Sultan, the Saudi ground forces commander, requested a letter from the commander of coalition forces, U.S. General Norman Schwarzkopf, to the effect that it was Schwarzkopf who ordered the evacuation of the town.⁶⁹

For the Gulf countries, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, two key takeaways from the Gulf War were the reliability of the United States as an ally and the U.S. military’s power and technological sophistication that allowed it to easily defeat Iraqi forces. A major legacy of the conflict, then, is the Gulf Arab states’ increased dependence on U.S. weapons, training, and power projection capabilities, and this reliance has only increased in the past three decades. At the same time, Gulf Arab monarchies have also recognized the benefits of expanding relations, including military links, with new strategic partners and arms suppliers. Aside from deepening relations with Britain – which opened military bases in Bahrain and Oman in the 2010s – Gulf states have established close ties with Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy,

⁶³ Florence Gaub, *Guardians of the Arab State* (London: Hurst, 2017), 38; and Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 159.

⁶⁴ Nazih N. M. Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 286.

⁶⁵ Stephanie Cronin, *Armies and State-Building in the Modern Middle East: Politics, Nationalism, and Military Reform* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 213-14.

⁶⁶ Author’s italics. Rory Miller, *Desert Kingdoms to Global Powers: The Rise of the Arab Gulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 85.

⁶⁷ Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 164.

⁶⁸ Confidential author interviews with Kuwaiti and Saudi experts (Kuwait, December 2016 and Jordan, April 2017).

⁶⁹ See, Norvell DeAtkine, “Why Arab Armies Lose Wars,” in *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy*, ed. Barry Rubin and Thomas A. Keaney (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 31-32.

Turkey, and a host of other countries.⁷⁰ In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have even begun to cautiously explore the potential advantages of security cooperation with Israel.⁷¹

The “Arab Spring”: Unrest and State Response

The Arab monarchies, with the notable exception of Bahrain, successfully eluded the brunt of the upheaval that rocked the presidential republics of North Africa and the Middle East starting in late 2010.⁷² Demonstrations in the kingdoms were generally small, protesters demanded reform not revolution, governments reacted to events with a measure of flexibility, and security forces typically avoided disproportionate retaliation. However, the extent of the unrest was quite different across the Gulf states and so was the regimes’ reactions to them.

The uprisings in the Gulf states ranged from virtual nonevents in Qatar and the UAE, to a number of modest demonstrations demanding jobs and anti-corruption measures in Oman, to more extensive but largely calm rallies in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province calling for the end of religious discrimination, to protests by stateless bidun and nongovernmental organizations calling for political reforms in Kuwait. Correspondingly, the gamut of state responses ran from tactical, preemptive political concessions in Qatar, to the deployment of the Omani army to disperse crowds using tanks, to the extensive tactical deployment of security forces in Saudi Arabia.⁷³ The regime in Kuwait utilized riot police to break up protests by its opponents, some of whom actually stormed and briefly occupied the National Assembly building.⁷⁴

The revolt in Bahrain was exceptional both in terms of its magnitude and the threat it signified to the regime. The uprising that began in Manama on February 14, 2011 soon took on a decidedly sectarian character. Although when the demonstrators converged on the Pearl Roundabout in the city center, their protest could be described as populist and cross-sectarian (with substantial Sunni participation), the regime’s propaganda machine succeeded in quickly driving a wedge between Sunni and Shia participants.⁷⁵ The unrest spread to mostly Shia neighborhoods and, in effect, became a Shia uprising.⁷⁶ Protesters initially called for a

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Ranjit Gupta, Abubaker Bagader, Talmiz Ahmad, and N. Janardhan, eds., *A New Gulf Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for an Asian Role* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014) and Khalid S. Almeaini and Jean-Marc Rickli, eds., *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies Before and After the Arab Spring* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁷¹ Clive Jones and Yoel Guzansky, *Fraternal Enemies: Israel and the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Hurst & Co., 2019).

⁷² This section draws heavily on Zoltan Barany, “Unrest and State Response in the Arab Monarchies,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 5-38.

⁷³ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Saudi Arabia,” in *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Christopher Davidson (London: Hurst & Co., 2011), 86; and Michael Birnbaum, “Saudi Arabia Calm on Planned ‘Day of Rage,’ But Protests Spark Violence Elsewhere,” *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2011.

⁷⁴ Omar Hasan, “Thousands of Kuwaitis ‘Storm Parliament,’” *AFP*, November 17, 2011.

⁷⁵ See Mary Ann Tétreault, “The Winter of the Arab Spring in the Gulf Monarchies), in *Arab Revolutions and World Transformations*, ed. Anna M. Agathangelou and Nevzat Soguk (New York: Routledge, 2013), 82; Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 77-78; and, more generally, Ala’a Shehabi and Marc Owen Jones, eds., *Bahrain’s Uprising: Resistance and Repression in the Gulf* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

⁷⁶ Kenneth Katzman, “Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy,” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 21, 2011), 5.

move toward constitutional monarchy and an end to anti-Shia discrimination in employment, housing, and education. After a predawn police raid on peaceful protests on February 17 that killed four protesters the crisis escalated and protests became more radicalized, taking an increasingly anti-monarchical character, notwithstanding King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa's offers of dialogue and the government's release of some political prisoners. The protests continued in March and occasionally turned into violent riots with demonstrators blocking the entrance to the Parliament building and blockading the city's financial district. Some of these events were quite large, with over 100,000 people (from a citizenry of fewer than 600,000) participating.⁷⁷ The suppression of the opposition forces resulted in at least 46 people dead, including some police officers. Approximately 3,000 people were arrested, 700 of them were still behind bars at the end of 2011, and over 4,000 lost their jobs as a result of their participation in the conflict.⁷⁸ Despite some misleading reports, the Gulf Cooperation Council's security personnel – primarily Saudi soldiers and Emirati policemen – did not engage the protesters but secured key buildings and infrastructure and were held in reserve in the south of the island.⁷⁹

Other Gulf Arab states also employed the stick when necessary. The already limited rights of freedom of expression and assembly were narrowed, media laws were tightened, and levels of political repression were raised.⁸⁰ Political activists, bloggers, and known opposition figures were all targeted for arrest. The government in Doha, for instance, released a media law that prescribed punishment for journalists criticizing friendly governments though the revised bill allowed (mild) criticism of Qatar's rulers.⁸¹ In the UAE five prominent signers of the petition in favor of an elected legislature were arrested, tried, and imprisoned (though they were soon pardoned). The UAE's Federal Supreme Council was also rumored to have hired a foreign mercenary army just to make sure that it would have the required force on hand if it proved necessary.⁸² Saudi Arabia imposed heavy jail terms to even the modest challenges to state authority.⁸³ In March 2011 the founders of the Islamic Umma Party were arrested after refusing to drop their demands for political reforms.⁸⁴ And, eight months later, the state handed down lengthy prison sentences for 16 individuals attempting to set up a human rights organization. The upheaval also showed that Gulf forces could respond to domestic challenges by coordinated action. After Bahrain's King Hamad asked for GCC assistance to restore order, help promptly arrived with over 1,500 security forces from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As a Kuwaiti analyst and retired air force colonel wrote:

⁷⁷ Katja Niethammer, "Calm and Squalls: The Small Gulf Monarchies in the Arab Spring," in *Protest, Revolt, and Regime Change in the Arab World*, ed. Muriel Asseburg (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2012), 15.

⁷⁸ "Arab Spring? That's the Business of Other Countries: Interview with King Hamad of Bahrain," *Der Spiegel*, February 13, 2012.

⁷⁹ For instance, Juan Cole wrote that Saudi troops went to Bahrain to "disperse" the protesters. See Juan Cole, "The Sleeping Giants of Tiny Bahrain," *truthdig.com*, March 29, 2011. For an analysis of the military aspects of the suppression, 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*, December 14, 2016, 26-31, esp. 30.

⁸⁰ See Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis*, 56, no. 1 (2012): 97-98.

⁸¹ "Qatar: Revise Draft Media Law to Allow Criticisms of Rulers," *Human Rights Watch*, October 30, 2012.

⁸² See Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis*, 56, no. 1 (2012): 97.

⁸³ Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis*, 56, no. 1 (2012): 97.

⁸⁴ Elham Fakhro, "The Kingdom Divided," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 8, 2012.

The operation was quite successful by military standards. The troops achieved their operational objective with professionalism, clarity of direction, firmness of intent, and ease of movement. By mobilizing quickly, and maximizing the element of surprise, they deterred the threat of a foreign takeover and restored peace and stability.⁸⁵

Enduring Legacies of the Past and the Impact of the Arab Spring

The critical junctures and legacies outlined above have continued to influence Gulf military affairs. Three security-related developments in the last decade help to demonstrate this continued impact.

Saudi Military Reform

Since Mohammed bin Salman took over the Saudi defense portfolio in 2015 and especially since his selection as crown prince two years later, administrative restructuring of the kingdom's military-security institutions has accelerated. Some of these have been personnel changes; virtually all defense-related ministries and major commands have new leaders. But the reforms were intended to go farther than merely ensuring the leadership of those with unquestioned loyalty to Mohammed bin Salman.

One of the organizations that has undergone significant transformation is the Saudi Arabian National Guard, or SANG, an institution much affected by tribal-regional identity and whose origins are linked to the Ikhwan. Mohammed bin Salman appointed Khaled al-Muqrin – a minor prince whose father, Prince Abdulaziz bin Mohammed, was one of the SANG's founders – as its new head in November 2017.⁸⁶ Unlike his predecessor, Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, who used the SANG to embezzle billions of dollars in state funds, Khaled al-Muqrin is expected to be a staunch supporter of the crown prince and unconnected to fiscal improprieties.⁸⁷

The restructuring of the defense sector commenced with sweeping plans but, according to prominent analysts, few meaningful reforms have been implemented thus far.⁸⁸ One of the main problems of Saudi – and more broadly, Gulf – forces is the absence of robust joint (interservice) operations. Yet, the Saudi Ministry of Defense excludes the SANG, which continues to be overseen by a separate Ministry of National Guard headed by Khaled al-Muqrin, along with a number of other organizations of the Saudi coercive apparatus (e.g.,

⁸⁵ Zafer Muhammad Alajmi, "Gulf Military Cooperation: Tangible Gains or Limited Results?" in *Gulf Cooperation Council's Challenges and Prospects*, ed. Jamal Abdullah (Doha: Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2015), 51.

⁸⁶ "FaceOf: Prince Khalid bin Abdul Aziz bin Ayyaf Al-Muqrin, Minister of the Saudi National Guard," *Arab News*, November 4, 2018.

⁸⁷ See Zoltan Barany, "Arms Procurement and Corruption in the Gulf Monarchies," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 11, 2020. See also "Saudi Anti-Corruption Drive: Prince Miteb Freed 'After \$1bn Deal,'" *BBC News*, November 29, 2017.

⁸⁸ Cited by Neil Partrick in "Saudi Defense and Security Reform," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 14, 2019.

Presidency of Public Security). In one of the last articles he wrote before he was killed by Saudi security agents, Jamal Khashoggi argued that:

The national guard itself needs to re-examine why it exists since it was formed to contain the volunteers who fought with the founding king and who were formed as tribal battalions. In the past, this was acceptable. Yet, the existence of military forces that allow tribal loyalty is not a wise thing in today's Middle East where people have become vulnerable to quick divisions over their minority identities.⁸⁹

Saudi leaders appear to disagree. The enduring independence of the SANG suggests that the crown prince is reluctant to provoke the SANG's tribal base, thereby risking a solid source of support for Al Saud rule. With British assistance, the SANG has established its own staff college to deepen its officers' education in advanced war studies. The SANG has been long recognized as more effective than the regular army, but in the Yemen war its performance has been mediocre at best and little better than that of the regular army.⁹⁰ A close observer of Saudi military reforms recently wrote:

There have been new figures appointed to individual SANG commands like armored vehicles, communications, and training as a customary change of personnel, not a major overhaul. Like the widely touted defense changes, reforms within the SANG are developmental, not transformational. SANG is neither facing substantive cost-cutting nor absorption into the SMOd [Saudi Ministry of Defense] – a necessary move for JOC [Joint Operational Command].⁹¹

The SANG continues to control its three mechanized brigades and five motorized infantry brigades – about 125,000 troops in all – whose integration into a joint command would be a major step toward a substantive structural reform of the Saudi armed forces.

Qatar's Naval Buildup

The invasion of Kuwait and the intra-GCC political conflicts in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings greatly strengthened Qatar's desire to develop independent foreign and military policies. Doha's increasingly close relations with Ankara in the last decade are widely considered a major development regarding Qatar's military options.

Turkey has now deployed at least 3,000 troops to Qatar with accommodations ready for 2,000 more.⁹² Although on a gross domestic product per capita basis until 2016 Doha had maintained the most modest defense outlays among the GCC countries, of far greater significance is how the gas-rich emirate spent key portions of its arms budget.⁹³ Naval forces have long been neglected aspects of Gulf military establishments but Qatar, true to its maverick reputation, has determined to concentrate on naval development.

⁸⁹ Jamal Khashoggi, "Saudi Arabia's Armed Forces: This Time It's Reform, Not a Power Grab," *Middle East Eye*, October 26, 2018.

⁹⁰ Alex Emmons, "Secret Report Reveals Saudi Incompetence and Widespread Use of U.S. Weapons in Yemen," *The Intercept*, April 14, 2019.

⁹¹ Neil Partrick, "Saudi Defense and Security Reform," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 14, 2019.

⁹² See Ali Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey – Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide," in *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Singapore: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019), 197-216.

⁹³ See "The Military Balance" Annual Reports 2011-2019, *International Institute for Strategic Studies*.

In 2016 Qatar's emir appointed Khalid al-Attiyah, a former fighter pilot and minister of foreign affairs, as minister of state for defense affairs. Under Attiyah's watch – a period that has coincided with strained relations between Doha and its GCC neighbors, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain – the Qatari Emiri Navy has embarked on an ambitious program. In 2017 Doha signed a 5 billion euro deal with the Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri for seven vessels, including four corvettes, two offshore patrol boats, and one helicopter carrier landing platform dock. The deal also included a 10-year maintenance program. In addition, the Qatari navy may become the first GCC navy – and, aside from Iran, the only Gulf country – to operate submarines. In early 2020, Doha signed a new memorandum of understanding with Fincantieri that covers the “supply of cutting-edge naval vessels and submarines.”⁹⁴ The shallow waters of the Gulf favor the light submarines that Fincantieri has an excellent track record of building.

In July 2019, Qatar opened the Al Daayen Naval Base in the country's northeast to house the headquarters of its coast guard and will be a key element in regional cooperation with GCC partners and the United States.⁹⁵ The Qatari navy also plans to open another new facility along with a new naval school by 2021.⁹⁶ The question is who will man Qatar's new warships (and fly its fighter jets – since 2017 Doha has purchased 36 U.S. F-15s, 12 French Rafale fighters, and 24 Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft). The Qatari navy has a current manpower below 3,000 but is expected to grow to 7,000 by 2025.⁹⁷ Qatar has slightly over 300,000 citizens and its armed forces have therefore been staffed mainly by foreign contract personnel.⁹⁸ Undoubtedly, Doha will need to hire more contractors while a sufficient number of citizen-sailors and airmen can be trained.

Clearly, Qatar's quarrels with its fellow GCC members (from 2013-14, and 2017-to present) have partly motivated its interest in bolstering its defense capabilities. Improving Qatar's navy also aids the Bahrain-based U.S. 5th Fleet in executing its mission, consistent with Doha's efforts, especially since 2017, to maximize its usefulness as a military ally to the United States.⁹⁹

Defense Procurement Diversification

During and after the Arab Spring uprisings, Gulf leaders were sharply critical of the willingness of the administration of former President Barack Obama to hastily dispense with decadeslong loyal allies, resort to idle threats, and reach a nuclear agreement with Iran without properly consulting with them. Although they view the administration of President Donald J. Trump more favorably, Trump's reluctance to use military force to defend their interests – such as Washington's muted reaction to drone and missile strikes believed to have been conducted by Iran on Saudi oil processing facilities in September 2019 – has reinforced their efforts to diversify their strategic and military relationships and cultivate new sources of armaments.

The expansion of arms suppliers has allowed the Gulf states to maintain and increase their autonomy. They have used purchasing not only as a way of shoring up bilateral relations but also to ensure they have alternative sources of weapons, so that if relations with one supplier go cold, they will not be without options. If U.S. and Western European vendors close the tap of arms owing to, for instance, concerns about human rights violations, these countries want to have established relations that allow them to quickly turn to China, Russia, and other states

unlikely to be troubled by such considerations.¹⁰⁰

Gulf states have already purchased armaments from non-U.S. allies although their share of arms sales remains relatively modest. China has sought to bolster its military-to-military ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. In late 2019, Beijing was preparing to sell weaponized drones to Riyadh; it had already been selling aerial drones to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Middle East countries.¹⁰¹ China is eager to corner the Middle East drone market as the United States, Russia, and 33 other countries are constrained by the Missile Technology Control Regime, an arms-control agreement to which Beijing is not a signatory.¹⁰² Recently Riyadh has concluded defense-industry agreements with Russia as well.¹⁰³

Top MENA Recipients of Major Arms and Their Top-10 Suppliers (%) 2014-18

| Supplier/Recipient | Saudi Arabia | Egypt | Algeria | UAE | Iraq |
|--------------------|--------------|-------|---------|-------------|------|
| China | 0.7 | 0.4 | 13 | 2.2 | 0.3 |
| France | 4.3 | 37 | 0.4 | 10 | -- |
| Germany | 1.8 | 6.1 | 10 | 2.4 | 0.6 |
| Italy | 1.3 | 0.1 | 4.8 | 2.2 | 3.2 |
| Russia | -- | 30 | 66 | 1.5 | 33 |
| Spain | 2.3 | 2.6 | -- | -- | 0.6 |
| Turkey | 0.8 | -- | -- | 7.8 | -- |
| UAE | -- | 2.8 | 0.5 | unavailable | -- |
| United Kingdom | 16 | -- | 1.1 | 0.1 | -- |
| United States | 68 | 19 | 0.4 | 64 | 47 |

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 250.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has also secured defense cooperation accords with Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and South Africa. The UAE has purchased armaments from Canada, Indonesia, and Sweden and, in 2017, agreed to purchase Russian Sukhoi Su-35 Flanker-E fighter jets. Other Eastern European countries, including Ukraine, Poland, and Serbia – the last of which signed a 200 million euro agreement to develop cruise missiles with the UAE – have also become active in the Gulf armaments market.¹⁰⁴ Oman has long endeavored to diversify its sources of armaments. In 2018 alone, it further broadened its centurieslong commercial ties

¹⁰⁰ Nadim Hasbani, "The Geopolitics of Weapons Procurement in the Gulf States," *Defense and Security Analysis* 22, no. 1 (2006): 81

¹⁰¹ Joe Wolverton, II, "China Set to Sell Weaponized Drones to Saudi Arabia," *America Daily*, November 21, 2019.

¹⁰² "Predator Pricing," *The Economist*, March 9, 2019. For a comprehensive study, see Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Justin Bronk, *Armed Drones in the Middle East: Proliferation and Norms in the Region* (London: Royal United Services Institute, December 2018), esp. 18-22.

¹⁰³ "Saudi Arabia to Build Major Aerospace Facility," *Al Defaiya*, June 6, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Florence Gaub and Zoe Stanley-Lockman, "Defense Industries in Arab States: Players and Strategies," *Chaillot Papers*, European Union Institute for Security Studies 141 (March 2017): 71.

with India. Muscat reached arms deals with New Delhi and permitted the Indian navy to use its fast-developing port facilities in Duqm.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

This paper identifies some of the foundations and historical junctures that help explain the evolution of Gulf armies and the sociopolitical and military-strategic context in which they exist.

All these issues have directly influenced the development of Gulf Arab security forces, continue to impact their present, and will undoubtedly help shape their future. Tribalism remains a major sociopolitical force in the region; tribal identity continues to be a crucially important consideration, particularly in personnel issues. Abdulaziz's creation of the Ikhwan showed that relatively loosely organized Arab troops can be extremely capable but their discipline and loyalties cannot be taken for granted. The deteriorating relationship between Abdulaziz and the Ikhwan signaled for the ruling families the need to guarantee their continued rule by establishing rival military units and institutions with unquestioned loyalty to them.

The legacies of the British in the Gulf region are multifaceted, but they are especially strong in the armed forces – they played a foundational role for all of the Gulf militaries, with the partial exception of Oman, in terms of their organization, training, and foreign orientation. The formation of the UAE and its unified armed forces was another key development as it demonstrated that individual rulers, specifically Zayed, were able to subordinate the interests of their own emirates to those of a federal state made up of quite different constituent parts. The invasion of Kuwait laid bare the numerous shortcomings of the Gulf states both in terms of domestic political unity and military effectiveness. Two decades later, the Arab Spring uprisings underscored the general resilience of the Gulf Arab states while also highlighting disparities among them.

The history of Gulf armies differs in many important respects from those of the rest of the Arab world. As they continue to evolve, in many cases with new roles, capabilities, suppliers, and strategic partners, they will nonetheless remain rooted in their historical foundations. Therefore, the distinctive junctures and sociocultural characteristics in their development are an essential guide to how they can be expected to adapt to changing realities in the coming years.

¹⁰⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "PM Modi's Oman Visit: Indian Navy Can Now Access Duqm Port," *The Economic Times*, February 13, 2018. See also Sebastian Castelner and Quentin Müller, "Oman's Duqm, a New Port City for the Middle East?," *Middle East Eye*, February 10, 2019.

