

The UAE Military Transformation: Balancing between Emiratization and Westernization

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UAE military modernization strengthened the armed forces by renovating ties to Western powers but meanwhile, produced a clash between Westernized and local military cultures.

In the past two decades, the UAE armed forces morphed into a modern military deemed among the best in the Middle East and earning Abu Dhabi the nickname "[Little Sparta](#)," attributed to former U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis. The Emirati military transformation was driven by the aspirations of Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, for self-sufficiency and strategic autonomy. This implied a stronger emphasis on building local skills and resources. But this "Emiratization" of the national military strategy implied, in theory, a decreased reliance on Western military support. However, details of the UAE military modernization reveal a complex and somewhat contradictory reality.

That transformation may have strengthened the Emirati military apparatus, but it did so, not by abandoning ties to Western powers, but rather by renovating them. In fact, Abu Dhabi's military modernization expanded the use of foreign expertise at all levels: from the training and education of officers to the command of military elite units and the development of local military industries. This overreliance on Western military support engendered what scholars call a form of "[military isomorphism](#)," a phenomenon implying not only the adoption of Western-like military structures but also beliefs and ideas about war that may eventually clash with Emirati views.

Use of Foreign Expertise

At the highest level, Mohammed bin Zayed works with a few close foreign military advisors who helped him modernize the armed forces. One of the most influential is the Australian retired SAS officer, Major-General Mike Hindmarsh who moved to the UAE in 2009 to supervise the creation of the UAE Presidential Guard (PG), founded in 2010 and manned with 12,000 men. Hindmarsh built the Guard as [an expeditionary force](#) and relied on training programs with the help of the UK Royal Marines and the US Marine Corps. Other foreign advisors include [Stephen Toumajan](#), a former US officer, who played a central role in the creation of the Joint Aviation Command (JAC). Just like the PG, [the JAC](#) was a new unit now responsible for aircraft and attack helicopters operated by special operations forces.

Similar reliance on expatriates can be observed in the field of military education. In 2013, Abu Dhabi launched its own national defense college and turned to the Pentagon to deliver its academic content. A "foreign military sales" agreement was signed between both governments - the same legal framework used for weapons transfer such as missile defense batteries or fighter aircraft - and a private company was selected to hire and send the faculty to the Emirati entity. Subsequently, the curriculum of the UAE National Defense College has been largely derived from those of American war schools.

Foreign influence is also visible in the defense industry field. The Emirati push for a local defense industry went hand in hand with its ambitions towards self-sufficiency. At first, it involved a process of mergers of local companies. In 2014, the government integrated sixteen local firms into the Emirates Defense Industries Company (EDIC). Following the same pattern with the PG and Hindmarsh, Mohammed bin Zayed [tasked](#) French businessman Luc Vigneron, former CEO of Thales, to lead that industrial reform. Eventually, Vigneron left the leadership of EDIC as the entity [merged](#) into another broader company, Edge, in 2019, now controlling most of the defense industrial activity in the country.

Arguably Emirati defense companies are the most mature in the Gulf but to do so, they had to partner with Western companies to develop their own systems. For

instance, UAE company Advanced Military Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul Center (AMMROC) [signed deals](#) with Lockheed-Martin and its subsidiary Sikorsky Aerospace to re-engineer a local version of the Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter. Abu Dhabi Ship Building (ADSB), also [teamed up](#) with French-based Constructions Mécaniques de Normandie, whose engineers designed and produced the first ADSB ship in France. Five other ships were then manufactured in the UAE. Noticeably, AMMROC, ADSB and the UAE government [downplay](#) the role of those foreign entities to emphasize their own technical achievements.

Ramifications of Western Influence for Military Organization

This contrast between the Emirati aspirations and the enduring Western influence has important ramifications for the UAE military organization; first at the institutional level with regards to the role conferred to Emirati officers, vis-a-vis those foreign advisors, in the development of new military ideas and the policymaking process. This is highlighted by the unusual role played by foreign advisors like Hindmarsh or Toumajan in the conduct of war, to the potential detriment of the Emirati military hierarchy. The import of those Western-inspired reforms creates a form of “military isomorphism” that can also fuel tensions among local officers vis-a-vis the way American instructors impose their own model of military modernization without considering the specificities of Gulf armed forces (e.g., the endurance of tribal solidarity within the military apparatus and the contentious nature of civil-military relations).

At the warfighting level, "military isomorphism" may be seen as an indicator of progress for the UAE armed forces in terms of operational effectiveness. But at the political strategic level, this Western model of warfare finds itself at odds in the Emirati context. In all fairness, this rift between Westernized and local military cultures is a common feature to other Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar that also rely on foreign expertise for their military reforms.

All in all, the UAE military transformation may have succeeded in building new armed forces able to project power and conduct complex operations. Tactical and operational progress were undoubtedly made. But by relying extensively on foreign-made reforms, Abu Dhabi experimented with a hybrid model of military modernization whose longevity is uncertain. Priority was given to the functionality of the military - to *fight wars* - but without much consideration for how Western imports may change the way its armed forces *think* about these wars. In the end, the UAE made a gamble: to change its armed forces without changing the military culture. Time will tell if such an approach is sustainable.

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