

"High Tribute to UAE's Heroes," *The National*, November 23, 2016.

## TheNational

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# High tribute to UAE's heroes



The new memorial park sits between the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and the headquarters of the UAE's Armed Forces, which overlook the Khor Al Maqta waterway separating Abu Dhabi island from the mainland. Delores Johnson / The National

**A 90-metre long sculpture made from 31 aluminium-clad steel tablets will grab the attention on Commemoration Day. The National was given an exclusive tour of the structure at the memorial park when it was being put together by British artist Idris Khan**

"What are monuments?" asks the British artist Idris Khan, designer of the memorial that will act as the focus for Commemoration Day on November 30.

"The word monument gets into your head and you think about what it represents. They're for people to visit, to be absorbed in and to feel power in a certain way."

Khan, 38, has certainly invoked that sense in the 90-metre sculpture that now stands at the heart of the newly-named Wahat Al Karama, a 46,000 square metre site that sits between the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and the headquarters of the UAE's Armed Forces.

Made from 31 aluminium-clad tablets, the tallest of which is 23 metres, Khan's sculpture overlooks a wide memorial plaza that doubles as a reflecting pool and leads to a smaller, circular structure, The Pavilion of Honour.

The Pavilion contains the names of each of the nation's heroes who, from the time of the UAE's unification in 1971, sacrificed their lives in the service of their country.

Each name is inscribed on its own panel, made from aluminium reclaimed from Armed Forces vehicles.

A graduate of London's Royal College of Art, the sculptor came to wider public attention thanks to *Seven Times* (2010), an installation of steel cubes sandblasted with layered Arabic inscriptions, and *You and Only You* (2012), a mural formed from fragments of pilgrims' responses to the experience of performing Haj.

Both works were displayed as part of the British Museum's 2012 exhibition *Haj: Journey to the Heart of Islam*.

But the memorial is the largest work Khan has ever undertaken. It is made from hundreds of tonnes of steel, and its 31 tablets and central spine are covered in over 1,000 hand-painted, individually cast aluminium panels.

Some of the panels bear poetry from the UAE's founder, the late Sheikh Zayed, while the monument's spine is inscribed with the pledge of allegiance sworn by all members of the UAE's Armed Forces.

"I wanted to create an entrance into the piece so that as you enter, you get a real sense of scale. You walk into the piece and there's an immediate difference in temperature," the artist says.

"You have these tremendous rays of light coming through the different tablets and the poems help to draw you round, providing different moments to pause and reflect."

The sculpture resembles a gigantic graphite sketch rendered in three dimensions, so it stands in contrast to the luminous stateliness of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and engages the building in an aesthetic conversation.

As the memorial's tablets rise at obtuse and acute angles, creating beams of light, stark shadows and cooler micro-climates beneath their steel and aluminium, they frame views of the mosque's domes and minarets.

The result of the ensemble is a new stage for commemoration and a site at which the UAE's national identity will be reflected upon and reinforced.

It is an Emirati statement of pride and remembrance with a resonance similar to Emil Sodersten and John Crust's Australian War Memorial in Canberra, or Edwin Lutyens' Cenotaph in London.

The engraved panels inside the Pavilion of Honour will be subtly back-lit so that they stand out in the chamber's shadowy interior.

The space is a circular wall with eight carefully arranged roof panels – one for each of the emirates and an eighth for the UAE's Heroes – that form a central circular hole, which channels a shaft of natural daylight into the pavilion's heart.

A glass sculpture designed by Khan sits directly below the circle.

Formed by seven laminated panels that are engraved with the Armed Forces' pledge of allegiance, it is surrounded by a water feature that is fed with water from a rill that runs through the site, leading visitors from the memorial and its plaza down to the pavilion.

"I wanted the memorial to feel like an installation, an immersive space that would draw you to it, that would allow you to walk inside it and through the shadows," Khan says.

"I wanted a place where everybody could congregate."

He likens his design to that of memorials such as Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington DC, which are designed to be a part of the wider landscape.

"That's what I wanted this memorial to look like – as if it had almost been drawn out of the ground; like it wasn't new but as if it was already a part of the landscape." A 90-metre long sculpture made from 31 aluminium-clad steel tablets will grab the attention on Commemoration Day. The National was given an exclusive tour of the structure at the memorial park when it was being put together by British artist Idris Khan

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The 90-metre sculpture is inscribed with the oath sworn by all members of the UAE Armed Forces. Delores Johnson / The National