Middle Eastern studies

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1. *Armies of Arabia: Military Politics and Effectiveness in the Gulf*, by Zoltan Barany, Oxford University Press, 2021, 368 pages, \$34.95 (Hardcover)

This volume is the first monograph in English that discusses the militaries of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The book is devoted to addressing the following puzzle: “why are the armies of Arabia so ineffective despite the enormous resources expended upon them” (300–301)? Barany identifies a combination of political-structural and sociocultural variables that together bring about the lackluster performance of GCC armies. With regard to political-structural variables, he argues that what he understands as the “absolute monarchy” of these states plays a fundamental role by making the main function of these armies “not the defense of the nation but, ultimately, the protection of the monarchical regime from its domestic challengers” (9). In GCC states, it is often the case that individual ruling elites and their circles built through nepotism and tribalism, rather than representative institutions based on meritocracy, determine the path of military development. In addition, the monarchies in these states create rival forces to prevent potential coups to preserve their rule. A further concomitant of this monarchy-oriented military building is the de facto reliance of these states on American and/or British forces as “the real defenders or true primary security providers” (10). Even arms procurement from America and its allies is mainly aimed at guaranteeing this provision of security. As for sociocultural variables, Barany highlights the “societal preference for conformity and obedience” that hinders “critical thinking and independent initiative” (12), “the absence of direct accountability and criticism” (13) partly due to a culture of honor that equates criticism with humiliation, religious fatalism that weakens personal agency, and the enjoyment of state-provided economic benefits that demotivates military aspiration.

The book consists of six thematic chapters. Chapter 1 examines “key sociocultural foundations and formative moments” (15) of GCC armies, including: tribes and tribalism; the history of the Wahhabi militia, Ikhwan; Britain’s historical involvement in Arabia; the creation of the UAE and its military force; the Iraqi

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invasion of Kuwait in 1990; and the military/security responses of GCC states to the Arab Spring. Chapter 2 studies “how political and structural factors impede the Gulf armed forces’ strength” (16), discussing in detail how the need to secure these “family states” shapes the function and structure of the military forces and their relationship with wider society. Chapter 3 is a sociological study of the GCC armies, exploring “issues from education to decision-making and the pervasive influence of tribalism” and providing “a comprehensive appraisal of the officer corps from cadets to generals, examining their career paths and education at home and abroad” (16). Chapter 4 turns to the economic dimensions of GCC militaries, covering defense expenditures, weapons acquisition, corruption, and the development of indigenous defense industries. Chapter 5 analyzes the military relations of GCC states with America, Britain, and Israel. Chapter 6 assesses the performance of GCC armies by examining their training systems and their actual deployments to foreign countries, including the involvement of Saudi and Emirati armed forces in the ongoing war in Yemen. In the conclusion, Barany summarizes the various causes behind the ineffectiveness of GCC armies and suggests ways for them to improve.

The book is essential reading for anyone interested in the history and current status of the militaries of GCC states.

2. *Tunisia’s Modern Woman: Nation-Building and State Feminism in the Global 1960s*, by Amy Aisen Kallander, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 300 pages, \$99.99 (Hardcover)

On 29 September 2021, Kais Saied, the president of Tunisia, appointed Najla Bouden Romdhane, a female geologist and university professor, as the new prime minister of Tunisia, making the latter the first female head of government in the Arab world. This appointment was hailed by some as evidence of women’s relatively high status in Tunisian society, which constitutes, together with Tunisia’s steady transition to a seemingly “genuine” democracy since 2011, the internationally acclaimed Tunisian exception to the lingering despotism and patriarchy in the region. Further, the appointment came at a time when one of the two pillars of Tunisian exceptionalism, i.e., democratic transition, was being challenged by the democratically elected president himself. Two months earlier, Saied suspended the Tunisian parliament and promised to change the current political system to tackle decade-long economic stagnation that had been aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic and political infighting. Other considerations aside, Romdhane’s appointment was clearly a public endorsement of women’s rights, the other pillar of the Tunisian exceptionalism, intended to counterbalance the negative effects on Saied’s legitimacy exerted by his bold political move.

This strategy, which can be summarized as “boosting legitimacy through feminism”, is not new to Tunisia. It belongs to an idea-cum-practice Kallander names “state feminism”, which is marked by reciprocal dynamism between state building and the improvement, guided but also constrained by the state, of women’s status in society. This state feminism in Tunisia—which experienced its formative stage during the presidency of Habib Bourguiba (1957–1987), Tunisia’s first

president—is the focus of Kallander’s monograph. She devotes five chapters to examining the formation of Tunisia’s state feminism in political discourse, development-driven family planning, academic research on women, fashion and dress codes, and marriage and family. Chapter 1 studies official understandings of modern womanhood as detailed in Bourguiba’s speeches and follow-up dissemination and discussions in the Tunisian women’s press. It points to the concordance between the liberal orientation of this modern womanhood and Tunisia’s alliance with the United States in the contexts of Afro-Asian solidarity and Cold War rivalries. Chapter 2 examines Tunisia’s policies of family planning and birth control and how Bourguiba aligned these policies with international imperatives that advocated population control as a vehicle for modernization, hoping to attract international donors while boosting Tunisia as a model for African, Arab, and Muslim countries. Chapter 3 explains how scholarship on rural populations, rural families, and rural women not only facilitated “a partnership between the state and scholars eager to shape national policy” on population and development but also produced “feminist analyses that challenged the male bias of development discourse, opening possibilities of cross-class solidarity that redefined what it meant to be Tunisian” (32). Chapter 4 explores fashion and dress codes as gendered sites where the tug of war between the penetrative state and rebellious youth took place. Chapter 5 focuses on discussions of family, love, premarital sex, and mixed marriage in the Tunisian women’s press, which participated in “the cultural project of reimagining the beloved” and urged “a reconsideration of hegemonic forms of masculinity” (35).

This book is an in-depth study of the evolution of Tunisia’s state feminism. With its findings on the collusion between modern nationhood and modern womanhood in Tunisia, it will interest both political scientists and cultural scholars of the Middle East and North Africa.

3. *The Invention of the Maghreb: Between Africa and the Middle East*, by Abdelmajid Hannoum, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 328 pages, \$29.99 (Paperback)

“Was there an Algerian nation before French colonization?” It is reported that Emmanuel Macron, the president of France, asked this question during a meeting with descendants of the Harkis, Algerians who served as auxiliaries in the French army during Algeria’s war for independence (1954–1962). On the same occasion, he also commented that the official history of Algeria had been totally rewritten based not on truths but “on a discourse of hatred towards France”. Algeria was furious. In response, the Algerian government accused Macron of “inadmissible interference” in its internal affairs and France of committing “genocide” in colonial Algeria, recalled its ambassador from Paris, and banned French military planes from its airspace.

Macron’s comments were reckless and misplaced, not because his suggestion that Algeria is a French colonial invention is absurd, but because as a politician he should not have made use of this claim to signal France’s superiority over a sovereign state whose identity and dignity are derived from its long and bitter struggle to rid itself of French colonization and its legacies. If there was indeed a

need to raise this claim, it was to deconstruct this colonial invention and its concomitant power structure to make room for alternative interpretations of the past and alternative prospects for the future. This is what drove Hannoum to write this monograph on the invention of the Maghreb as a geopolitical entity that encompasses “mainly Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and not so much Libya” (5) and that is distinct from both the Middle East and Africa. He argues that the Maghreb is “a modern reconfiguration of the region operated by and through modern technologies of power of colonial France” and reproduced and confirmed with “alterations and changes” and “contradictions and corrections” by local historians, ideologues, and politicians (275).

The main body of the book consists of six chapters. The first four chapters concentrate on the French side and examines how colonial cartography, archaeology, and historiography participated in the creation of the Maghreb and the categorization and naming of its constituents: space, race, language, religion, etc. The other two chapters turn to the indigenous side. Chapter 5 studies the ideas of Salafi and nationalist writers in Maghreb countries and demonstrates that indigenous resistance to the colonially made modern Maghreb without sufficient technologies of power ended in guaranteeing the longevity of this notion of Maghreb. Chapter 6 investigates three “fissures” in the Maghreb that prevent its cohesion, namely, conflict over the Sahara, the Amazigh question, and the issue of language, especially the antagonism between French and Arabic.

This book follows a Foucauldian and Saidian tradition and reminds us of the complicated interaction between power and knowledge that runs deep beneath the *realpolitik* of postcolonial Maghreb.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.