

## Guardians of the Arab State: When Militaries Intervene in Politics, from Iraq to Mauritania

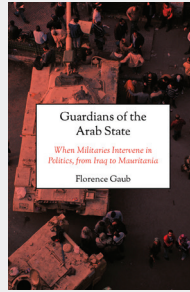
By Florence Gaub

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Reviewed by Veysel Kurt, Istanbul Medeniyet University

The role of the militaries in politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been one of the most popular issues among scholars and researchers focusing on the Middle East politics since the Arab Uprisings erupted against the autocrats. It is a common assumption that the autocrats in the MENA ruled for decades with the support of the militaries. Once the uprisings began in 2010, the militaries played an undeniable role in the outcomes and consequences of the regime change demands, and indelibly affected the political transformation process. *Guardians of the Arab State* sets out to explain the behavior of the militaries on a theoretical level.

The main question of the book is simple: why did the militaries become political actors in the first place, in spite of the fact that they are not political actors by design? This question itself is suspect, however, since in the Arab world, the militaries have long been involved in politics, not only through conducting military coups but also in many other ways; for instance, by criticizing the executive branch with public declarations, refusing civilian orders, controlling and benefitting from economic assets, affecting the judicial system, etc. In spite of a decline in the frequency of military coups after the 1980s, the role of militaries in politics has not changed in essence. In other words, the civilianization of the MENA rulers was an illusion, because rather than re-



linquishing their pivotal roles, the militaries merely integrated with the governments in different models.

Let's return the question again, from a slightly different angle. For what reason have Arab militaries never ceased being political actors?

The author firstly eliminates the alternative explanations that have tried to explain similar questions before. According to Gaub, most research looks only at extreme forms of military involvement, such as coups, and ignores other sorts of involvement. Some research focuses on one variable to provide a causal explanation, such as the defense budget, external dependence, or political fragmentation. In conclusion, most of the theories and arguments presented to date only scratch the surface of what military involvement in politics means in the region; they focus on regime-military relations and ignore the relations between the military forces and society.

*Guardians of the Arab State* fills this gap in the literature and illustrates the conditions that enable the military's involvement in politics in the MENA region. As Gaub explains, Arab military forces become political actors in the broadest sense when four elements come together. Political intervention of the Arab armed forces depends on whether they have enough capacity, whether they have a reason to legitimate their action, whether they encounter no civilian opposition, and whether

they have popular support. The first two conditions are internal to the military and the others are related to external conditions.

The book is divided into five chapters in order to explain these factors and present the Arab militaries in the context of their involvement in politics. The first chapter makes an overview of the literature and evaluates alternative explanations. The second chapter focuses on conditions within the military, specifically the capacity and will of the armed forces to intervene in politics. Capacity for involvement is a crucial condition for any form of involvement of the armed forces. This concept refers not only to the number of officers mobilizing against the government; in most cases, only two percent of the military is enough to conduct a coup. So, capacity also means the organizational ability of the leadership of the armed forces to keep the army in cohesion. Insufficient ability to organize a collective action or to garner consent from the other part of the military can cause a conflict within the armed forces or lead to an unsuccessful attempt. Moreover, merely having the capacity does not mean the military will involve itself in politics. The second necessary condition is the will and reason of the leadership. The armed forces may move into action for institutional benefit but cloak this motive in a national narrative. In such cases, the military leadership conflates military interest with national interest and presents the coup as a national necessity.

The third chapter analyzes the socio-political conditions for involvement, following capacity and will. The involvement of the military also refers to the failure of the civilian leaders. There are dozens of Arab leaders –from Iraq to Libya– who fail to stay in power. There are four main reasons behind their failure: lack of non-punitive measures to keep the armed

forces in check, failing to consider a coup as a possibility as a result of too much separation, politicizing the military in order to protect their rule, and lack of necessary legitimacy. In summary, an ideal type of civil-military relationship can cause civil leaders to prevent military involvement and stay on power. Civil-military relations do not consist solely of formal structures and procedures, but of a set of relations that function on a societal level.

During the Arab Uprising, the traditional understanding of civil-military relations was tested against the power of social mobilization. In other words, before the Arab uprising, social forces were functional to call for involvement or to legitimate military involvement, but the uprisings presented a new phenomenon. Arab militaries made a choice between cracking down on the crowds and refusing civilian order. This means that the will of the military is embedded in societal relations, especially in times of socio/political mobilization.

In chapters four and five, Gaub classifies MENA countries in terms of their degree of military politicization. According to the author, when a military organization is not capable of acting cohesively to accomplish its core mission, defense, it will be less capable of acting politically. The main criteria for either capability is cohesion. When a military is fragmented for any reason –ethnicity, ideology, sectarian sympathies or tribal affiliations– it cannot move into action on a large scale. Libya, Iraq and Yemen are countries where the militaries failed in their core mission and in their attempt at involvement in politics.

Potentially political armies and militaries willing to venture into the political arena will not necessarily end up doing so. Where the armed forces are embedded in a government-

regime nexus, they will have their needs met and have no reason to act. In Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, the militaries are technically capable of acting against the government but there is no reason to do so, or technically they are controlled by civilians. In Egypt and Algeria, because the military is capable, willing and unchecked by civilian powers, it influences politics for its own advantages. Without any systemic changes in the country, the militaries in these countries do not need to move overtly into politics.

To conclude, *Guardians of the Arab State* tries to answer this question: why and when do Arab militaries become political actors? It is an old question for Middle East Studies and the book tries to achieve a comprehensive

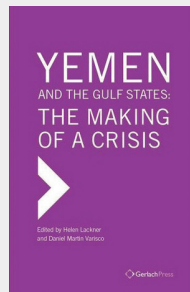
explanation for all Arab countries. It does succeed in offering a consistent explanation, but ignores a crucial factor that shapes politics in the region: the international relations of the militaries. Besides the formal relations between the Middle East countries and international actors, the militaries' specific connections with their counterpart institutions makes them an independent player. It is impossible to explain militaries' capacity and will for their core mission or their drive to become political actors without considering their affairs and interdependency with other regional and global actors. The book makes a contribution to civil-military relations in the Middle East, and therefore it is not ignorable for scholars focusing on the security, military and politics of the region.

## Yemen and the Gulf States: The Making of a Crisis

*Edited by* H. Helen Lackner *and* Daniel Martin Varisco  
Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2018, 143 pages, €85.00, ISBN: 9783959940306

*Reviewed by* Betül Doğan Akkaş, Qatar University

*Yemen and the Gulf States: The Making of a Crisis*, an edited volume by Helen Lackner and Daniel Martin Varisco, provides six chapters presented in a workshop on Yemeni issues at the Gulf Research Meeting 2016 held in Cambridge, UK. The chapters address both domestic and international aspects of the ongoing conflict, namely the Iranian, Omani, Saudi, and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) dimensions of the crisis. The six chapters are selected out of thirteen papers presented in the workshop. However, Lackner keeps his readers in the dark regarding the basis on



which the chapters were selected, despite providing synopses of the content of the papers. Although the exclusion of the remaining papers is within the discretion of the editors or publishers, transparency about the selection process would have served to clarify why the book is structured as it is.

*Yemen and the Gulf States* frames the current crisis from a third-party approach. Instead of presenting an exclusively Saudi, Iranian or Yemeni stance on the issue, the authors have chosen to provide a combination of perspec-