

The Enduring Challenges of Middle East Security and the Evolving Role of the United States

Review Article by David B. Des Roches

Security Politics in the Gulf Monarchies: Continuity amid Change, by David B. Roberts. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 320 pages. \$140 cloth, \$35 paper, \$34.99 e-book.

New Military Strategies in the Gulf: The Mirage of Autonomy in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, by Jean-Loup Samaan. London: I. B. Tauris, 2023. 267 pages. \$100 cloth, \$34.95 paper, \$31.45 e-book.

Security Assistance in the Middle East: Challenges . . . and the Need for Change, edited by Hicham Alaoui and Robert Springborg. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2023. 397 pages. \$89.95 cloth, e-book.

The various states of the Middle East — particularly those that partner with the United States — have struggled since their independence to define and develop a self-sustaining security capability that allows them to preserve their sovereignty, protect their interests, and — in extremis — operate independently of their main security guarantor.

The US, for its part, has approached the region somewhat ambiguously and disjointedly. At various times, the focus of the US security assistance approach has shifted from developing the capacity to counter revolutionary regimes allied (within a wide range of variance) with the Soviet Union, to countering the spread of Iran’s Islamic Revolution and preventing similar revolutions in the region, to providing key support (logistic and ideological) in the anti-Islamist global war on terror, and to developing a genuine security capability that will allow the US to maintain a smallish baseline presence in the region while relying on its extensive global capabilities to provide decisive military capability if needed.

In the background of these efforts lies Israel, which serves as both a model of defense self-sustainability as well as a continual source of friction in US-Arab security relations. The US requirement to maintain Israel’s qualitative military advantage, which has evolved from a policy into law, is often cited as a reason to deny the latest or most capable American military equipment to its Arab partners. Other factors, such as the various technology safeguards required to receive advanced US equipment, are often viewed by Arab states as unacceptable infringements on national sovereignty.

These regional concerns are piled on top of a global issue with security assistance in democracies: most people think the arms trade is both immoral and dangerous. A cultural distaste against the sale of weapons has become baked into the psyche of the Anglosphere since the “merchants of death” narrative became dominant during the 1920s and 1930s investigation into the origins of the First World War.¹ This visceral dislike of weapons transfers is exacerbated when the weapons are going to states that are not democracies, or are deeply flawed democracies, as in the case of most Arab states.

1. H. C. Engelbrecht and F. C. Hanighen, *Merchants of Death: A Study of the International Armament Industry* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1934).

THE EVOLUTION OF REGIONAL SECURITY

In the immediate postindependence era, most Arab states developed military structures that were not fit for state defense against a capable external enemy. Rather, the focus tended to be on developing each state's military as a locus of nascent national identity, as a regime protection force, and as part of a group of armed national security agencies keeping an eye on one another in a process that has become known in the literature as "coup-proofing." In those cases when Arab militaries engaged in conventional warfare (as in the various Arab-Israeli wars) or expeditionary operations (as in Egypt's 1962–67 intervention in North Yemen), the results were less than salutary.

Operation Desert Storm was a revelation for the Gulf Arab states and for developing militaries in general. A robust and well-equipped Iraqi military force, which was armed with modern Soviet equipment, was isolated and degraded by an extended air campaign that featured precision air strikes and network strikes that were the forerunners of today's cyberattacks. A large and well-equipped Soviet-model force was then routed in relatively short order. As this followed (by a few years) the even more shocking but lesser-known 1986 defeat of a modern Libyan force with the then-latest Soviet radar and armored vehicles by Chadian forces at Ouadi Doum in Chad, the consensus emerged that the military prowess offered by Soviet equipment was no more viable than the Soviet economic and political model. Many countries began to look toward the West, and the US in particular, as their partner of choice and ultimate security guarantor. Smaller Arab states, particularly in the Gulf region, began to modernize with the goal not of complete self-sufficiency but rather of compatibility with American forces and their allies.

This shift toward modernization — generally but not always on an American model — continued even as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 degenerated into a prolonged counterinsurgency. The memory of Desert Storm began to fade, and the drawn-out wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began to tarnish the military reputation of the Americans and their allies. Middle Eastern countries began to look to their own devices for their security.

This accelerated during the administration of US president Barack Obama, which first announced a "pivot" from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region. The pivot was and is wrongly taken in the Middle East to mean a complete unilateral withdrawal of American forces from the region. The conclusion of a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, which was negotiated with minimal Arab consultation, served as a further impetus for an examination of local defense agreements. Finally, the Saudi- and Emirati-led operations in Yemen and the Emirati and Qatari operations in Libya showed the desire of various Gulf states to conduct military operations either on their own or with only minimal US assessment. So, we are now in a third era of postindependence Arab military development.

These developments are the subject of three new books that are essential reading for any serious student of security affairs in the Gulf. As a disclaimer, I have collaborated in the past with the authors and editors of all three volumes, but it should be noted that academic work on Middle East security is a somewhat small field.

Two of these books are written by single authors and thus have a unitary voice and an intellectual and authorial focus. They are both limited to the Gulf states. The third book, an edited volume, deals with security matters in the wider Arab world and has the highs and lows one expects from such a collection. I will examine each in turn.

ROBERTS RULES

David Roberts's *Security Politics in the Gulf Monarchies* is the book that deserves to have the widest audience of the three. Roberts, a senior lecturer at King's College London, has an extensive academic background on Gulf issues. He has worked in the Gulf in security-related positions for many years, including directing the Royal United Services Institute outpost in Qatar.

The charm of Roberts's book is that it is more than a study of Gulf security; it is also a sort of extended introduction to the Copenhagen school, a newish comprehensive approach to analyzing international affairs that views security as more than in the military sense but also as a societal, economic, and environmental concern. Roberts structures his book not by country but rather by the different aspects of security in this expanded view, looking then at the region's efforts to maintain and advance security in each of these realms.

This is an unusual but also refreshing approach. Readers who approach Roberts's work to gather information about, say, Kuwaiti security will find themselves marginally frustrated by the requirement to pick through a discussion about the various aspects of security in the entire Gulf. They will have to engage the book in its entirety rather than dipping in and out, but the rewards for this are substantial.

The Copenhagen school's comprehensive approach to security is one that has generated considerable attention in the academic study of international relations and is now beginning to drive national policy: consider the emphasis on climate change in traditional defense organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Pentagon. Those who work on security tend to be less theory-focused than scholars in other fields (I am exhibit A in this indictment), but Roberts provides both a comprehensive overview of this school of international relations in his introduction as well as an extended application of the Copenhagen analysis to the Gulf.

A student of IR with no interest in Gulf affairs would find this book to be an enjoyable and entertaining read. Gulf specialists, and especially Gulf security specialists, will benefit from considering the expanded definition of security and employing it in their work.

SAMAAN: THE FOCUSED GAZE

Jean-Loup Samaan's *New Military Strategies in the Gulf* is more narrowly focused on defense reform in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates in the decade from 2010 until 2020. Samaan, a former French defense ministry official with years of experience teaching at the UAE National Defence College, has a strong insight into military thought trends in the region. His chosen field of study is a good one: the three countries examined are the drivers of Gulf military trends, and — despite rhetoric to the contrary — tend to view one another as rivals or even “frenemies.” The decade, aside from the lure of recency, is one that opened with a period of Gulf security reassessment as the Americans retreated from Iraq and ended with Qatar having endured a pointless internecine blockade by Saudi Arabia and the UAE and with the latter two countries searching for a way to extricate themselves from a war in Yemen that had become as interminable as the American defeat in Iraq. During this decade, the Gulf states sought to develop strategic autonomy as a way to lessen their dependence on America and other outside powers for their security.

Strategic autonomy and the inability to achieve it is the theme of the book, which neither limits itself to strictly military concerns nor dives as deeply into the Copenhagen school as does Roberts's study. Instead, the book devotes chapters to the efforts to develop professional military education (a subject that few have more experience with than Samaan), the efforts to develop military industries, and the role of militaries in developing national and social identity in these three states.

The book then takes a bit of a welcome analytic jump by examining two of the key security issues of the period: the challenges of Gulf regional security integration (which notably includes the Qatar blockade) and the Yemen war. Both chapters can be approached as stand-alone studies.*

* Editor's note: Samaan previously explored the Qatar blockade's impact (or lack thereof) in an article for the *Journal*. See “The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Elusiveness of Defense Cooperation: The Revealing Effect of the 2017–2021 Crisis,” vol. 76, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 179–98, <https://doi.org/10.3751/76.2.12>.

THE WIDER APERTURE

Hicham Alaoui and Robert Springborg's *Security Assistance in the Middle East* has all the strengths and some of the weaknesses endemic to collected volumes with such a wide range of contributors. The contributors are all established experts in their respective fields, but there is such a broad divergence of topics and regions examined that it is most likely that readers will treat this like a reference and read single chapters for their purposes rather than read the entire volume. This is just the nature of such collections.

The primary focus of this book is the United States' efforts to build military capacity in the Arab world. There are a few chapters on the complementary efforts of US partners in the region, such as the European Union, but the spotlight is centered on the Yankees.

The book opens with general overviews of security assistance in the region by such venerable scholars as Anthony Cordesman and Glenn Robinson. It then offers three case studies (Lebanon, Tunisia, and Egypt); the aforementioned four chapters on non-US security assistance; chapters on metrics, public opinion, and civilians in the defense establishment; and finally concludes with two chapters by nonacademic security assistance professionals.

Each of these chapters can be rewardingly read in isolation. Some of the themes and perspectives are common, while others are less known to academics. The chapter by Pink Williams, a former commander of the US security mission to Egypt, is a perspective that academics generally do not experience — I would recommend reading it in sequence with Zeinab Abul-Magd's on Egypt.

As one would expect, the introduction and conclusion are more than just foreshadowing and recapitulation. The conclusion in particular serves as a brief but comprehensive discussion of the various factors that have frustrated security capacity development in the region. It is mandatory reading for anyone interested in the subject.

One strength of this volume is that the various authors have clearly read one another's contributions and refer to them. The editors have labored mightily to overcome the inherent challenges of a collected volume, but the broad sweep of the subject has made this an impossible charge. Nevertheless, Alaoui and Springborg's work is one that scholars and policy-makers would be wise to keep close at hand, albeit with certain chapters tabbed.

We who work on regional security are in a dark age where we are seeing the increasing possibility of conflict but an enlightened age of academic writing on the challenges and approaches to developing and enhancing security in the Arab Middle East. The efforts of Roberts, Samaan, and Alaoui and Springborg (together with their contributors) are extremely timely, but their value lies in true scholarship rather than just novelty or the thrill of immediacy. Alaoui and Springborg's work is a useful reference; both Samaan's and Roberts's are indispensable to anyone interested in Gulf security, and Roberts's will be of value as an explanation of a developing school of IR theory even to those with little interest in the region. Just on the strength of these volumes, 2023 was an *annus mirabilis* for students of regional security.

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