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David S. Sorenson’s *Civil-Military Relations in the Modern Middle East* provides an in-depth and comprehensive examination of the complex interplay between military and civilian authorities in a region often defined by its turbulent political landscape. Sorenson, a seasoned scholar of Middle Eastern politics and security, delves into the historical, political, and social factors that shape civil-military relations across various countries in the Middle East, offering valuable insights into the forces that drive both stability and upheaval in the region.

Sorenson’s book is structured around a series of case studies that highlight the diversity of civil-military relations across the Middle East. By focusing on individual countries, such as Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, Sorenson elucidates the unique historical trajectories and contemporary dynamics that influence the military in each state. This approach allows readers to appreciate the specificities of each country while also drawing broader conclusions about civil-military interactions in the region.

One of the book’s major strengths is its historical depth. Sorenson traces the evolution of military roles in governance from the colonial and postcolonial periods to the present. For instance, in Egypt, the military has been a dominant force since the Free Officers movement of 1952, and Sorenson meticulously documents how this legacy continues to shape Egyptian politics, especially in the post-Arab Spring era. Similarly, the author explores the military’s fluctuating role in Turkey, from its position as the guardian of secularism to its current subordination under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s administration.

Sorenson also addresses the ideological dimensions of civil-military relations. He examines how ideological commitments—whether secular nationalism, Islamism, or other political doctrines—affect military behavior and civilian control. For example, the book provides an insightful analysis of Iran, where the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operates both as a military force and a political entity, deeply intertwined with the ideological fabric of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Following the introduction (chapter 1), in chapter 2, on military and society in the Middle East, Sorenson examines the profound and complex interactions between military institutions and the societies they operate within. He discusses how the military often serves as a microcosm of broader societal structures, reflecting and sometimes reinforcing social hierarchies based on eth-
nicity, sect, and class. The author illustrates how conscription policies, recruitment practices, and military service can influence social cohesion and national identity, often serving as tools for social engineering by authoritarian regimes. The chapter also addresses the dual role of the military as both protector and oppressor, highlighting instances where military forces have been deployed against domestic populations to suppress dissent and maintain regime stability. Through detailed case studies, Sorenson shows how the military’s relationship with society can vary significantly across different Middle Eastern countries, influenced by historical, cultural, and political contexts. This analysis underscores the importance of understanding the societal dimensions of military power in assessing civil-military relations in the region.

In chapter 3, on civil-military relations of Middle East transitions, the author delves into the complex challenges and transformations that occur during periods of political upheaval and regime change in the region. He explores how civil-military relations are often reshaped in the aftermath of revolutions, coups, and democratization efforts, examining the dynamics of power struggles between civilian governments, military leaders, and other influential actors. Sorenson analyzes successful revolutions, failed revolutions, and counterrevolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen during the Arab Spring, elucidating how transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy, or vice versa, can significantly alter the balance of power between civilian and military institutions.

Chapter 4, on the political economy of Middle East civil-military relations, delves into the intricate ways economic factors shape the dynamics between civilian governments and military establishments. He explores how military institutions often extend their influence into economic sectors, becoming key players in such industries as construction and telecommunications. This economic entanglement not only secures the military’s financial independence but also reinforces its political power. Sorenson highlights how economic control allows the military to exert pressure on civilian leaders, often leading to a symbiotic yet tension-filled relationship where the military supports the regime in exchange for economic privileges. The chapter provides a nuanced analysis of how economic interests can both stabilize and destabilize civil-military relations, depending on how resources are managed and distributed. Sorenson’s examination of the political economy offers critical insights into the sustainability of military influence and its implications for governance and reform in the Middle East.

Chapter 5 delves into the historical evolution of military power, from colonial legacies to postcolonial state-building efforts, shedding light on the enduring significance of military establishments in shaping state structures and political processes. Sorenson also examines the diverse roles played by militaries in different Middle Eastern countries, ranging from guardians of stability to actors in regime change and authoritarian repression. Moreover, the chapter discusses the internal dynamics of military institutions, including their organizational structures, recruitment strategies, and ideological orientations, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay between military and civilian spheres.

In terms of methodology, Sorenson employs a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating political science, history, and sociology to build a nuanced understanding of his subject. This is particularly evident in his treatment of Syria, where he blends historical narrative with an analysis of the Assad regime’s reliance on military support to maintain power amid civil war. The detailed examination of the Syrian Arab Army and various militia groups offers a clear picture of how civil-military relations can become entangled with sectarian and ethnic divisions, further complicating governance and stability.

Sorenson’s work effectively illustrates how the military’s role is often a double-edged sword,
providing stability while also stifling political development and democracy. The book also addresses the international dimensions of civil-military relations. In particular, it highlights the role of foreign powers in training, equipping, and influencing Middle Eastern militaries. The influence of the United States in Egypt and Iraq, Russia in Syria, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Turkey is explored to underscore how international dynamics interplay with domestic civil-military affairs.

However, the book is not without its limitations. While Sorenson provides a thorough examination of several key countries, the scope of the Middle East means that some nations receive less attention. For example, the gulf monarchies, with their unique security apparatuses and civil-military configurations, are not explored in as much depth. Additionally, while the case study approach is effective, some readers might find the lack of a unifying theoretical framework across the different cases somewhat limiting in terms of comparative analysis.

In conclusion, despite these minor shortcomings, Civil-Military Relations in the Modern Middle East is a significant contribution to the field of Middle Eastern studies and civil-military relations. Sorenson’s meticulous research, combined with his ability to synthesize complex historical and political information, makes this book an essential resource for scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in understanding the intricate dynamics of military and civilian power in the Middle East.

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