Explaining the Ineffectiveness of Arab Armies

Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 696 pp., $34.96.

A Review Essay

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The armed forces, one might argue, are the most important institutions of the state since they alone have the capacity not just to defend it but also to destroy it. In authoritarian polities the military plays an especially critical role since the generals’ active support is indispensable for regime maintenance. Still, until just a few years ago the armies of the Arab world – composed exclusively of authoritarian states – were some of the most understudied militaries on the planet. Although following post-independence state-formation, the robust political role of many Arab armies received extensive attention, from the mid-1970s all the way up to the 2011 uprisings only a few scholarly studies appeared on the region’s militaries. In the interim period academic interest in Arab military politics had waned, obtaining reliable information without endangering oneself and one’s sources was difficult, and the little that was published was rarely presented in a methodologically sound and systematic manner.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This state of affairs changed in 2011 when the armed forces’ decisive role in the resolution of the Arab upheavals reminded us just how little we knew about them. After the uprisings the armed conflicts and political revitalization in much of the region attracted renewed scholarly attention benefitting from the explosion of media coverage and the (partial) breakdown of some old rules and norms that impeded research into the military in the past. As a result, the past 7-8 years have seen an upsurge of strong academic work published on Arab armies. Several excellent monographs,[[2]](#footnote-2) compendia,[[3]](#footnote-3) and dozens of scholarly articles – including symposia in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* in 2011 and the *Journal of Strategic Studies* in 2013 – in disciplinary and area studies journals signaled the return of politico-military issues to the forefront of scholarship on the region.

The most recent and the most notable of this rich harvest is Kenneth Pollack’s *Armies of Sand*,published in early 2019. The book’s primary goal is to explain an old conundrum: the remarkably and consistently weak combat record of Arab armies. Few scholars are better positioned to take on this task than Pollack. For the past three decades he has held jobs as a Washington analyst and adviser at the CIA, the Brookings Institution, and now at the American Enterprise Institute with stints on the National Security Council: in all these endeavors he focused on security issues in the Arab world and the wider Middle East, notably Iran.

*Armies of Sand* originates in Pollack’s 1996 MIT dissertation, *The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness*, a 792-page (!) study that purported to explain “why have Arab armed forces fared so poorly in combat since 1945?”[[4]](#footnote-4) The explanatory variables – “the characteristics of dominant Arab culture”[[5]](#footnote-5) – he introduced were nearly identical to those analyzed in his new book, the discussion of politicization was very similar, and a number of the key case studies of that work were the same as well although presented in a less persuasive and confident manner. This after all, was a dissertation, written for a different audience and for a different purpose by a young scholar.

Pollack’s revised thesis became a 700-plus page tome published under the title, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* in 2002.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although some of the dissertation’s rough edges were smoothed out, the book retained most of its problems. One scrupulous reviewer faulted it for not offering a compelling and wholly original argument to explain the study’s central question, for the problematic research design which limited “what Pollack’s analysis can tell us about Arab states’ efficacy in war,” and for the “method of assessment of his evidence” that was deemed “at best ambiguous and, at worst, highly subjective.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Still, *Arabs at War* was a major contribution partly because of its detailed and discerning case studies and, perhaps even more so, owing to its attention to the long overdue discussion of a significant and ever-timely subject. It is noteworthy that theretofore few attempted to tackle this topic; none more perceptively than Norvell B. De Atkine, a retired U.S. Army colonel with many years of service and first-hand experience with Arab armies.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*Armies of Sand*, thus, is the third iteration of Pollack’s work on Arab military effectiveness and it adopts whatever is useful – and there is much, including six of the twenty-two chapters – from the earlier versions. This time around, he hits it out of the proverbial ballpark. No book is flawless and this, too, has its share of problems as I shall hash out below. But, lest I be misunderstood, I do want to state it at the outset: notwithstanding my criticisms this is the best book I have read on Arab armies. The argument of *Armies of Sand* is logically structured and persuasive, it is based on unusually wide-ranging research, and it is written in an accessible style with occasional flashes of humor. Most of all, Pollack’s new book succeeds in explaining a long-standing puzzle in military and Middle East studies.

The book’s design is simple, sensible, and effective. Pollack starts off with the useful though well-trodden example of the crushing defeat of Arab armies in the 1967 Six-Day War against a numerically inferior Israeli side. Then, in Chapter 1, he catalogues their main shortcomings from the greatest and most consistent to the less debilitating and inconstant. Since the Second World War, Arab forces displayed persistent and debilitating weaknesses in armed conflicts especially in tactical leadership, information management and intelligence, technical skills and weapons handling. The record is more wavering in areas like strategic leadership (many limitations but some strengths), unit cohesion (variable “not only from war to war and army to army, but even within armies during the same war”[[9]](#footnote-9)), logistics (generally OK), maintenance (mostly problematic), morale (varying from war to war). Pollack emphatically renounces the claim of earlier observers that cowardice was a common problem with Arab troops. He splits the critical issue of training to two separate discussions: the amount of preparation to fight external enemies as opposed to domestic opponents of the regime and the determination with which armies approach the task of preparing for war (on both counts, a mixed record).

The next step is to explain these deficiencies that together account for the humiliating war record of Arab armies. To do so, Pollack considers four principal arguments that for long have been offered by analysts to illuminate the question: reliance on Soviet doctrine, politicization, underdevelopment, and cultural patterns. The rest of the book, in four corresponding multi-chapter sections, is dedicated to meticulous deliberations of the merits and limitations of these contentions.

The foremost examples Pollack uses to illustrate the failings of Arab military effectiveness concern armies that were strongly impacted by or relied on Soviet military doctrine, training, and weapons. These included virtually all the armed conflicts of Egypt (1960s and 1970s), Iraq (1980s and 1990s), Libya (since independence), North and South Yemen (in the 1994 Civil War), and Syria (from the 1960s to the present). He finds that the chief cause of these armies’ poor performance on the battlefield was not their dependence on Soviet methods of warfighting. In fact, few of them adopted Soviet practices properly – as Pollack writes, their Soviet advisers “tore their hair out at the unwillingness of the Arabs to take their methods to heart and implement them as Moscow intended…”[[10]](#footnote-10) He also offers an instructive additional perspective by dissecting in a separate chapter the war records of two non-Arab militaries – the North Korean army during the Korean War (1950-1953) and that of the Cuban expeditionary forces in Angola (1975-1988) and Ethiopia (1977-1978) – that were similarly reliant on Soviet methods. He concludes that their combat performance “pretty much puts the nail in the coffin of the theory that Soviet military doctrine is to blame for the poor showing of Arab militaries since 1945.”[[11]](#footnote-11) In fact, Pollack demonstrates that, if anything, the Arab militaries’ reliance on Soviet methods, inconsistent and halfhearted as it was, probably *improved* their performance.

The second major theory advanced to explain Arab military deficiencies suggests that it is rooted in the excessive politicization. Pollack outlines three different types of politicization – praetorianism, commissarism, and palace guardism, concepts that he thrashed out already in his dissertation – and explains how they have gotten in the way of Arab military effectiveness. He also notes another closely related (and common) phenomenon that has had a markedly strong impact on civil-military relations in authoritarian states, the “top-down problem,” indicating that “politicization tends to have the greatest impact on the higher levels of command with diminishing impact at lower ranks.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In the next two chapters Pollack evaluates how politicization had affected the Egyptian and Iraqi armies in various periods. Then, in the balance of this part of the book, he dedicates separate chapters to contemplate the differences politicization made on the performance of two other heavily politicized armies: the South Vietnamese in the Vietnam War (1969-1975) and the Argentine during the Falklands War (1982). He finds that while politicization negatively impacted all four militaries, it was by no means the most important problem that explained their failures as warfighting entities. He concludes that “politicization has been a cause of Arab military weakness, but it is only one of many, and not the most important.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The study’s next section is devoted to refute the third major argument that is often purported to shed light on the Arab armies’ subpar performance. This line of reasoning goes like this: Arab states have been chronically underdeveloped – including, for three-fourths of the 20th century, the oil-rich monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula – therefore, they could not generate military power to the same extent as more advanced economies could. In other words, the fundamental cause of Arab military feebleness has been economic, displayed by several symptoms such as low health and education standards and limited familiarity with technology. These attributes manifested themselves in problems related to maintenance and repair, engineering, training, etc. Pollack weighs these matters in chapters that follow, concentrating on the bearing of economic development on the military performance of Syria, Libya, and another extraneous example, China during the Korean War. His comparative analysis of these (and other, more briefly mentioned) cases confirms the hypothesis that “underdevelopment is not the best explanation for Arab military ineffectiveness from 1945 to 1991.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The most convincing explanation for Arab military ineffectiveness, Pollack argues, is firmly rooted in the attributes of and patterns of Arab culture. Researchers have long known that there is a causal link between Arab culture and military performance but, in the past decades, cultural explanations have become extremely sensitive and, for Western academics, potentially career damaging if done sloppily or injudiciously. No one is more aware of this than Pollack who writes that “dealing with culture is like working with nitroglycerin: it may be necessary to do so, even useful, but you have to handle it with great care.”[[15]](#footnote-15) And he does. In fact, he devotes the next six chapters, nearly 100 pages in all, to a fascinating, sagacious, balanced, and well researched discussion of culture in general and Arab culture in particular. Along the way he fastidiously mines the scholarly literature in a number of disciplines – anthropology, economics, history, pedagogy, psychology – accepting only findings reached by multiple respected researchers and categorically excluding anecdotal evidence (including his own).

Pollack leaves no stone unturned as he draws attention to all possible caveats that could potentially derail the equanimity of his exposition. He notes that culture is not congenital, it constantly changes, it is helpful in understanding large group behavior but not individual conduct, and that there are important differences between the culture of various Arab societies and regional subcultures even as they share many essential attributes. “Culture,” Pollacks says, “can grant some advantages to a society in certain activities where two societies are competing, but that does not mean that one is superior to the other except in that narrow area of competition.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This point reminded me of a point a senior British adviser to the Omani military made in conversation: for the Western mindset, the action of Arab officers who go home early may be frustrating, but for those officers spending time with family is more important than to discharge duties they consider inessential – and who is to judge who is right?[[17]](#footnote-17)

In the end, Pollack settles on a number of Arab cultural characteristics that, he argues, suggest a causal relationship with military ineffectiveness: conformity, centralization of and deference to authority, passivity, group loyalty, manipulation of information, atomization of knowledge, as well as ambivalence toward manual labor and technical work. His several-chapter long discussion of how culture is inculcated and continually reinforced by informal (families, friends, etc.) and formal (the education system, places of employment, mosques, military training) agents of socialization is evenhanded and exhaustive. To make the study fully comprehensive, Pollack considers examples he considers anomalous, splitting them into state armed forces (e.g., Jordan in 1948, Syria’s commandos in 1982) and non-state armies (Hizballah, Da’ish [a.k.a. ISIS]) to account for their better than average performance. Ultimately, he presents a watertight case to support the book’s fundamental argument that the most important explanatory variable for Arab military ineffectiveness is none other than Arab culture. Ever prudent, Pollack notes in the conclusion that cultures, technologies, and approaches to warfighting do change and the failings of contemporary Arab armies might well diminish or be even reversed in the future.

This *is* a terrific book but it has a number of shortcomings. At 696 pages, it is unnecessarily long – though unsurprisingly so, given that the shortest of Pollack’s six single-authored books is 528 pages – and the redundancies for the alert reader are frustrating. At times Pollack comes across as the pedantic schoolteacher who, in a desperate effort to get his points across, relentlessly repeats himself. Some of the discussions to illustrate basic concepts like politicization – e.g., the expositions on World War II Soviet and German history (123-128) – seem unnecessary, a footnote directing the reader to key sources would have been sufficient. Do we really need a thirty-page treatise on North Korean and Cuban military performance in long-ago wars to understand that Soviet doctrine did not appear to hinder their performance? Or twenty pages to get another important albeit equally simple point about the Argentine armed forces?

At the same time some principal Arab countries, wars, and arguments get short shrift in *Armies of Sand*. Most of the examples Pollack mines relentlessly are wars that occurred many decades ago while more recent or even contemporary armed conflicts are ignored. For instance, Algeria, the second most populous Arab state is almost totally overlooked while the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), or, for that matter, the relatively recent and crucially important Algerian Civil War (1991-2002) get nary a mention.[[18]](#footnote-18) The same goes for Tunisia, one of the region’s most interesting states from the military perspective.[[19]](#footnote-19) I, for one, would have been curious to read Pollack’s interpretation of the only Arab military that has played minimal role in politics and never attempted a coup and, incidentally, the only one that, after hastening the end of a corrupt dictatorship has been supportive of the Arab world’s sole credible democratization experiment.

Aside from a few brief historical references, the book offers little to those whose interests lie in the Gulf monarchies. This is a shame not just because the Gulf is a major and increasingly consequential part of the Arab world, but also because civil-military relations, defense economics, and a host of other issues in the Arabian Peninsula are quite different from the rest of the Middle East. What lessons can be learned from the Dhofar Rebellion – or Omani Civil War (1963-1976) in terms of reliance on Soviet doctrine, coalition warfare, and the development of Oman’s modern army?[[20]](#footnote-20) What is the impact of the large number of mercenaries serving in the armed forces of the Gulf? What about the role American, British, and other Western military training and bases play in the Gulf countries’ defense? What were the reasons for and what changes can one anticipate from the recently introduced mandatory military service in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates? How can one account for the UAE armed forces’ widely recognized recent professional advances especially when contrasted with no parallel developments in Saudi Arabia’s military establishment? Pollack ignores all of these questions.

More importantly, the Yemeni Civil War, a major armed conflict that has been going on since early 2015 receives hardly any attention from Pollack. This is quite a surprising authorial decision – especially since all the wars as far back as the 1940s and 1950s that he does allot ample coverage to – considering that the war between the Houthis and the Yemeni government and their backers features all kinds of issues and raises a host of questions that Pollack writes about. Rather than going back to painstakingly analyze Libya’s wars against Chad in the 1970s and 1980s that only a few experts can claim to be familiar with and care about, he could have delved into a war of great consequence that is going on right now and that involves both America’s key allies (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and enemy (Iran) in the region. I wonder how would he explain the embarrassing military performance of Saudi Arabia, a beneficiary of many billions of dollars’ worth of top-shelf Western weaponry, training, and logistical/intelligence support? Why does the Saudi/UAE campaign against the Houthi insurgents continue after four years of fighting? One would think that explaining the reasons for this outcome would have been more useful and appealing to the reader than some of the more obscure historical examples with questionable relevance to the present.

Although Pollack’s research is far-reaching, I was surprised not to find a single Arabic-language source in his bibliography. Also, for someone who claims to have spent a great deal of time in the region in the last three decades, virtually all of the interviews he cites appear to have been conducted in the 1990s for his dissertation research with the exception of one endnote, “Author’s interviews with US military personnel in Iraq, 2003-2011.”[[21]](#footnote-21) I found the absence of recent interview materials curious because those of us who regularly conduct field research in the region typically obtain a great deal of useful information and derive much benefit from talking with Arab journalists, scholars, politicians, and (often retired) military personnel.

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, this work is a signal achievement and, in my view, the best English-language book on Arab militaries to date. It fully achieves its objective as it provides a convincing and nuanced explanation to a crucial but often misunderstood issue. Among the many distinctions of Pollack’s study is his extraordinarily sensitive, multidimensional, and useful treatment of culture as a valuable and illuminating explanatory variable. For that alone, it is worth reading.

1. \* Zoltan Barany is Frank C. Erwin, Jr. Professor of Government at the University of Texas and the author, most recently, of *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

   For an assessment of the extant literature on the subject, see Oren Barak and Assaf David, “The Arab Security Sector: A New Research Agenda for a Neglected Topic,” *Armed Forces & Society*, 36:5 (October 2010): 804-24. Barak’s *The Lebanese Army: A National Institution in a Divided Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009) and Anthony H. Cordesman’s *Saudi Arabia: National Security in a Troubled Region* (New York: Praeger, 2009) are two of the few noteworthy book-length studies on individual Arab armies from this era. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for instance, Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen: Egypt’s Road to Revolt* (London: Verso, 2012) and *idem*., *The Power Triangle: Military Security, and Politics in Regime Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); J. E. Peterson, *Oman’s Insurgencies: The Sultanate’s Struggle for Supremacy* (London: Saqi, 2013); Stephanie Cronin, *Armies and State-Building in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Florence Gaub, *Guardians of the Arab State* (London: Hurst, 2017); and Sean Burns, *Revolts and the Military in the Arab Spring* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018) – the last I reviewed in the Autumn 2018 issue of this journal. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Holger Albrecht, Aurel Croissant, and Fred H. Lawson, eds., *Armies and Insurgencies in the Arab Spring* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and Zeinab Abul-Magd and Elke Grawert, eds., *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness*, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, MIT, February 1996,4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*., 48-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. University of Nebraska Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Risa A. Brooks’s highly critical but deeply insightful review essay, “Making Military Might: Why Do States Fail and Succeed?” *International Security*, 28:2 (Fall 2003), 149-191, citation on 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Norvell B. De Atkine, “Why Arabs Lose Wars,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (*MERIA*), 4:1 (March 2000): 16-27. De Atkine’s later papers on the subject – all chock full of plain-spoken first-person observation – include “Western Influence on Arab Militaries: Pounding Square Pegs into Round Holes,” *MERIA*, 17:1 (Spring 2013): 18-31; and “’Muhammad Taught Us How to Fight’: The Islamic State and Early Islamic Warfare Tradition,” *MERIA*, 19:3 (Fall 2015): 19-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*., 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*., 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*., 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*., 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*., 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*., 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid.*, 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Author’s confidential interview (Muscat, 16 May 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See for instance, Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2003); and Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. # Hicham Bou Nassif, “A Military Besieged: The Armed Forces, the Police, and the Party in Bin ‘Ali’s Tunisia, 1987-2011,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 47:1 (February 2015): 65-87.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. # See, for instance, Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Armies of Sand*, endnote 18, 596. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)