



Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness by Kenneth M. Pollack.

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Following the departure of international forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the question of what makes militaries effective has come to preoccupy the general public as much it has scholars and practitioners. Kenneth Pollack's forward-looking new book makes an important contribution to the conversation.

Armies of Sand is a well researched book in which Pollack adopts a focused case study method. His lucid prose makes for a highly readable contribution accessible to interested laypersons and professionals alike. Drawing primarily from conflicts involving Arab states in the period 1950-2000, Pollack addresses four theories of why Arab militaries have been so consistently ineffective: (a) adaptation of Soviet doctrine, (b) politicization of the military, (c) underdevelopment of the economy, and (d) Arab culture.

Pollack demonstrates that the train and equip approach to security cooperation taken by the Soviets (and later, by the United States, particularly in Iraq from 2003 to 2011), was a failure of innovation and creativity. Pollack argues that Arab military success in the modern era has less often depended on the battlefield success of specific commanders than on the ability of a highly competent general staff to script an consistent daily plan. Forced to go off-script, Arab militaries are far less competent. Indeed, Pollack notes, many of the complaints of US advisors to Arab militaries are similar to those of Soviet advisors.

Similarly, the author downplays politicization as a cause of Arab military ineptness. Instead, he divides politicization into three categories: (a) praetorianism, that is, military dictatorship or a strong military influence in the governments; (b) commissarism, or "coup-proofing"; and, (c) palace guardism, that is, militaries designed to protect a regime from internal threats. Pollack compares the Arab experiences, including the defeat and disintegration of the Iraqi military, to, for instance, Argentina during the Falklands War and South Vietnam in the period 1969-75. While each of the politicized militaries he assesses suffered from multiple problems, only the Arab versions lacked aggressiveness and creativity at the junior officer levels.

Pollack investigates the role underdevelopment may have played in the poor performance of the Arab militaries. Here, he acknowledges that there are some consistencies in technical areas where education would play a role, such as weapons handling, maintenance, combined arms, and setting a pace of operations. But he establishes that, in areas like engineering, logistics, and training, Arab militaries have been effective at times, thus breaking the pattern. After examining the Syrians in the Israeli War of Independence and economic development during the Libya-Chad wars, the author contrasts them with Chinese performance in the Korean War; he finds that Arab militaries "had less in common with the performance of other Third World militaries than they had in common with them (emphasis in the original)" (338).

Pollack's thesis is that culture has been responsible for Arab military ineffectiveness over the decades. This accounts for the general failure of those professionals who have wondered why US

efforts to train and equip Middle Eastern partners have yielded only moderate improvements in military effectiveness. “Sons are taught to be submissive to their father and generally are discouraged from taking any decisions of consequence without paternal approval In Arab society, to do something wrong generally is much worse than to do nothing at all” (376). Deference to authority brings honor, while shame enforces conformity. These observations buttress Pollack’s argument that Arab armies generally fail to innovate at the tactical level, but often perform well when led by superb generals able to script operations days in advance.

Perhaps the most important weakness of this important work is one that Pollack himself recognizes: the unprecedented change occurring across the Middle East over the past few decades. In developing his conclusions that Arab military effectiveness reflects the broader Arab culture, he focused on formal Arab military institutions in the later twentieth century. By contrast, Hizballah (a non-state actor) during the Syrian civil war and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (a quasi-state actor) demonstrated initiative and innovation. Here, Pollack credits zeal; poor adversaries; flat or unorthodox hierarchies; and, in the case of the Islamic State, the large number of foreign fighters. Thus, while formal institutions may reflect core aspects of Arab culture, less formal, more innovative fighting institutions in the Middle East may show a path toward better military capability.

Pollack offers few recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness of Arab militaries. There is a rich history of foreign advising across the Arab world; this included French and German advisors after the Franco-Prussian War, and Soviet and US advisors in the latter the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Generally, these advisors concentrated on tactical performance over institutional and ministerial-level ability to generate and sustain forces in the field. Here, one wonders whether rank-conscious military organizations in the Middle East impeded institutional improvements.

Armies in the Sand will make an excellent addition to the bookshelves not only of scholars and laypersons interested in the military affairs of the Middle East but also of anyone interested in security cooperation and improving military effectiveness more generally.