

**Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness**, Kenneth M. Pollack, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 676, \$34.95 hardcover.

## The Arab Military and American Foreign Policy

Edward S. Shapiro

Wars give rise to a number of questions, including what caused them and what the political, economic, and social implications will be. The major concern of historians of war, however, beginning with Herodotus and Thucydides, through Edward Gibbon's multi-volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788), and continuing to the present day, has been to show why some nations and empires have won while others have lost wars. The great nineteenth century German military

thinker Carl von Clausewitz defined war as "the continuation of politics by other means," but what have been the most effective of these means for achieving victory? World War II historians such as Jonathan W. Jordan and Andrew Roberts have emphasized the crucial role of military leadership in the Allied victory, while other historians, including Ian Toll, Arthur Herman, and Paul Kennedy, have pointed to superior Allied war production and more advanced military technology as the critical factors. Certainly there is more to victory than bigger battalions, as Napoleon claimed and which the United States discovered to its regret in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

The reasons for victory and defeat have also dominated the writing on recent Middle East warfare. This has been driven by the need to explain the shocking military ineptitude of Arab armies, particularly in their wars with Israel since 1948. At first glance, Israel's military predominance over her Arab neighbors appears inexplicable in view of her smaller population and far more limited economic

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1 See, for example, David Donald, ed., *Why the North Won the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960); Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995); and Bevin Alexander, *How Hitler Could Have Won World War II: The Fatal Errors That Led to Nazi Defeat* (New York: Crown, 2000). Perhaps the best starting place for understanding modern military effectiveness in World War I, the interwar period, and World War II are the three volumes edited by Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray titled *Military Effectiveness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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resources. And yet whenever a major war has broken out between Israel and her neighbors the Jewish state has won decisively and in a relatively short time. The Six-Day War of 1967, in which the combined armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan squared off against Israel, was especially important in propagating an imagery of Arab military ineffectiveness. This shocking humiliation has been attributed to a host of factors, including the Arab personality, culture, educational practices, and political systems, as well as to a lack of professionalism within the officer corps and low morale and inadequate training within the ranks.

What makes contemporary Arab military ineptitude particularly interesting is that Arab armies were not always known for losing wars. Beginning in the seventh century, Arab armies spreading Islam overran North Africa, the Middle East, and Spain in short order, defeated Crusader armies several centuries later, and conquered territories in southern Europe. Far from being a focus of derision as they are today, Arab armies were much feared. Much of the interest of historians and social scientists in Arab military ineffectiveness stems from this contrast between the effectiveness of prior Arab armies and their contemporary counterparts.

Why were the regular armies of Egypt unable to defeat Yemeni irregular forces? Why was Iraq unable to conquer the Kurds? How in 2014 could a rag-tag ISIS army of ten to twenty thousand soldiers move unchallenged over a wide swath of territory in Syria and Iraq and be on the verge of establishing a caliphate extending from Iraq to the Mediterranean? But the success of irregular and unconventional Arab military forces such as those in Algeria during the 1950s, in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, in Lebanon early this century, and ISIS in Syria and Iraq should instill caution in claiming that Arabs cannot wage effective modern war. If the definition of winning at war is achieving the political objectives for which it was fought, then the Arabs have certainly won some recent wars.

Kenneth M. Pollack is a prominent authority on Middle East warfare, although the footnotes and bibliography of his books do not indicate a familiarity with the languages of the Middle East. He is the author of seven books on the Middle East and Iran, including *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (2004), *A Path Out of the Desert: A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East* (2008) and *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy* (2013). His 1996 doctoral dissertation

at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—"The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991"—was the basis for his first book, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (2002). With *Armies of Sand* he has now brought the story of Arab military failure up-to-date. Pollack begins *Armies of Sand* by asking:

What's wrong with the Arab armies? Why do they lose so many wars that by all rights they should win? And why is it that when they do win, their victories tend to be so modest, if not outright pyrrhic? Why have the Arabs lost to Israel time and again? Why did it take Iraq eight long years to defeat an Iran wracked by revolution and cut off from the rest of the world? Why was that same Iraqi army then crushed effortlessly by the US-led Coalition in the Persian Gulf War of 1991? How on earth did the Libyans manage to lose to Chad in 1987? Chad! And the Libyans weren't just beaten, they were routed. Why did the Iraqi army collapse under ISIS attack in 2014? And why was it so hard for Iraq to drive ISIS out of their country despite massive American air power and the

assistance of sixty-two other countries? (ix)

Since Arab military ineffectiveness is to be found throughout the Arab world, the answers to his questions, Pollack argues, are not to be found in the unique histories of individual Arab countries, in the biographies of individual Arab political and military leaders, in the nefarious plots of the Zionists, or in the shameful ambitions of the Americans, but rather in a culture which transcends the political boundaries of the Arab states and which has shaped the policies of their diverse leaders. "Certain patterns of behavior fostered by the dominant Arab culture," Pollack wrote in his doctoral dissertation, "were the most important factors contributing to the limited military effectiveness of Arab armies and air forces from 1945 to 1991."

One of the virtues of *Armies of Sand* is showing what social science can contribute to the debate over Arab military ineptitude and, by implication, to the examination of military incompetence in general. The involvement of American social scientists in the study of armies and war began in a serious way during World War II when they were recruited by the federal government in behalf of the war effort. Their most notable contribution was

the four-volume survey of American soldiers during World War II published in 1949 and 1950. This survey was directed by Samuel A. Stouffer, a prominent Harvard sociologist and a specialist in the relatively new fields of market research and public opinion polling. Stouffer headed the Research Branch of the Army Information and Education Division during the war. The Research Branch employed dozens of social scientists, and their famous survey questioned over a half-million American soldiers regarding racial integration, their officers, American war aims, and other topics.<sup>2</sup>

Other American social scientists during the war worked in the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services, the Office of War Information, the War Relocation Authority, the War Labor Board, the War Production Board, the National Resources Planning Board, the Selective Service System, the Office of Price Administration, and the Strategic Bombing Survey which studied the strategic bombing campaign against Germany and Japan.

The French political thinker Raymond Aron noted that “an army always resembles the country from which it is raised and of which it is

the expression.” Social scientists have shown that armies and war cannot be viewed in isolation, that the factors leading to military victory include not merely political and military leadership, weaponry and technology, industrial output, the size and training of the military, and diplomatic alliances, but also social and cultural factors which determine how effectively military resources are employed. One important example of the effort by social scientists to understand why nations win and lose wars is Stephen D. Biddle’s prize-winning book, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (2004). “To understand the military underpinnings of international politics,” Biddle wrote, “requires a systematic explanation of how material and nonmaterial factors interact to produce real combat outcomes.”

Pollack’s doctorate is in political science, and he has benefitted from an extensive social science literature on the reasons for success and failure in war. Since receiving his degree he has worked at the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, the National Defense University, the Brookings Institution, and the Council of Foreign Relations, and is currently employed by the American Enterprise

2 For Stouffer, see Joseph W. Ryan, *Samuel Stouffer and the GI Survey: Sociologists and Soldiers during the Second World War* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013).

Institute. *Armies of Sand* is dedicated to three of his undergraduate professors at Yale—Paul Bracken, Paul Kennedy, and Brad Westerfield—and he has spent time at Harvard University. He is thus a product and a member in good standing of the national security establishment.

Pollack first came to widespread public attention with the publication in 2002 of *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*. This was a lengthy defense of the rationale used by the George W. Bush administration in invading Iraq the following year. Pollack claimed here that the cost of leaving Saddam Hussein in power and his nuclear weapons factories intact would be much greater than any military effort to oust him. An invasion, he wrote, “may not be cost-free, but it is unlikely to be horrific and it is the only sensible course of action” to block Iraq from continuing to develop chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons; to end her threat to her Arab neighbors and Israel; and to prevent her export of state-sponsored terrorism. (424)

Pollack was correct in emphasizing the weakened status of Iraq’s conventional military forces, and he correctly predicted a war with Iraq would be short and relatively painless in the short-term for the American military. And while it would

be difficult to imagine Israel establishing diplomatic relations with four Arab League countries (Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Morocco) in 2020 with Saddam still in power, the war had serious long-term negative consequences which he did not discuss. It emboldened the far more dangerous Iran by removing from power its traditional Iraqi foe, heightened the animosities of rival political and religious groups within Iraq, and led to an unanticipated and long-lasting irregular war with disaffected Iraqis. *The Threatening Storm* has a section titled “The Advantages of Invasion.” It does not have a section titled “The Disadvantages of Invasion,” although it does have a chapter titled “Rebuilding Iraq” which underestimated the problems and costs to America should it decide to help transform Iraq into a stable and prosperous country with a representative government.

In *Armies of Sand*, Pollack compared the performance of fifteen Arab armies and air forces from 1948 to 2017 to that of the military forces of Argentina, Chad, China, Cuba, North Korea, and North Vietnam, and concluded that Arab culture is the only thing that can explain the poor performance of Arab soldiers. This culture, he wrote, exhibits “rigid top-down decision-making, little initiative

or innovation at lower levels, a propensity for underlings to avoid taking responsibility and to await decisions from above, and problems with information flows both vertically and horizontally.” (406) Arab culture prioritizes “passivity, dependency, resignation, deception, dissimulation, and quietude” (369); emphasizes conformity to the group and the centralization of authority at the expense of originality, innovation, and initiative; and disdains science and manual labor. Within Arab militaries, originality and creativity are similarly discouraged, decision-making is marked by rigidity and inflexibility, and morale within the ranks is low. One statistic regarding innovation which Pollack mentioned is especially revealing. Between 1980 and 2000, the number of patents registered in Israel were a hundred times the number registered in Egypt, even though Israel’s population was less than one-seventh that of Egypt.

If one assumes that the emphasis of *Armies of Sand* on Arab culture is correct, it leaves American political and military leaders in a quandary. The United States would prefer to train Arab officers and provide weapons and financial aid to Arab armies so that there would be no need to send American soldiers to the Middle East to counter the ambitions of the

Iranians and the Islamists. But how effective can American military assistance be if the culture of the recipients prevents such assistance from being put to good use? Should the United States withhold or reduce the funds and advanced weaponry it currently provides to some Arab states? Pollack is unwilling to go this far, and one wonders why since this would seem to flow logically from his argument.

But military assistance to Arab states can be defended if, as some of Pollack’s critics argue, it is not culture but politics which is the primary reason for Arab military ineffectiveness. A strong military is a potential threat to Arab political leaders, and this has incentivized them to keep their military forces weak and divided while staffing them with incompetent cronies and members of the ruling families. Pollack noted that this politicization of the Arab military has undermined the morale and cohesion of Arab armies and frustrated American efforts to improve Arab armies. For over forty years, Pollack asserted, “the United States has repeatedly expected its Arab allies to fight in one way and at a certain degree of effectiveness, only to have them fall short,” and he concluded that “[i]ndustrial-age warfare was well beyond the capacity of contemporary Arab society to master.”

Forcing Arab soldiers “to think and act like Americans has not succeeded so far either, and probably never will.” (517-22) One possible solution is new leaders, but there is no assurance that they will be any better than their predecessors, and any attempt to replace the current leaders would lead to political chaos.

And so what can be done? America is seemingly at an impasse, and the wishful bromides with which Pollack concludes his book are of little comfort. He sees on the horizon vast changes in the Middle East stemming from an information revolution which could alter Arab politics and, in turn, transform Arab culture. Pollack concluded *Armies of Sand* by stating that “while the match between their [Arab] society and warfare was a disastrous misfit during the industrial age, the information age might be something else entirely.” (523) It is at least as likely, however, that this revolution will never occur, or that should it occur it will reinforce rather than weaken the political status quo and strengthen those factors responsible for intellectual stagnation and military inefficiency within the Arab world.