

## Strategic Visions: Volume 18, Number II

Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xvi + 676 pp. \$34.95 U.S. cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-090696-2

For the majority of the day on June 7th, 1967, nine Israeli tanks held a small pass in the Sinai Peninsula against three entire divisions of the Egyptian army. Four of the tanks did not have any fuel. Egypt's failure to push the outmatched Israeli force out of the pass was a particularly low point in the Six Day War, where the Arab coalition of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq had nearly every material advantage over their opponents yet were humiliated on every front. In *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, Kenneth M. Pollack, who spent a career as a military analyst of the Persian Gulf at the CIA, National Security Council, Brookings Institution, and American Enterprise Institute, tackles the vexing question: What factors have led Arab militaries to consistently “punch below their weight” and limited their military effectiveness in the post-World War II world?

For Pollack, the greatest factor in Arab underperformance has been the patterns of behavior in the military resulting from the “dominant Arab culture” (511). Various cultural traits, such as conformity and the centralization of authority, have hindered Arab success in military settings by stifling innovation and creativity on the battlefield. With few exceptions, the behavior of Arab armies has not been conducive to what Pollack terms the “dominant mode of warfare” in the late twentieth century (345). Due to technological changes in communications and weaponry, it is impossible for one supreme commander to orchestrate an entire battle alone. Modern

warfare is highly reliant on officers – even junior and non-commissioned - to show initiative and creativity during battle, and the centralization of authority, among other traits, has limited the ability to do this. Militaries of the Arab states are more effective in preplanned, set-piece operations, but in the heat of the battle, these armies have difficulties in reacting, counterattacking, and adapting to unforeseen developments as a result of a dogmatic approach to traditional military doctrine.

To further bolster his argument, Pollack points to the relative effectiveness of insurgencies and militias such as Hezbollah and ISIS over state militaries. These forces are not centralized and lack a traditionally organized structure. This dispersed, “cellular nature” promotes initiative, aggressiveness, and innovation rather than a deference to a central command. *Armies of Sand* also highlights other minor factors that limited Arab effectiveness on the battlefield. In some cases, politicization and patronage systems in military structure put men in positions based on loyalty rather than ability, and the underdeveloped state and late industrialization of Arab economies have also contributed to unfamiliarity with more sophisticated systems. For example, well into the 1990s, the Department of Defense reported that Egyptian pilots were unaccustomed with the avionics and rarely used the radar in their American-made F-16s, even after extensive support from advisers.

Pollack links the importance of analyzing Arab military effectiveness directly to international peace. He urges that American security forces must recognize the strengths and limitations of Arab state armies, because improving the military effectiveness of Arab allies is crucial for regional security and meeting the challenge of insurgents. The key here is not to “force them to think and act like Americans” but highlight what the armies are good at: keeping forces small and focusing on heavily scripted offensives while coalition allies support where needed. Pollack also offers hope for future military effectiveness: the region is undergoing profound political change, and the “information age” will change how all armies conduct warfare in the future.

Pollack breaks *Armies of Sand* into four parts, each examining a major explanation for Arab military ineffectiveness: the influence of the Soviet Doctrine, politicization, economic underdevelopment, and culture. He positions his book as a major historiographical intervention, because scholars have never looked at all of these explanations in relation to one another. While Pollack agrees that, to varying degrees, underdevelopment, politicization, and culture are factors, he rejects one prevailing scholarly notion that “the Soviet Way of War” – which stressed offensive flanking and encirclement operations from ground forces – hindered Arab armies. Instead, *Armies of Sand* argues against that in the few instances where Arab armies faithfully implemented it, the Soviet military doctrine was helpful.

*Armies of Sand* takes a truly multidisciplinary approach, combining military analysis with economic and cultural studies. Pollack’s research is based primarily on published secondary sources, and he adheres to the “Delphi method” of relying on the behavioral analysis of experts to inform his own analysis, claiming that this method has helped him in avoiding unfounded “folk theories” and arguments for which there is no clear consensus among experts regarding Arab culture. While his sources are primarily in English, he draws on the multilingual research of cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural psychologists and applies them to military history. Pollack’s published sources – some translated from Russian or Arabic – range from studies on Soviet military doctrine to publications

from Edward Said and Iraqi sociologist Sana Al-Khayyat. While the majority of his research is secondary, Pollack brings his own research as well, including his analysis of Iraqi military manuals and interviews with U.S. and Israeli military personnel.

Overall, Pollack is careful to treat culture with its proper reverence and care. He acknowledges that culture is “a nebulous subject,” and that treating it with too much precision, as he has done, is ultimately unrealistic. The oversimplification is “an unfortunate necessity,” but he appears to achieve his purpose without doing “grievous damage” (367). While he focuses on broad cultural similarities, he emphasizes regional diversity as well. Attempting to untangle cultural, political, and economic matters is an equally difficult task, because these sources are in constant interaction with one another. This approach certainly opens his analysis up to dispute over the weight each factor deserves, but his process is sound.

Written at a time when the United States is experiencing trials and tribulations in attempting to piece the Iraqi army back together, *Armies of Sand* is a clearly-written and argued analysis for those interested in international relations and security in the Middle East.

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