



Kenneth Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019.

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Four decades of western and Soviet military officers, intelligence personnel, and military analysts have been dumbfounded by Arab military performance. Despite massive military aid and enormous training missions throughout the Arab world, Arab militaries have been largely ineffective, leaving many of these seasoned professionals asking, *why?* Dr. Kenneth Pollack brings a compelling case in his latest book, *Armies of*

Sand. Pollack does not rely on his personal experience in the region (though it is considerable and spans three decades), instead putting together a gripping narrative underpinned by meticulous, interdisciplinary research. If you are an analyst, military officer, or curious observer of the Middle East, there is no better book to lay down a foundation of understanding than *Armies of Sand*.

In this his newest book, Pollack argues that the organizational manifestations of the dominant Arab culture bear the greatest portion of the blame for poor military effectiveness. To demonstrate this, popularized explanations are explored and evaluated with considerable depth. He then seeks to explain the causal mechanisms behind Arab military ineffectiveness and makes adroit use of exceptions to reinforce his thesis.

Pollack attacks the topic from a peculiar vantage point. Other scholars like Stephan Biddle (in 2004's *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*) emphasize force employment. More traditional scholarship focuses on material and technological imbalances. Pollack instead sees military effectiveness through the lens of a "dominant form of warfare." This framework is akin to Plato's search for the "ideal man," or the conception that there exists an optimized version of everything, taking all other things into account. Military effectiveness is brought into being by a society that produces a soldiery best optimized to the dominant mode of warfare for that time. For example, Swiss society in the 15th and 16th centuries produced excellent pikemen because the technology of the pike and method of fighting was optimized by the culture of the Swiss cantons. This gave them the ability to dominate warfare for a time despite other societies having access to the same technology. But as technologies, cultures, societies, and realities change, only the Pope would find use of Swiss pikemen in pantaloons.

The meat of the book focuses on assessing popular scapegoats for Arab military ineffectiveness. First, Pollack debunks the theory that Soviet equipment and doctrine are to blame. This is because, for one, many Arab militaries simply do not use Soviet doctrine, and many are equipped and trained by western nations. Beyond this logical failing, Pollack brings in a thorough qualitative comparison to other Soviet-trained militaries like the Cubans and North Koreans to disprove this claim.

Next, Pollack examines the role politization plays in Arab military effectiveness, ultimately coming to the conclusion that politization certainly hampers Arab military effectiveness but does not account for the largest portion of the problem. Politization, particularly the practice of “coup-proofing,” and other commissarist practices certainly account for a marked drop in military effectiveness.¹ But Pollack ensures that a deliberate logic keeps separate the problems that are caused by politization and those that are simple co-present within a politized military. He claims that the effects of politization would be mostly felt at the strategic-level, where the leader can hand-pick officers whose loyalties (but perhaps not their competence) have been proven. There are simply too many Lieutenants and Captains to effectively screen for loyalty and these ranks rarely have a large enough support base to stage a coup (though Pollack does begrudgingly note Qadhafi). Therefore, Pollack argues that a politized military ought to see diminishing effects as you look further down the ranks from General to Private, but Arab militaries do not seem to follow this logic. While the level of politization definitely has an effect on strategic leadership and depolitizing improves strategic leadership, tactical acumen is lacking across the board irrespective of the level of politization. So while politization is a factor, Pollack does not assess it as the chief cause.

Next, Pollack addresses development. Many scholars, particularly many Arab scholars, point to underdevelopment as a source of military ineffectiveness. Their logic follows that a military that does not have a soldiery familiar with technology cannot hope to maintain nor operate at full potential sophisticated weaponry like fighter aircraft or modern tanks. While first glances may confirm this view, Pollack’s closer look leaves it lacking. Using the Chadian military as an example, Pollack demonstrates that an underdeveloped nation (Chad) can defeat a more developed nation (Libya). History is replete with examples of lesser-developed nations defeating technologically or developmentally superior foes.

This leads Pollack to his ultimate conclusion: there is something unique to Arab militaries that makes them particularly ineffective in this arena. Using an interdisciplinary approach, calling on anthropology, social psychology, history, and

¹ For a wonderful study on military effectiveness in authoritarian regimes, see Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

other disciplines, Pollack demonstrates that there is a dominant Arab culture that establishes certain social norms and modes of behavior for most Arabs. This dominant Arab culture propagates itself in many Arab organizations through familial and educational reinforcement and manifests in most every Arab organization from business enterprises to government bureaucracies but is especially noticeable in military organizations. Pollack uses examples, especially from the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, to demonstrate how Arab cultural traits hamper military effectiveness. He is careful to remind readers that this assessment is most important when describing large social group behavior, not explaining individual person(s) decisions.

The power of Pollack's thesis shines in the final chapters. Here, instead of shying away from exceptions and complicating cases, he demonstrates how these exceptions prove the rule. Jordanian relative effectiveness in 1948 and then lack thereof in subsequent wars is one of several examples that counterintuitively hammer Pollack's thesis home. One unsatisfied itch this book leaves unscratched is any discussion of the relatively effective United Arab Emirates' military; that may be another exception proving the rule but is notably absent from Pollack's analysis.

With its novel approach to military analysis, Pollack's *Armies of Sand* is an excellent addition to the literature on military effectiveness writ large and on the modern Middle East. It is an absolute must-read for any intelligence, diplomatic, or military leader hoping to effect positive change in the region.

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