

***Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991*, by Kenneth M. Pollack**

***Strategic Insights*, Volume III, Issue 1 (January 2004)**

Reviewed by [Daniel Moran](#)

[Strategic Insights](#) is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991. By Kenneth M. Pollack. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8032-3733-2. Maps. Tables. Notes. Index. Pp xv+698.

Arabs do not fight well. Why is that? This is Kenneth Pollack's problem, and it is one that is likely to inspire unease among some of his readers. Even those willing to agree that the statement is true, and the question legitimate, may wish to propose qualifications. In the seventh century, after all, Arab armies, propelled by their new Islamic faith, overran an empire stretching from the Pyrenees to the Hindu Kush, a span of conquest exceeding that of Rome at its zenith, and far more rapidly achieved. No one could suggest that Arabs do not fight bravely. "Cowardice" is one of the possible explanations for Arab military failure that Pollack examines (and rejects) in his new study *Arabs at War*, but the idea is such an obvious straw man that it scarcely bears thinking about. Whatever else we might make of the last half century of warfare in the Arab world, the willingness of its inhabitants to fight and die weapon in hand cannot be doubted.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that since the Arabs acquired political independence in the wake of the Second World War, they have not produced armed forces remotely capable of vindicating the ambitions of their political leaders. Arab armies have performed poorly not just against advanced Western opponents such as Israel, Britain, and the United States, but also against Kurds, Persians, Africans, and each other. It is impossible not to be impressed by this recurring pattern of mediocrity.

Pollack has set out to study it by analyzing Arab "military effectiveness," a concept that he defines as "the ability of an armed service to prosecute military operations and employ weaponry in military operations," and which he equates generally with "the 'human factor'" in war, as distinct from "the quality of [an army's] weapons, or the quantity of its men or materiel" (3-4). It is not an especially fruitful or persuasive definition. It may be contrasted, for instance, with the more dynamic approach of Allen Millett and Williamson Murray, whose influential volumes on the military effectiveness of the armies that fought the World Wars focused instead on "the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power."^[1] This in turn led them to an open-ended series of questions, all of which dealt in various ways with the seminal military problem of harmonizing ends and means: "to what extent," they ask, "are a military organization's concepts and decisions consistent with available technology"; or "to what degree are strategic goals and courses of action consistent with force size and structure."^[2]

Pollack, on the other hand, has organized his investigation in terms of abstract categories or "factors"—unit cohesion, generalship, tactical leadership, information management, technical skills and weapons handling, logistics and maintenance, morale, training, and cowardice—whose relative significance he proposes to weigh in the course of surveying the military histories of six countries: Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Libya. It is basically a mechanical approach, and it suffers from the fact that armies are not machines. Pollack's chosen factors, however reasonable in themselves, are not independent of each other, but, as the statisticians would say, "co-variant," sometimes severely so.

"Morale," "training," "unit cohesion," and "tactical leadership," in particular, are so intimately connected that Pollack's efforts to tease them apart raise doubts about the whole enterprise. When, having labored for almost six hundred pages, Pollack declares that four factors—tactical leadership, information management, weapons handling, and maintenance—are chiefly responsible for Arab military failure, while three others (unit cohesion, logistics, and cowardice) were "simply not problems" (573), one feels quite sure that, had the categorical lines been drawn differently, the results would have been different too. This is a study whose conclusions are defined more by its method than by its evidence.

The artificiality of Pollack's approach is evident in what is certainly his most interesting argument: that the underperformance of Arab armies is chiefly owed to poor junior leadership rather than to bad generals. General Joffre, the supreme commander of the French Army at the start of the First World War, once remarked that he did not know who won the Battle of the Marne, but that he did know who would have lost it, had it been lost. Victory, he knew, has many fathers, while defeat is a foundling laid at the door of the guy in charge. Pollack is not prepared to settle for this sort of conclusion, though it is widespread in the Arab world, where military disappointment is routinely followed by the wholesale vilification and sacking of senior officers. This, in his view, is mostly unfair. He finds the performance of Arab generals to have been mixed—sometimes disastrous, occasionally "superb" (581), but mostly of average professional competence. Such a conclusion is the more easily arrived at, however, if one narrows the scope of what generals are thought to do. One outstanding feature of Arab generals, as Pollack shows, is that they command armies that frequently cannot carry out perfectly sensible orders, officered by subordinates who persistently lie to them about the results of combat operations. These failings—which all good armies would regard as unambiguous failures of senior leadership—the author assigns instead to "training," "tactical leadership," and "information management." The average-to-acceptable performance of Arab generals is thus not an empirical discovery, but an artifact of the way the evidence is organized.

Setting aside the unconvincing analytic framework, however, leaves one with a consistent and basically familiar picture. Across a considerable span of time, diverse tactical environments, and widely varying opponents, Arab armies have tended to perform well under three circumstances: when manning prepared defensive positions, when engaging in set-piece frontal attacks (even against heavy odds), and when retreating in the absence of a pursuing enemy. They have had a hard time adapting to the unexpected, whether to seize opportunities or to avert calamity; which is to say, whenever they have to undertake movements or actions that are not deliberately planned. Arab soldiers often fight hard when they are surrounded: a disconcerting number of Pollack's examples of excellent "unit cohesion" fall into this category. Yet intact units are also prone to avoid envelopment by disorderly retreat, after which the reconstitution of effective formations may prove impossible. Arab armies have generally had weapons as good as or better than those of their opponents, but they often lack the technical knowledge and doctrinal finesse required to make the most of their equipment. All of which means that their sometimes surprising psychological resiliency has meant less than one might have expected. "When Arab armies have had poor morale it has hurt them," Pollack observes, "and when they have had high morale, it has helped them, though not that much" (569).

These sorts of propositions have been commonplace among scholars of war in the Middle East, not to mention those who have been obliged to fight there, for at least thirty years.^[3] The chief contribution of this book, which is based exclusively on sources in English, is to have assembled the evidence for them in one place.^[4] It is useful, though scarcely revelatory, to see that Libya's difficulties in its war with Chad (1978-87) resemble those experienced by Iraq against Iran (1980-88), or by Egypt against Israel (1948-73, *passim*). One is also disposed to agree with Pollack's argument that, one way or another, the critical path to failure passes through the performance of field-grade and junior officers, a group that, apart from its vital battlefield role, always represents a crucial link between an army and the society whose interests the army is meant to defend. This, however, is a connection in which Pollack is expressly uninterested. An army's "relationship to its broader society," as well as its peacetime practices, are, he insists, "irrelevant to the development of [military] effectiveness" (12).

Pollack's indifference to the social (and, indeed, political) dimensions of his subject is surprising in a book framed, at least putatively, in cultural terms. Arabs, after all, are a cultural group, defined by a language

that Pollack, in common with this reviewer, does not speak. This is not necessarily a fatal flaw: there are many aspects of the history of the Middle East that can be, and have been, usefully explored by those who do not speak Arabic. But it is a serious deficiency in a book that purports to explain the fortunes of Arab armies with reference to a shared Arab identity. To that extent, however, the unease inspired by Pollack's definition of his problem is misplaced: nothing like a culturally-grounded explanation of Arab military performance is even attempted. On the contrary, Pollack's analysis is confined to generic military categories, and could easily have been extended to include the recent histories of Iran and Pakistan, or, for that matter, any number of African and Latin American armies as well. We are left, then, with a lengthy, somewhat repetitive, description of Arab military performance in recent times. An explanation will require a scholar with different assumptions, and different tools.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our [Strategic Insights](#) home page.

To have new issues of Strategic Insights delivered to your Inbox at the beginning of each month, email ccc@nps.navy.mil with subject line "Subscribe". There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

References

1. Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," in *Military Effectiveness*, 3 volumes, ed. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 1: 2.
2. *Ibid.*, 5-25; examples from pp. 9 and 15.
3. See, for instance, Edward Luttwak and Dan Horowitz, *The Israeli Army* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 282-98; a discussion that is itself summarizing the existing literature at the time.
4. In this connection one must take a moment to deplore the author's habit of prefacing his own observations with unsubstantiated and often implausible references to "some," "many," "other," and even "countless" authors, whose views are supposedly less convincing than his own. Given Pollack's overwhelming dependence on secondary sources, this sort of pretense is decidedly out of place.