
Armies of Sand:

The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness

By Kenneth M. Pollack

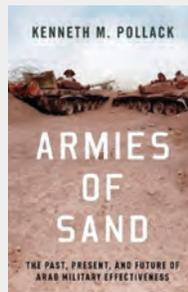
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Reviewed by Soner Doğan, Anadolu Agency

Kenneth M. Pollack laid the foundations for this book during his time at the CIA. For over 30 years, the author has worked as an expert on Middle East military affairs and policy in the U.S. bureaucracy and in the field. Stating that the book is the product of 15 years of work, Pollack started by analyzing the situation of the Iraqi army during the Persian Gulf War. While the main ideas of the book originated from the CIA, it did not evolve into an academic work until the author's graduate studies at MIT. The book contains a large bibliography, as well as official and unofficial interviews with Western, Arab, and Turkish military and intelligence personnel.

Pollack defines in general the Arab world as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. In the book, the author analyzes the poor performance of Arab armies during the wars since 1945. The author tries to explain why the Arab armies have repeatedly failed. He analyzes the situation of the Arab armies with questions such as: What is wrong with the Arab armies? Why are they losing so many wars that they should have won? Why has Israel defeated the Arabs so many times?

The book is a vital bedside book for understanding the changes taking place in the Middle East. To understand the regional conflicts



and wars, this work gives the reader ideas in many areas. The book seeks to answer how different societies generate military power and why some countries are more powerful. It underscores the imperative of delving into the social dynamics that underpin the sources of military power, posing this general

principle as applicable to the intricate analysis of Arab armies presented in the book.

Pollack argues that the Arab armies lost the war against Israel because Israeli intelligence penetrated the highest levels of the Arab armies and provided Israel with a wealth of information. In this way, Israel was able to build up a remarkable profile of the Arab armed forces, their capabilities, deployments, operational procedures, and military echelons. In addition, the Arab armies were untrained, did not adhere to their adopted doctrine and were weak in terms of leadership, making them vulnerable to Israel.

Pollack argues that the main factor in the failure of the Arab armed forces from 1945 onwards, and the unresolved problem, was the performance of junior officers in the Arab Army such as Egypt, Syria, etc. The lack of officers' training affected the speed of tactical and strategic reaction, movement, coordination, and concept of warfare of the Arab armies. These reasons were important in the defeat of the Arab armies in the Six-Day

War. Also, the Arab armies were incapable of quickly and efficiently devising tactical solutions to unforeseen events. Arab armies rarely preferred active maneuvering on the battlefield. Arab troops in defense remained permanently in position, relying on firepower to defeat the attacker. On the offensive, Arab armies also tended to rely on firepower and massiveness, using either frontal assaults to simply overwhelm the defender or position bombardments in which they attempted to destroy the enemy defenses with massive fire support before advancing. Arab artillery was often only able to carry out pre-planned fire missions. It could not quickly and accurately shift fire, conduct counter-battery missions, concentrate fire from geographically separate batteries, or provide accurate on-call fire support.

Moreover, Arab armor often went into battle without infantry support. Finally, Arab ground forces did not conduct adequate exercises, limiting inter-unit coordination of weapons. This was also the case for the ground and air forces, which failed to apply interoperability due to lack of previous exercises. On the other hand, Pollack states that Arab air forces were not a compelling force element like the ground forces. In all types of missions, most Arab pilots were capable of only simple tactics, rigid, non-aggressive, unimaginative flying. The performance of Arab air forces in air-to-ground missions was as insufficient as their performance in air-to-air combat.

Pollack claims that there were also problems in the chain of command of the Arab armies and that the necessary action could not be taken during the war. Another factor in the failure of the Arab armies was that the Arab armed forces took longer than other armies to train in modern warfare. Even if the Arabs

had a significant advantage in the quantity of their weapons and missile range, they could not use it effectively. For example, in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, most batteries of the Iraqi Republican Guard used the G-5 or GHN-45 howitzer, probably the best artillery weapon in the world at that time. Although the G-5 had a longer range, accuracy, and firepower than any of the Coalition howitzers, the Republican Guard batteries lost every counter-battery duel with U.S. batteries using M109 howitzers (p. 28).

After the general evaluations above, the book consists of 4 main chapters, namely Soviet Doctrine, Politicization, Underdevelopment and Culture. The chapters are divided into their subheadings and consist of 23 sub-chapters in total.

In the first chapter, “the Soviet Doctrine” is discussed, and the situation of the Arab armies is evaluated. Pollack does not directly attribute the failure of the Arab armies to the Soviet doctrine because he claims that the same doctrine was used in North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam and that these countries were successful. However, the Arab armies performed poorly because they failed to understand and internalize Soviet doctrine and were tactically and strategically weak. Soviet experts observed that the Arabs did not understand the basic concepts of their doctrine, and to the extent that they tried to apply it, they did not do as the Soviets intended.

In chapter 2, he analyzed the situation of the Arab armies in terms of “politicization.” Acknowledging the natural tension between military and civilian leaders, the author defined politicization as deteriorating military-civilian relations. By this, we mean that civil-military relations have reached a point where significant breakdowns exist between

civilian and military chains of command. Politicization refers to a breakdown in the effective functioning of the armed forces (p. 108). Pollack argued that politicization was among the reasons for the poor performance of Arab armies, as civil-military relations in the Arab world tended to be poor throughout the post-Second World War period. For example, palace guards are an excellent example of understanding the politicization of Arab armies.

In chapter 3, “Underdevelopment,” the author analyses the relationship between the level of development and the Arab armed forces. Pollack makes a connection between the fact that Arab countries are in the group of underdeveloped countries despite their rich oil revenues and the low performance of Arab armies.

In the final chapter, the situation of Arab armies is analyzed under the title of “Culture.” Pollack evaluates that Arab culture also impacts the failures of Arab armies in wars. He argues that the main weaknesses of the Arab armed forces since 1945 are due to the cul-

turally motivated behavioral patterns instilled by Arab educational processes. In addition, much of the training in Arab countries was taught through compulsory memorization of basic skills. Arab soldiers and officers often repeated the same actions repeatedly without any variation. More effort was needed to ensure that personnel understood the purpose of the skill or how it could be adapted to suit different circumstances. Arab armies did not perform as well as desired because their practical training was poor.

In summary, Pollack’s *Armies of Sand* provides important insights about the wars and Arab armies in the Middle East since 1945. Hence, it is a must-read for those who want to learn about the political history of the Middle East. In the book, Pollack analyses the state of Arab armies, exposing their shortcomings and failures. In this endeavor, he draws comparisons between nations like Vietnam and North Korea, which adopted similar Soviet doctrines. However, geographical features of these countries (such as mountains and rivers) which should be taken into account for strategy matters are ignored.