



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive
DSpace Repository

Faculty and Researchers

Selected Student Publications

2005-05

Book Review by Barak A. Salmoni of Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991, by Kenneth M. Pollack

Salmoni, Barak A.

Salmoni, Barak A. "Book Review: Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991." *Armed Forces & Society* 31.3 (2005): 471-473.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/60933>

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. Pp. 586. \$49.95, hardcover.

Arabs at War is a comprehensive narrative of Arab armies' combat performance. It provides the first encyclopedic examination of how Arab militaries operate in war or war-like conditions. It evidences wide reading, synthesis, and an accessible writing style. It is certain to serve as a point of reference for further work. For all its strengths, the book remains deeply problematic in that it does not break any new conceptual ground. The result is an immensely enjoyable read that does not reshape our analytical paradigm.

To evaluate military effectiveness, one first must define the term, and Pollack's book is deficient. "Military effectiveness," for Pollack, entails "the ability of an armed service to prosecute military operations and employ weaponry in military operations" (p. 3). This is *part* of the definition. Yet military effectiveness is not synonymous with *combat effectiveness* unless one implies military operations consist *solely* of war, which this book does. In Arabic-speaking countries, though, militaries engage in several military operations other than war, including internal security, regime security, disaster relief, and what civil-military relations scholars once labeled nation-building. To truly evaluate Arab states' military effectiveness in terms applicable to the concerns of those states' leaders, these factors must be included.

By focusing only on war, Pollack adapts a particularly Western, and indeed American, approach. As one example, while militaries in the Middle East have enjoyed great success in protecting regimes since the 1970s, the author is limited by his definition of effectiveness to highlighting only Arab military *ineffectiveness*. In fact, he works throughout to "identify the greatest problems afflicting the Arab armies since 1945" (p. 12). One wonders if his results would have been different if effectiveness had been defined as "the ability of Arab militaries to do what their regime leaders need them to do," or if he had focused more narrowly on 1967–1991.

As Pollack's definition of military effectiveness is partial and problematic, so are his categories for evaluating it. He focuses on unit cohesion, generalship, tactical leadership, information management, technical skills and weapons handling, logistics and maintenance, morale, training, and cowardice. Ultimately he eliminates cowardice as "the most malicious theory" (p. 9) explaining Arab failure at war and devotes little attention to training. He focuses on these categories because "over the course of time, different military officers, analysts and historians" (p. 4) have done so. The author thus remains within tired, older frameworks.

Similarly, while claiming to examine "the full military histories" (p. 10) of his chosen countries, he omits key factors explaining military effectiveness that

have been used elsewhere: professional military education, the *cursus honorum* of military officers, the nature of the rank pyramid, and indigenous understandings of military professionalism. Furthermore, he makes a conscious decision to leave out "the army's relationship to its broader society," labeling it "extraneous material" (p. 11). I doubt any analyst would consider cultural, intellectual, or economic linkages between military and society as "irrelevant to the development of effectiveness" (p. 11) in examining, for instance, the factors that make United States or North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces successful. The literature on civil-military relations and military professionalism informs us that this factor is central to evaluating military effectiveness, especially in the Middle East.

Referring to six different states from Libya to Iraq between 1948 and 1991 and with widely divergent regime types as "Arab" is also perilous. One might legitimately ask what makes these states Arab per se, and what makes military performance Arab per se? Are the characteristics he finds Arab, or reflective of a specific kind of intellectual and political development not solely Arab? Would his analysis differ markedly if he had included Iran or Pakistan? If not, are we speaking of Arab, Middle Eastern, or lesser developed countries' military effectiveness?

Pollack does not deal with this potential problem through a rigorous dialogue with literature in the fields of Middle Eastern studies or cultural anthropology. Rather, in an endnote, he justifies speaking in terms of Arabs because everyone else talking about poor Arab military performance has "couched their terms in general statements applicable to all the Arab armed forces." Also, "Arab militaries display far more similarities of military effectiveness than differences," permitting consideration of them "as a collective whole" (p. 586). The first reason sounds like "because everyone else does so, it must be the way"; the second rationale neither dispels suspicions of a priori assumptions, nor addresses whether the "collective whole" in question is Arab or something else.

Further, there are places in the book where Arabs as a collective whole, and Pollack's chosen categories of analysis, are unsustainable. There is "no ironclad pattern" (p. 553) of unit cohesion, since "evidence is not entirely consistent" (p. 554). "No consistent pattern" of generalship emerges because "Arab generalship fluctuated." Likewise, morale "fluctuated from war to war and army to army" (p. 568). Given the lack of collective trends in these key categories, ought the author to speak of Arab armies? Where he does detect trends—as in "poor tactical leadership, poor information management, poor weapons handling, and poor weapons maintenance" (p. 574)—are these dynamics Arab? Or are they characteristic of militaries produced by societies at certain levels of educational development, with particular kinds of political cultures and regimes, and ingrained with specific (in this case, Soviet-style) military approaches?

Still, if one refers to Arab militaries, then at least implicitly, one is speaking in cultural terms—as one would if referring to “Turkic,” “Sinitic,” or “Western” militaries. Yet, Pollack does not broach the topic of culture, either from the perspective of how an individual country’s military culture influences combat operations, or from the perspective of how *Arab* culture influences Arab armies. Yet if one suspects that “the army’s relationship to its broader society” influences military performance, then examining culture is inescapable. By eliminating culture as a category, Pollack deprives the reader of a needed analytical axis.

This omission is perplexing because his dissertation, on which the current book is based, did deploy culture to good effect.¹ Pollack’s retreat from culture as an explanatory tool was ill-advised in light of his other, derivative, and unsatisfactory categories. As just one example of the need to rigorously define and then examine culture, he rejects cowardice as explaining Arab military problems. But cowardice is, to some extent, a culturally determined notion. Western militaries’ use of defensive depth and stand-off weapons could easily be considered cowardly in the eyes of a culture valuing face-to-face combat. In the broader Middle East, US forces have encountered opponents who do consider such Western fighting styles cowardly, yet who fail to stand and fight to the last man—a behavior sometimes held to be cowardly in Western terms.

Ultimately, though Pollack quite competently addresses his chosen categories, the reader is left with the nagging and more profound question of *why* Arab militaries act as they do. The author can “identify the greatest problems” of Arab armies at war, but cannot explain *why* they exist. An explanation is necessary.

Readers will find this book a treasure trove of narrative detail, based on an exhaustive reading of English sources. The absence of Arabic and Hebrew sources is worrisome, however, as the accumulated studies and memoirs mean these sources are available. *Arabs at War* will indeed assist future researchers, and is remarkably factually accurate. It is regrettable that a work integrating war and combat operations into the study of the Middle East yields little analytical originality or nuance.

Note

1. Kenneth M. Pollack, “The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness” (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996).

Barak A. Salmoni
Department of National Security Affairs,
US Naval Postgraduate School