

Pollack, Kenneth M. Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991. A Council on Foreign Relations Book. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

John Nelson Rickard

Volume 23, Number 2, Winter 2003

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs23_2br03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rickard, J. N. (2003). Review of [Pollack, Kenneth M. Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991. A Council on Foreign Relations Book. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 23(2), 166–168.

Vol. XXIII, No. 2 Fall 2003

Pollack, Kenneth M. *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991*. A Council on Foreign Relations Book. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

Ken Pollack is best-known for his guest analyst spots on CNN during the Iraq War. It was fitting that he perform such duty because his previous work, *The Case for Invading Iraq*, articulated the dangers posed by Saddam Hussein's regime. He was also a former Gulf military analyst at the CIA and was Director for Persian Gulf Affairs at the National Security Council. Prior to his latest work the best source on the subject under discussion was perhaps Chaim Herzog's *Arab-Israeli Wars* (1982) or the late Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy's *Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars* (1978). Now there is a new standard. *Arabs at War* is the refined product of Pollack's doctoral dissertation at MIT that explored the influence of Arab culture on military operations.

The author attempts to judge Arab militaries in combat since 1948 based on different criteria, including unit cohesion, generalship, tactical leadership, information management, technical skills and weapons handling, logistics and maintenance, morale, training, and cowardice. Pollack takes the reader through a comprehensive analysis of the military operations of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Syria before concluding with an overview of his principal findings. Pollack renders great service by shedding light on some little-known Arab versus Arab wars other than the now infamous Iran-Iraq War. The Libyan- Chadian conflicts from 1978-87, the Libyan-Egyptian border disputes, the Syrian- Jordanian War of 1970-71, and the Iraq-Kurd Wars of 1961-70 and 1974-75 receive significant analysis.

Pollack argues persuasively that one cannot understand the history of warfare in the Middle East strictly through measurement of material. This may seem a logical enough deduction but many previous authors have failed to fully explore the glue that keeps Middle Eastern armies together or facilitates their undoing. Some specific examples of the combat ineffectiveness of the various Arab armies over the last 50 years stand out in this book.

Throughout Egypt's numerous wars with Israel, Pollack argues, Egyptian soldiers fought well in static positions, but the junior officers, "consistently demonstrated an unwillingness to maneuver, innovate, take the initiative, or act independently." (p. 146) The Iraqi Army consistently faltered in combat because the soldiers lack the necessary technical skills and had a "limited exposure to machinery" in Iraqi culture. (p. 265) The Arab Legion of Trans-Jordan receives high praise, organized and trained as it once was by British officers, but once British influence waned in the 1960s the Jordanian Army continually exhibited poor reconnaissance skills, an absolute necessity for manoeuver warfare. (p. 356)

The Libyan Army demonstrated reasonable logistical capabilities during its war with Chad but "parroted Soviet tactics in the most stereotyped manner and without taking

advantage of even the limited flexibility inherent in Soviet doctrine." (p. 401) The section on Saudi Arabia is the smallest in the book. With the exception of the 1991 Gulf War Saudi forces have seen little combat and that is probably a good thing. By the mid-1980s, despite massive expenditures on military hardware, Pollack points out, there were almost 50,000 Americans, British, French, and Pakistani soldiers supporting 50,000 Saudi soldiers. (p. 428)

Some of Pollack's judgments will no doubt elicit skepticism. He may have given far too much credit to the Tawakalnah 'Allah Mechanized Division of the Iraqi Republican Guard for its so-called "stand" against the US VII Corps in the 1991 Battle of Wadi al-Batin. The coalition ground offensive only lasted *four* days and the Republican Guard held for half that time. However, Pollack did admit that the Tawakalnah ultimately fought "far below Western standards." (p. 254)

The author also tries to rehabilitate the Western perception that Saddam Hussein lacked even rudimentary strategic awareness based on his deployments in 1991. Pollack suggests that Iraqi strategy rested on the assumption (ultimately erroneous) that the air campaign would last only a few days and that enough of the Iraqi Army would survive to push American casualties past the breaking point. (p. 238) This may seem rational, but Saddam grossly misjudged American faith in massive aerial firepower. Saddam could have gained fame as a strategist had he pushed on into Saudi Arabia and destroyed the lead brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division, one of the very first American units deployed during Desert Shield. Yet he was no strategist, and neither was Muammar al-Qadhafi of Libya whose running duel with the United States Navy during the 1980s "appear at best misguided if not irrational or simply foolish." (p. 421)

At times Arab strategic planning demonstrated sophistication. The best example by far was the Egyptian planning for crossing the Suez Canal in 1973. However, Pollack makes clear that the inability of the Arabs to form resilient alliances and to trust each other through tough periods of combat was a problem they never solved. A comprehensive study of Arab diplomacy and effectiveness at building strong alliances within the Arab world would make an excellent parallel study to this fine work.

Pollack concludes that Arab armies consistently failed miserably on the battlefield in four key areas: tactical leadership, information management, weapons handling, and equipment maintenance. These were "without question" the principal sources of Arab misfortune. (p. 574) One of their greatest strengths, however, was unit cohesion. This may seem incomprehensible to some who could point to a wealth of impressionistic evidence arguing the opposite, but Pollack does a fine job of objectively analyzing numerous battles. He feels that "underestimating the unit cohesion of Arab armies is a mistake." (p. 555) He also makes a compelling argument that the Arabs, as a general rule, are not cowards who flee at the earliest opportunity. (p. 572) Yet rehabilitating the image of Iraqi soldiers surrendering to American unmanned aircraft in 1991 is no easy task.

At almost 700 pages *Arabs at War* is a tour de force with a first-rate bibliography and numerous helpful maps. If there is any weakness in this book it might be Pollack's

superficial handling of American aid to Israel in the form of airlifts or the absence of any discussion of the performance of the Afghani *mujahidin* against the Soviets in a guerrilla war, but then again, Pollack's emphasis is clearly on conventional war. The author has succeeded in taking a giant step forward in correcting many false assertions. The book is a major contribution to the literature of the Middle East conflict and goes a long way to proving that armies are cultural manifestations of the societies from which they are raised and that the Arabs still do not grasp the essential elements required to win on the modern battlefield.

Captain John Nelson Rickard of Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians), is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of New Brunswick.