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Training Better Arab Armies

Michael J. Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack

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ABSTRACT: US security force assistance missions to Arab partner states have had limited success, due in part to a tendency to impose American doctrine, which embodies American cultural values and norms, on Arab armed forces. Accordingly, US security force assistance missions should train Arab partners to fight in a manner better suited to their own cultural preferences and operational requirements.

The United States must develop a radically different method of training partner Arab militaries to help them better meet future counterterrorism, unconventional, and conventional warfare challenges.¹ Doing so will require the US military to approach the task in a very different way than it has in the past, devoting the same creativity, willingness to experiment, sustained focus, and seriousness of purpose to the security force assistance (SFA) mission, that it has to building up its own combat capabilities.² While the US military has applied cultural knowledge to the mechanics and programmatic aspects of the SFA relationship in Iraq and elsewhere, there is little evidence to suggest it has done so systematically and consistently in its efforts to create effective combat units or capable national security institutions.

Since World War II, the Middle East has been a major recipient of American arms and military assistance. Today, nearly half of all US arms exports go to the region, and US military personnel train or advise more than a dozen Arab militaries.³ Yet despite this massive, sustained effort, US SFA has not helped create competent Arab armed forces. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Egyptian, Saudi, and Kuwaiti forces failed to acquit themselves well despite overwhelming coalition

1. The authors would like to thank Lieutenant General James M. Dubik, US Army retired; Lieutenant General Sean B. MacFarland, US Army retired; Colonel David M. Witty, US Army retired; and two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable insights and comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2. James F. Jeffrey and Michael Eisenstadt, *U.S. Military Engagement in the Broader Middle East*, Policy Focus 143 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2016), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus143_JeffreyEisen-4.pdf; and Eisenstadt, “*Defeat Into Victory: Arab Lessons for the Iraqi Security Forces*,” Policy Watch 2373 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 17, 2015), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeat-into-victory-arab-lessons-for-the-iraqi-security-forces>.

3. Susan B. Epstein and Liana W. Rosen, *U.S. Security Assistance and Security Cooperation Programs: Overview of Funding Trends*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report R45091, February 1, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R45091.pdf>; and Clayton Thomas, *Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy*, CRS Report R44984, October 11, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf>.

superiority.⁴ In June 2014, several hundred fighters from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) routed tens of thousands of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) troops when they captured the city of Mosul.⁵ And since 2015, Saudi forces leading an Arab coalition in Yemen have struggled against Houthi tribal fighters—although the small United Arab Emirates (UAE) contingent did considerably better in advancing the Emirates’ diverse goals there.⁶

The US experience in Iraq and Syria since 2014 has yielded a somewhat different picture, however. In both places, the US military has made a virtue out of necessity. With successive administrations unwilling to commit large US ground combat formations to accomplish ongoing missions in the Middle East, US commanders have had to devise a method of winning wars *by, with, and through* indigenous partners.⁷ These efforts have been much more successful than previous efforts in the region in large part because American personnel have tailored operations to partner capabilities—predominantly Kurdish forces in Syria and largely Arab forces in Iraq—rather than insisting they fight like the US military.

This welcome, relatively recent operational approach has not yet been translated into formal doctrine nor has it spawned an extensive lessons-learned literature. Previous SFA efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan produced findings on a range of issues including core challenges of building tactically competent units and creating institutional capacity as well as the mechanics of SFA and its bureaucratic and programmatic aspects.⁸

4. Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 425–46.

5. Yasir Abbas and Dan Trombly, “Inside the Collapse of the Iraqi Army’s 2nd Division,” War on the Rocks, July 1, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/inside-the-collapse-of-the-iraqi-armys-2nd-division/>; and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 165–68.

6. Michael Knights, “Lessons from the UAE War in Yemen,” *Lawfare* (blog), August 18, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/lessons-uae-war-yemen>; and Knights, “The U.A.E. Approach to Counterinsurgency in Yemen,” War on the Rocks, May 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/the-u-a-e-approach-to-counterinsurgency-in-yemen/>.

7. Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense (DoD), January 2018); and Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018): 40–47, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/JFQ/Joint-Force-Quarterly-89.aspx>.

8. James Dubik, “Partner Capacity Building and U.S. Enabling Capabilities,” *Army Magazine*, (Arlington, VA: Association of the United States Army, May 2012), https://www.ausea.org/sites/default/FC_Dubik_0512.pdf; Owen West, “Why Obama’s Plan to Send Advisers to Iraq Will Fail,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/opinion/why-obamas-plan-to-send-advisers-to-iraq-will-fail.html>; DoD Office of the Inspector General (DODIG), *Assessment of DoD/USCENTCOM and Coalition Plans/Efforts to Train, Advise, and Assist the Iraqi Army to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*, IG Report DODIG-2015-177 (Washington, DC: DODIG, September 30, 2015), <https://media.defense.gov/2015/Sep/30/2001714172/-1/-1/1/DODIG-2015-177.pdf>; and DoDIG, *Summary of Lessons Learned—DoD IG Assessment Oversight of “Train, Advise, Assist, and Equip” Operations by U.S. and Coalition Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan*, Inspector General Report DODIG-2015-093 (Washington, DC: DODIG, March 31, 2015), <https://media.defense.gov/2015/Mar/31/2001713483/-1/-1/1/DODIG-2015-093.pdf>.

These findings, however, devoted little attention to addressing specific challenges of building capable combat formations and national security institutions in the Middle Eastern cultural and political milieu. With the exception of the effort to rebuild the ISF during the 2007–8 US surge in Iraq and again after the ISIS offensive in 2014, American SFA activities throughout the region have generally suffered from this gap between doctrine and reality. Of greatest importance, the United States did not formulate new SFA practices nor a unique doctrine for America's Arab partners. To its credit, the Army did create Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs).⁹ These SFABs are a good start, but they are not capable of formulating a new combat doctrine and have a limited capacity to devise new instructional methods more appropriate to Arab partner militaries. Moreover, they are not designed to build the necessary institutional capacity at the ministerial level to allow partner militaries to stand on their own.¹⁰

The implicit subtext of much of the lessons-learned literature is, for instance, that Iraqi soldiers need to become more like Americans and the ISF needs to operate more like the US military (with a strong noncommissioned officer [NCO] corps, for example), not that the United States should tailor its approach to its partner's cultural predilections and operational requirements—though there are signs of progress.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, efforts to train Arab militaries to fight like the US military have generally not succeeded because they require the former to operate in ways contrary to deeply rooted and culturally grounded habits and norms.¹² And while SFA efforts have been tailored to account for the skill level and experience of partner militaries, US military personnel are only just beginning to formulate, systematically, SFA doctrine for Arab militaries that is culturally relevant, and they are doing so largely on their own initiative, without formal guidance or a wider program to learn and institutionalize such practices across American training missions in the Arab world.

Arab Military Ineffectiveness

The sources of Arab military ineffectiveness run deep. They are rooted in wider Arab society, and cultural tendencies which foster patterns of behavior that have not meshed well with the demands of

9. Andrew Feikert, *Army Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs)*, In Focus 10675 (Washington, DC: CRS, October 24, 2018), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF10675.pdf>.

10. James M. Dubik, "SFABs are Great, But They Can't Build Nations," Association of the United States Army, June 18, 2018, <https://www.ousa.org/articles/sfabs-are-great-they-can%E2%80%99t-build-nations>.

11. Ben Kesling and Matt Bradley, "Victory Marks Turnaround for Iraq Army," *Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-security-forces-say-they-have-liberated-ramadi-from-islamic-state-1451303441>; and Karen DeYoung, "Victory in Ramadi May Not Yet Be Proof of Strategy, but It Is a Milestone," *Washington Post*, January 1, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/victory-in-ramadi-may-not-yet-not-be-proof-of-strategy-but-it-is-a-milestone/2016/01/01/7915e874-aff5-11e5-9ab0-884d1cc4b33e_story.html.

12. Norvell B. DeAtkine, "Western Influence on Arab Militaries: Pounding Square Pegs into Round Holes," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2013); and Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

modern conventional warfare and counterinsurgency. One of the most important of these societal problems is the zero-sum, winner-takes-all politics of the Arab world.¹³ Too often Arab armies have played too big a role in politics, and when they have not, Arab politicians have typically played too big a role in military affairs. Indeed since World War II, Arab states have often oscillated between military dictatorships and civilian autocracies that fettered their armed forces to defend against military coups—real or imagined.

This politicization has often hobbled war-making activity by saddling Arab armed forces with incompetent but loyal senior leaders, as well as command and control arrangements designed to coup-proof the armed forces rather than enhance their effectiveness. These measures can undermine the morale and cohesion of a military.¹⁴ This zero-sum mindset is also reflected in the brute-force approach to counterinsurgency employed by many Arab armies, which generally entails crushing insurgents and repressing, driving out, or even eliminating the supporting civilian populations.¹⁵

Underdevelopment in Arab economies has also played a role. Industrialization came late to the Muslim Middle East and never reached the extent it did in the West or in East Asia. Relatively few Arab personnel had the kind of basic understanding of machinery necessary to enable them to maintain properly or take full advantage of the capabilities of equipment used to wage modern war. Repeatedly, Arab armies, navies, and air forces could not employ weaponry to its full potential. Moreover, only a fraction of their weapons systems were typically combat ready due to inadequate maintenance.¹⁶

Ultimately, however, the greatest problems Arab armed forces experienced during the modern era derived from the dominant Arab culture.¹⁷ This is not a value judgment, merely a description of the social reality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Behavioral patterns emphasized by the dominant Arab culture, while functional in other contexts, were not best suited for success on the modern conventional battlefield. Arab culture tends to promote a deference to group norms and authority, an emphasis on rote learning and school solutions rather than the development of critical reasoning skills, and a preoccupation with saving face, resulting in the suppression of unpalatable facts. These patterns of behavior produced conventional Arab armies that often failed at maneuver warfare because tactical leaders were inflexible; did not show initiative or innovation; and tended to obfuscate, dissemble, or lie.

13. Florence Gaub, "Why Arab States are Bad at Counterinsurgency," *Lawfare* (blog), June 21, 2015, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-arab-states-are-bad-counterinsurgency>.

14. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 107–232; and James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 131–65.

15. Gaub, "Bad at Counterinsurgency."

16. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 233–342.

17. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 343–509.

Thus Arab militaries have been consistently crippled by passive and unimaginative tactical leadership, an inability to conduct combined arms operations, and badly distorted flows of information across their chains of command, especially at tactical levels. Arab cultural preferences have also hindered effective air operations, weapons handling, and maintenance.¹⁸ This reality reflects the emphases of the dominant culture—an impact economists and social scientists have recognized as having hindered political and industrial development and economic productivity during the modern era as well.¹⁹

Training Assistance to the Arab World

Militaries reflect the societies they come from. Methods the US military devises to fight wars and train young Americans to do so do not necessarily *fit* the young people who compose the armed forces of very different societies. Given differences between Arab and American society, it is unsurprising the gulf between how Americans think things should be done and how Arabs think things should be done is wide. It is worth noting that in their efforts to train Arab militaries, the Russians have fared little better for precisely the same reasons.²⁰

Thus if the United States is going to help build better Arab militaries, it must account for the impact of culture and other aspects of Arab society and adjust accordingly. At least in the short term it should generally eschew efforts to remake partner Arab militaries in its own image—creating forces which can implement mission-type orders, staffed by officers and NCOs capable of operating with little or no guidance, and improvising as needed in response to battlefield developments. Rather, it should train them to fight in a manner better suited to their cultural preferences and operational requirements.²¹

The United States will need to experiment with new approaches to SFA, be willing to make mistakes, and recognize the road to success may be as long and as difficult as the effort to rebuild and remake the US Army between its defeat in Vietnam and its victory in the Persian

18. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 369–405, 439–51.

19. Gary S. Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 341–56; Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 406–14; and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports including Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS), UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society* (New York: RBAS, UNDP, 2003); and RBAS, UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World* (New York: RBAS, UNDP, 2005).

20. Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries,” *Middle East Journal* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 549–78.

21. Eisenstadt, “Defeat Into Victory.”

Gulf War.²² And to some extent these efforts will be conducted under fire, while partner and Allied militaries are dealing with domestic and external threats. In order to create more effective fighting organizations, the United States would benefit by studying successful Arab efforts to rebuild their militaries after defeat and learn from these examples.²³ Such efforts, described below, can point the way toward more effective US approaches to SFA in the Arab world.

Building Elite Formations

Arab armed forces have often dealt with challenges posed by military ineffectiveness by creating small, specially trained, elite units. These may be ad hoc, task-organized units consisting of proven performers or standing elite formations trained to a higher standard than the rest of the military with preferential access to the newest equipment.

The more a military can select those with the right skills and abilities from the wider force and concentrate them in elite formations, the more capable those formations are likely to be, due to the synergies created by having so many highly capable personnel working together. Moreover, creating smaller units increases the likelihood they can be filled with personnel with the right skills. The opposite is also true: it is harder to fill larger units with personnel with the appropriate (but, in the Arab militaries, culturally rare) skills needed for success on the modern conventional battlefield. The example of elite forces may also inspire conventional personnel and units to raise their standards and improve their performance.

Small can be beautiful when building greater military effectiveness through elite Arab formations for another reason: it can facilitate a chain of command populated with officers with the right skill sets. A competent battalion commander can be stymied and frustrated if he has to report to an incompetent brigade commander or if his company commanders lack his skills and understanding. Going small maximizes the number of officers with the right skills throughout a command structure, ensuring superior performance.

Not surprisingly, many of the more successful Arab elite formations have been special forces-type units. Those who volunteer for such units tend to be more highly motivated and, as is the case elsewhere, many are cultural outliers—individuals with uncommon skills and/or a

22. “Rebuilding the Army: Vietnam to Desert Storm,” in *American Military History: Volume II: The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917–2008*, ed. Richard W. Stewart (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2010), 373–411, <https://history.army.mil/books/AMH-V2/PDF/Chapter12.pdf>; Suzanne C. Nielson, *An Army Transformed: The U.S. Army's Post-Vietnam Recovery and the Dynamics of Change in Military Organizations*, The Letort Papers (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, September 2010), <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/an-army-transformed-the-u-s-armys-post-vietnam-recovery-and-the-dynamics-of-change-in-military-organizations/>; and Barry D. Watts, *US Combat Training, Operational Art, and Strategic Competence: Problems and Opportunities*, Strategy for the Long Haul Series (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2008), <https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/2008.08.21-Combat-Training-Operational-Art-Strategic-Competence.pdf>.

23. Eisenstadt, “Defeat Into Victory”; and Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 452–509.

greater willingness to adopt novel practices. Because they are elite, these units tend to have higher esprit de corps, morale, and unit cohesion than conventional units. Moreover, their training frequently emphasizes small-unit actions, independent operations, and improvised solutions to unexpected problems.

Various Arab militaries have tried this approach with varying degrees of success. The Syrians recognized after the Yom Kippur War (1973) and their intervention in Lebanon (1976) that the special forces regiments were their most capable units, and they transferred many of the best soldiers and officers to these formations resulting in the latter's superior performance during the Lebanon War (1982).²⁴ The Iraqis did the same on a grander scale in expanding the Republican Guard after 1986. The Guard comprised a much higher percentage of Iraqi ground force personnel than did Syrian commando units, and most Guard formations did not receive special forces training. As a result, while unquestionably more capable (and more dedicated) than the Iraqi regular army, the Guard did not perform as well as Syria's special forces.²⁵

More recently, in its efforts to support Iraq's Counterterrorism Service (CTS) during Operation Inherent Resolve in 2014–18, the US-led coalition inserted trainers and advisers throughout the Iraqi chain of command. Moreover, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization mission effectively trained and retrained much of the Iraqi Army. As a result, coalition and Iraqi commanders were able to identify the best personnel—those with the culturally rare but militarily desirable skill sets—and either lobbied for their promotion to key leadership slots and/or their transfer to the CTS. Further, the CTS was given extensive training of the type specific to special forces and enjoyed tremendous prestige and popularity. Not surprisingly, the CTS performed demonstrably better than conventional Iraqi formations and spearheaded every coalition offensive against the so-called Islamic State, though Iraq lost many of its best soldiers as a result.²⁶

Nevertheless, the success of the Iraqi CTS would not have been possible without Iraqi army critical enablers (such as tanks and bulldozers) and the help of coalition forces (intelligence, logistics, artillery, and air support). Should US trainers and advisers opt to use the CTS model as a template elsewhere, such critical enablers must be created in the partner's conventional forces, or the United States or other allies must be willing to provide them in times of need, placing a premium on joint training between US forces and Arab allies that is adaptable to various circumstances. Inevitably a trade-off is involved:

24. Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 514–51; and Michael Eisenstadt, *Arming for Peace? Syria's Elusive Quest for "Strategic Parity,"* Policy Paper No. 31 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992), 67–68, 70–72.

25. Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 218–66.

26. David Witty, *Iraq's Post-2014 Counter-Terrorism Service*, Policy Focus 157 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus157-Witty-3.pdf>; and Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service* (Washington, DC: Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution, March 2015), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/David-Witty-Paper_Final_Web.pdf.

teaching US partners how to integrate US enablers is cheaper and easier than trying to create these capabilities in their militaries, but it creates dependencies and implied obligations on the part of the United States that Washington may be unwilling or unable to fulfill in a crisis.²⁷

These examples underscore the limitations of this approach as well. While ideal for operations where highly competent militaries will provide the bulk of the fighting forces and only small Arab units with modest capabilities are needed, concentrating personnel with the right skills for military success in elite formations leaves an unbalanced force with limited capabilities—one insufficient for larger or more demanding missions.

Designing Military Operations

Another way Arab armed forces have learned to generate greater combat effectiveness is by designing military operations that play to their strengths. Arab armies have generally fared best when conducting static defenses, preferably from fixed, fortified positions and backed by plentiful fire support. On the offensive, Arab militaries have tended to do best performing limited deliberate assaults, especially when they can rely on firepower, surprise, and numerical advantages to overcome enemy defenses. They tend to fare better when relying on artillery rather than air support and when employing ground-based air defenses rather than fighter operations.

In the air, on the ground, or even at sea, the most effective Arab militaries have worked to avoid maneuver warfare, ad hoc operations, or other missions that demand initiative and creativity from lower-level commanders. On the offensive, Arab ground forces have consistently performed worst when ordered to conduct fast-paced breakthrough and exploitation operations meant to encircle enemy defenders and defeat enemy reserves in fluid meeting engagements. Likewise, Arab air forces have learned to eschew offensive counterair operations and complex air campaigns.

The Egyptian Armed Forces in 1973 and the Iraqi Armed Forces in 1987–88 were the best examples of Arab militaries that learned these lessons and won limited victories by employing techniques tailored to the strengths of their troops without implementing transformational solutions that would have required far-reaching cultural or institutional change.

Cairo's original plan for the 1973 war was developed with the Soviets and reflected the latter's doctrine: the crossing of the Suez Canal was to be followed by a breakout and exploitation to retake all of the Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptians eventually deemed this plan unrealistic and abandoned it. The plan they ultimately implemented instead was developed without Soviet input and embodied a limited war approach

27. Dubik, "Partner Capacity Building," 20–23.

that exploited the vulnerabilities—and temporarily neutralized the strengths—of Israel.

Specifically, it entailed a coordinated offensive to seize a bridgehead on the far side of the Suez Canal and impose heavy costs on counterattacking Israeli forces, thereby exploiting the latter's vulnerability to casualties. It also made innovative use of new antitank and air defense systems to neutralize Israel's main strengths—armor and airpower. In addition to restoring Egyptian honor, the operation discredited the Israeli assumption that the territorial status quo was sustainable and enabled Cairo to regain the Sinai in postwar diplomacy.²⁸

In the case of Iraq, facing possible defeat after losing the al-Faw Peninsula to Iran in February 1986, Saddam Hussein turned the conduct of the war over to his professional generals who then devised a new strategy employing limited, systematic offensives to defeat the Iranians and force them to accept a cease-fire. He also granted his generals greater control over organization, force generation, and doctrine, accelerating a trend of depoliticizing the military, promoting officers based on merit, and giving commanders greater latitude. As a result, the general staff developed a new approach involving extensively scripted offensives that Iraq's forces could accomplish with massive superiority in firepower, numbers, and surprise. This new scheme ultimately enabled Iraq to smash Iran's exhausted ground forces and drive them from Iraqi territory.²⁹

Both the Egyptians and Iraqis made special efforts to improve the quality of their forces by increasing the number of high school and college graduates. They studied failures and developed approaches that avoided weaknesses and built on strengths, relying on heavily scripted systematic operations obviating the need for initiative, improvisation, or coordination of combined arms. They carried out exhaustive rehearsals on detailed mockups of objectives. They reduced the responsibilities of their soldiers and officers to a small number of mission-essential tasks that could be practiced repeatedly and learned by rote, relieving them of the need to exercise initiative or independent judgment.

These examples demonstrate Arab military forces can be trained and organized to conduct certain useful military operations successfully in a matter of years without the kind of truly transformational change that could take decades to accomplish. It also illustrates operations must be crafted to work within the culturally defined skill set of Arab armed forces, avoiding operations they are ill-equipped to perform: in 1973, when the Egyptians attempted to attack beyond their bridgeheads and well-practiced scripts to seize the Sinai passes, they were crushed by smaller Israeli forces in the same fashion as in 1967. Likewise in 1991 when the US-led coalition's left-hook maneuver flanked Iraqi defenses and thwarted their planned static defensive operations and deliberate counterattacks, the Iraqi army was routed in a matter of days.

28. Eisenstadt and Pollack, "Armies of Snow," 562–66; and Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 98–106.

29. Eisenstadt and Pollack, "Armies of Snow," 568–69; and Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 218–29.

These experiences also suggest Arab partner forces are best used in circumstances allowing for meticulously planned, heavily scripted methodical operations, extensive rehearsals involving rote fulfillment of mission-essential tasks, and reliance on numbers, mass, and overwhelming firepower to defeat the enemy. This assessment does not preclude, however, the possibility of limited ad hoc, momentum-driven exploitation or pursuit operations when the adversary has been thrown off balance or scattered, though in such cases US reserves and/or standby air support should be available.

Structuring Arab Forces

A small number of Arab irregular forces have outperformed and succeeded in bloodying conventional militaries—both Arab and foreign. In the Second Lebanon War (2006), Hezbollah succeeded in inflicting more Israeli casualties per Arab fighter than had any Arab army in any previous Arab-Israeli war.³⁰ Similarly in 2014, several thousand ISIS fighters routed five divisions of the Iraqi army and conquered nearly a quarter of Iraq. Likewise, the Houthi in Yemen, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, and a number of other Arab militias and insurgent groups have also fared surprisingly well in combat, especially when compared to the more dismal overall record of the armed forces of the Arab states.³¹ What factors account for the tenacity, commitment, and relative effectiveness of some of these irregular forces, and can conventional Arab armed forces exploit these factors to enhance their own military effectiveness?

Most modern armies try to mold recruits from diverse backgrounds into a *band of brothers* willing to fight and die for one another, a common goal, the nation, or an ideology or cause.³² By contrast, Arab irregular forces often start with a band of brothers who are already a tight-knit group united by family, clan, regional, and ethnosectarian solidarities, and build a military organization on this foundation.

In such groups, the trust, confidence, and sense of mutual obligation engendered by the aforementioned solidarities, as well as intensely felt religious commitments (in sectarian or faith-based militias), often create synergies that strengthen unit cohesion and ultimately enhance

30. Stephen Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2008), 76, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/the-2006-lebanon-campaign-and-the-future-of-warfare-implications-for-army-and-defense-policy/>.

31. Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Humiliation at Rout Hits Iraqi Military Hard,” Associated Press, June 18, 2014; Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, “Special Report: How Mosul Fell—An Iraqi General Disputes Baghdad’s Story,” Reuters, October 14, 2014; and Jessica Lewis, “The Terrorist Army Marching on Baghdad,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2014.

32. Michael Eisenstadt and Kendall Bianchi, “The Ties that Bind: Families, Clans, and Hizballah’s Military Effectiveness,” *War on the Rocks*, December 15, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/ties-bind-families-clans-hizballahs-military-effectiveness/>; Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1948): 280–315; Omer Bartov, “Daily Life and Motivation in War: The Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 12, no. 2 (1989): 200–214; and Thomas A. Kolditz et al., *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, July 2003), <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB179.pdf>.

group performance.³³ This trust enables the close teamwork and cooperation needed in combat, while their religious zeal makes them formidable opponents.³⁴ By contrast, Arab conventional militaries are often weakened by wide social gaps between the officer corps and foot soldiers, the lack of a professional NCO corps to bridge these gaps, and a culturally patterned top-down command structure that induces junior officers to wait for orders from above.³⁵

Arab irregular forces, however, are not unique in their use of social solidarities to advance military ends. Various Arab regimes have created praetorian units drawn from personnel sharing tribal or ethnosectarian ties with the country's leaders in order to defend against coups or unrest.³⁶ Such units have not only proved politically reliable, but as discussed previously, generally have performed somewhat better on the battlefield than regular units from these militaries. The success of these praetorian units may be due, at least in part, to the mobilization of many of the same social solidarities the aforementioned militias have relied upon for their success.

The success of these units also has implications for US efforts to turn allied Arab militaries into effective combat organizations. Arab armies have tended to rely on the same methods used by armies elsewhere to turn civilian recruits from diverse backgrounds into soldiers and create effective units in large numbers—with little overall success. The key for Arab regimes may be to find ways—without exacerbating social tensions or engendering political strife—to strengthen their militaries by constructively harnessing solidarities that have so often undermined regime stability.

Some Arab militaries might therefore consider more broadly applying the manpower model used by irregular forces, militias, and praetorian units, which employ social solidarities to create more effective combat units. They might also look to the British regimental system for an example of a successful Western military that has often used local affiliations to enhance unit esprit and cohesion.³⁷ Certainly, organizing units along local lines would require Arab regimes to accept a degree of risk, potentially empowering competing tribal, ethnosectarian, and regional groups and encouraging centrifugal tendencies within their societies.

33. Norvell B. DeAtkine, "The Arab as Insurgent," *American Diplomacy* (September 2009), <http://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2009/09/the-arab-as-insurgent/>.

34. Ángel Gómez et al., "The Devoted Actor's Will to Fight and the Spiritual Dimension of Human Conflict," *Nature Human Behavior* 1 (2017): 673–79, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-017-0193-3>.

35. DeAtkine, "Arab as Insurgent"; and Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 476–509.

36. Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 107–28; and Quinlivan, "Coup-proofing," 131–65.

37. Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1980); Alistair Irwin, "What is Best in the Regimental System?," *RUSI Journal* 149, no. 5 (2004): 32–36; and Charles Messenger, *For Love of Regiment: A History of British Infantry, Volume Two, 1915–1994*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1996).

A Different Military Culture?

Perhaps the most desirable but most difficult way to improve the effectiveness of Arab militaries is by creating a distinct military culture more conducive to success. Militaries are powerful agents of human socialization. To a certain extent, they can help reshape people's thinking—expanding identities, reorienting values, shifting priorities, and flipping default modes of conduct. At the most basic level, any truly effective army has to be able to take young soldiers and train them to do things their nature, upbringing, and education did not prepare them for like charging a machine gun nest or parachuting from a perfectly good airplane at 1,250 feet. But overcoming various tendencies inherent in Arab society—rote learning, deference to authority, and a reluctance to take the initiative—takes considerably more work than instilling the courage necessary for success in battle.

The earlier a military can start to train and teach its personnel, the more successful it is likely to be in changing fundamental patterns of behavior. Cultural inculcation begins from the earliest periods of childhood, and studies by anthropologists and social psychologists indicate the period of late childhood (roughly ages 7–13) is when cultural values and patterns of behavior are most decisively formed by family, friends, and the educational system.³⁸ If the younger personnel destined for the military can be taught differently, culturally patterned values and behavioral tendencies can be altered more easily.

Of all of the nations that attempted to improve the effectiveness of a modern Arab military, the British had the greatest success, but only in Jordan. The British created the modern Jordanian armed forces as the famed Arab Legion in 1923. They recruited its personnel almost exclusively from Bedouin tribes, accepted only volunteers, and insisted on long terms of service. The British paid reasonably well and among the Bedouin, soldiering was considered an honorable and prestigious calling, further ensuring large numbers of eager and dedicated recruits.

Crucially, the British created Legion schools with a British curriculum and British, or British-trained teachers. The Legion schools prepared Jordanian boys from the age of 10 (in the middle of the critical age range of cultural assimilation) for later service in the Legion. The Legion's formal military training, starting with basic training itself, was also conducted principally by British personnel in accordance with British practices. Indeed, the Legion was commanded mostly by British officers, along with a smaller number of Jordanians who had

38. Gary S. Gregg, *Culture and Identity in a Muslim Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 292–93; and Yasuko Minoura, “A Sensitive Period for the Incorporation of a Cultural Meaning System: A Study of Japanese Children Growing up in the United States,” *Ethos* 20, no. 3 (1992): 304–39.

been educated at Sandhurst, Camberley, and other British military educational institutions.³⁹

As a result, the Arab Legion was culturally a world apart from wider Jordanian society. It felt and functioned much more like a British colonial army with most of their strengths and weaknesses. Consequently the Legion in 1948 was arguably the most formidable foe the Israelis ever fought, demonstrating higher degrees of tactical initiative, innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness than virtually any other Arab fighting force except perhaps Hezbollah. The Legion also demonstrated the tremendously strong individual soldiering skills, marksmanship, and unit cohesion that were the hallmarks of the British Army for centuries.⁴⁰

Without question it will be difficult for Arab states to adopt this kind of model with the United States playing the role of mentor. The educational systems of nearly all the Arab states continue to underperform. And both inertial bureaucracies resistant to change and traditional elites fearful of cultural contamination from the West would likely oppose change as they have past efforts to modernize both military and civilian educational methods.⁴¹ But the UAE has partly adopted the Arab Legion model, and its example may furnish some insight into employing it more broadly. The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has long been a proponent of educating young Emiratis abroad. As part of his effort to bolster UAE military power, he instituted conscription and used it to bring more foreign-educated Emiratis into the officer corps. He has reinforced this focus by relying heavily on Western training methods, sending many Emirati personnel to Western military schools and employing many Westerners as trainers in Emirati programs.

Of course, the UAE has also kept its armed forces small, focused on quality, and has taken a number of other steps that have enhanced Emirati military capabilities. By consciously cultivating foreign-educated and foreign-trained military personnel, Abu Dhabi has begun to create a military culture distinctly different from its wider society, contributing

39. John Bagot Glubb, *The Story of the Arab Legion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948), 103–4, 171–74; Glubb, *The Changing Scenes of Life: An Autobiography* (London: Quartet, 1983), 121–28; Syed Ali El-Edroos, *The Hashemite Arab Army, 1908–1979: An Appreciation and Analysis of Military Operations* (Amman: Amman Publishing Committee, 1980), 221–36; and P. J. Vatikiotis, *Politics and the Military in Jordan: A Study of the Arab Legion, 1921–1957* (London: Frank Cass, 1967), 73–75.

40. Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 269–84.

41. RBAS, *Arab Human Development Report 2003*; Marwan Muasher and Nathan J. Brown, *Engaging Society to Reform Arab Education: From Schooling to Learning* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/11/engaging-society-to-reform-arab-education-from-schooling-to-learning-pub-77454>; Liesbet Steer, Hafez Ghanem, and Maysa Jalbout, *Arab Youth: Missing Educational Foundations for a Productive Life?* (Washington, DC: Center for Universal Education at Brookings, February 2014), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/arabworld_learningbarometer_en.pdf; and Pollack, *Armies of Sand*, 415–38.

to its relative military effectiveness in Yemen.⁴² Attempts to apply the Emirati experience to much larger Arab states would undoubtedly face formidable challenges, however.

The foregoing analysis underscores the importance of educational reform both for the political and socioeconomic development of Arab societies and as a national security imperative. An educated manpower base is a prerequisite for the creation of an effective military. Likewise, greater emphasis must be placed on building up the training base of Arab armies, focusing more on basic soldiering skills and weapons familiarization training. Too often soldiers arrive in units without an adequate general educational foundation and only the most rudimentary military skills. It is unrealistic to expect units to make up for this deficit while also attempting to conduct collective training and managing the reception of new recruits and the release of trained conscripts from active service.

Getting the Politics Right

A revamped US concept for SFA building on elements of these four approaches—relying on small, elite formations; designing military operations to account for Arab strengths and weaknesses; structuring Arab military forces to take advantage of social solidarities; and creating military subcultures that would foster militarily desirable skills—could produce more effective Arab military partners. But transitioning to such a model will create significant organizational and political obstacles on both sides. Generally, the US military has not tailored its training to fit the cultural proclivities of other nations due to its faith in the efficacy of its own doctrine, as well as a belief that doing so would, in effect, mean providing substandard training. Instead, the United States has traditionally taken a one-size-fits-all approach, which it modifies largely to account for differences in the aptitude and abilities of its partners. This approach will have to change.

Moreover, only a special type of individual is likely to succeed as an American adviser or trainer in the unique cultural milieu of the Arab Middle East. The Army should establish a rigorous assessment and selection process to identify individuals who have the *right stuff* for the mission—the right personal and psychological attributes, open to doing things differently from the traditional *US Army way*.

Because Arab militaries are officer-centric, US train and advise efforts in the Arab world should be officer-centric as well. Personnel

42. Taylor Luck, “New Arab Military Force to Reckon with as ‘Little Sparta’ Rises,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2019/0228/New-Arab-military-force-to-reckon-with-as-Little-Sparta-rises>; Nael Shama, “Commentary: Ambitious UAE Flexes Military Muscle,” Reuters, August 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-shama-uae-commentary/commentary-ambitious-uae-flexes-military-muscle-idUSKCN1LC1EC>; Knights, “U.A.E. Approach to Counterinsurgency”; and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “In the UAE, the United States Has a Quiet, Potent Ally Nicknamed ‘Little Sparta,’” *Washington Post*, November 9, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-the-uae-the-united-states-has-a-quiet-potent-ally-nicknamed-little-sparta/2014/11/08/3fc6a50c-643a-11e4-836c-83bc4f26eb67_story.html.

should be drawn largely from the ranks of the officer corps, and NCOs should be frocked as officers for the duration of their tours to enhance their standing and credibility in the eyes of their Arab partners. Moreover before arriving in the Middle East, advisers and trainers should attend a six- to twelve-month course to familiarize them with Arab and Arab military culture and to teach them how to train Arab soldiers and officers. They would have to be willing to volunteer for relatively long deployments of two to three years to enable relationship-building and ensure continuity of effort. This requirement alone will significantly diminish the pool of available volunteers, but it is the best way to ensure those sent will have a real impact.

Furthermore, the United States will have to develop a distinct doctrine for partner Arab forces—or possibly a family of doctrines to account for variations between states—based on what has worked for successful Arab militaries in the past (for example, Egypt in 1973 and Iraq in 1987–88) as US doctrine will often be inappropriate. The program of instruction taught to Arab partners should be modified to de-emphasize bottom-up initiative, quick decision making, and ad hoc or improvised operations, and should instead emphasize static defense, coordination of firepower, deliberate assaults for limited objectives, and sequential vice simultaneous operations. Conceivably, elite Arab special forces units could be taught doctrine and procedures closer to standard US doctrine, especially if they are comprised of soldiers and officers selected for their greater initiative, aggressiveness, and ability to improvise.

Overcoming political and bureaucratic opposition on the US side will only be part of the problem. America's Arab partners get a vote too. The first political hurdle will be convincing them to allow American trainers and advisers to teach something other than standard US doctrine as taught to American servicemembers. At least some, and possibly all, of America's Arab allies may feel shortchanged if they believe their troops are getting something other than what the US military teaches its own.

Moreover, SFA in the Arab Middle East will rarely be a narrow military-technical activity. On the contrary, because most Arab regimes ultimately depend on their militaries for survival, any tinkering with their workings is an inherently political activity touching on the most sensitive matters of state.⁴³ Accordingly, US trainers and advisers must understand the political implications of what they are trying to accomplish, especially in societies where ethnosectarian divisions, corruption, or the malign influence of neighbors may impose significant limits on what they may be able to accomplish.

Any effort to improve the effectiveness of certain units or the military writ large may have implications for the balance of power among political elites. And even if trainers and advisers succeed in making more capable forces, the zero-sum, winner-takes-all approach to politics may

43. Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

result in their being used in a way that results in greater instability—and thus less security.

Mitigating these potential impacts might require the United States to become more deeply involved in the selection of personnel, military organizational matters, and efforts to counter meddling by neighboring states than would be considered desirable.⁴⁴ Such mitigation could require high-level intervention by senior officials on the ground and in Washington. For instance, during the 2007–8 US surge in Iraq, then Lieutenant General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker (among others) worked to protect competent officers and prevailed upon Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to fire numerous malefactors in the ISF and have competent personnel promoted in their place.⁴⁵ United States military and diplomatic officials were able to take these actions because the United States had 150,000 troops on the ground, and as a result Washington had tremendous leverage, and was highly motivated and engaged.⁴⁶ This kind of situation, however, is obviously the exception rather than the rule.

As always in politics, nothing worth doing is ever easy. But as America's strategic focus and military assets eventually shift to other regions of the world, and the US interventions of the past three decades in Iraq and elsewhere fade into the past, the United States will have no choice but to rethink its approach to SFA in the Middle East. For better or worse, the Middle East remains a region of vital interest to the United States, one still facing threats from terrorists and aspiring hegemony, and which continues to export its instability to the rest of the world, including to the United States. Unless the American people are willing to walk away from the Middle East, leaving a security vacuum that will most likely be filled by Iran and all manner of vicious extremist groups, the United States will have to find a better way to build effective Arab partners and allies. It is our hope this article will prompt a rethink of the US approach toward SFA in the Middle East and thus mark a first step toward achieving this goal.

44. Karlin, *Militaries in Fragile States*; and James M. Dubik, *Building Security Forces and Ministerial Capacity: Iraq as a Primer* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, August 2009), http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/BuildingSecurityForces_0.pdf.

45. Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War—Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2019), 114; and Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 249–51.

46. Michael E. O'Hanlon and Ian Livingston, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, January 26, 2010), 22, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/index20100126.pdf>.

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