

# MERIA

## WESTERN INFLUENCE ON ARAB MILITARIES: POUNDING SQUARE PEGS INTO ROUND HOLES

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*This article is a personal account of U.S. Army Colonel Norvell DeAtkine's experience in dealing with Arab militaries for over 40 years. Based on observation and study of Arab military establishments, he concludes little of significance has happened to change the deeply embedded character of the Arab military mindset. While there is some evidence that Arab soldiers historically performed better under European officers, there is no evidence that the Western tradition of command ethos outlived the departure of the officers. There is indeed a distinct Arab military tradition and attempts to recreate it in one's image are not only fruitless, but often counter-productive.*

In 1999, I wrote an article entitled "Why Arabs Lose Wars," which has appeared a number of times in other periodicals and has had a rather long shelf life on the internet. Some considered it as stereotypical, but it was derived from my many years of being with or observing Arab armies, including the civil war between the Jordanian Arab Army and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.<sup>1</sup> Other than the Jordanian experience, my store of knowledge comes from more than two years of daily interface with the Egyptian ground forces as an Army Attaché and a number of temporary duty assignments with Gulf military establishments, including an assignment to the British-officered Trucial Oman Scouts before the emergence of the United Arab Republic. I have combined these on-the-ground observations and experiences with over 40 years of collecting as much information as possible on the military culture and way of life of Arab militaries.

As the Middle East Seminar Director for over 18 years at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, I have interviewed literally hundreds of my former U.S. Army Special Operations personnel, reviewing their experiences with various Arab military establishments. Since retiring from government service, I continued as a consultant working with military personnel

deploying to the Middle East. The most salient observation I have drawn from my observations and study of Arab military establishments has been to convince me that little of significance has happened to change the deeply embedded character of the Arab military mindset.<sup>2</sup>

From these many conversations and discussions, I found little has evolved in the Arab military culture in the years since I wrote the article that would cause me to change the conclusions I reached. Moreover, they sharpened my belief that there is indeed a distinct Arab military tradition and that our attempts to recreate it in our image are not only fruitless, but often counter-productive. When we write articles on how to improve Arab military effectiveness, to me it smacks of condescension and leftover colonialist thinking, however well intended the suggestions may be.<sup>3</sup>

The article I wrote focused on conventional war and the Arab impediments to conducting it successfully against Western type forces. Yet as the Iraqi insurgent war against the coalition forces dragged on with continuing violence, an obvious degree of effectiveness was visible on the part of the Iraqi insurgents,<sup>4</sup> and it was becoming apparent that the demonstrated ineffectiveness of Arab armies in conventional warfare did not apply to the

parameters of unconventional warfare. The insurgents displayed initiative and imagination<sup>5</sup> in their tactics that were rarely displayed in their conventional war making. Reviewing the historical record, Arab unconventional war effectiveness in the modern era has presented a much more positive picture. Through the Arab resistance against the Italians, French, and Spanish in North Africa as well as the guerrilla warfare against the British in Aden, Iraq, and Palestine, the Arabs demonstrated a proficiency lacking in their conventional warfare operations.<sup>6</sup>

### **THE ARAB AS UNCONVENTIONAL FIGHTER**

As I examined what in fact made the difference between the Arab insurgent or guerilla fighter and the conventional soldier, I surfaced a number of factors. Among them was that the Arab guerilla usually had leadership sharpened by battle as well as experience and exuded the confidence that motivated others to follow him--as opposed to a conventional unit commander most likely picked by the regime for political reasons.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Arab guerilla was apt to be with those of his own ethnic group, clan, or tribe--once again as opposed to a conventional unit of diverse, urban/rural, tribal, or sectarian differences. The officers almost always came from the dominant ethnic group, such as the east bank Jordanians versus the Palestinians in Jordan, the Sunnis in Iraq versus the Shi'i soldiery, or the Christian Maronite officers in Lebanon.

The unconventional Arab soldier is fighting within his element with people he trusts. In admittedly simplistic terms, it boils down to the concept of fire and maneuver--the idea that an attacking soldier exposing himself to enemy fire can count on those who support him to provide covering fire, and that his life has meaning to his superiors. If there is a lack of trust in officers and one's fellow soldiers, the willingness to expose oneself to attack is missing.<sup>8</sup> My observation was that they

trusted soldiers in their own unit but not those in neighboring units.

The stark differences between the Arabs' capabilities in conventional and unconventional war led me to the next step. Thinking about the long history of Western presence and involvement with the militaries of the Arab world, and the fact that for the most part the Western powers tried to create an Arab military in their own image, what has been the result? More importantly, perhaps, has the Western military influence been adverse to Arab effectiveness in war in general?

### **CONTINUITY IN THE ARAB MILITARY CULTURE**

Reading the passages from the *River War* by Winston Churchill on the remaking of the Egyptian Army with the infusion of British training and officers reminded me of our effort, now dwindling, to remake Saddam's army. As Churchill wrote, under the new army, "The recruits were treated with justice. Their rations were not stolen by officers. The men were given leave to visit their villages from time to time. When they were sick they were sent hospital instead of being flogged. In short, the European system was substituted for the Oriental."<sup>9</sup>

Exactly 100 years later, I was observing the Egyptian army, and I realized, in reality, how little things had changed. The officers did not steal from their men, but they used them as indentured servants working on their farms and cared very little for their rations, which usually consisted of bread, some onions, a little dried fish, beans, tea, and sugar. Watching a truck roll into the unit area with the cargo bed piled high with bread being held down by soldiers standing or sitting on it, gives some idea on the care that went with their rationing. Moreover soldiers could buy supplemental food items from a sort of unit-level Post Exchange in which very often the unit officers would retain the profits.<sup>10</sup> I did not see soldiers flogged, but I did witness soldiers being slapped and pushed around.

The Egyptian officers were not barbarians or uncaring brutes. It was and is a way of life inculcated by centuries of living in a specific environment. The Egyptian soldier expected nothing more. I once asked an Egyptian officer why the officers got into their autos and drove off to Cairo on Thursday afternoons, leaving their soldiers stranded in the desert and having to hope they could hitch a ride to Cairo on a passing truck. His answer was that to give them a ride or in any way assist their way into Cairo would only perplex and confound them. The same concept that officers have privileges and are fools not to take advantage of them is pervasive throughout the Arab world. For example, in the U.S. Army and British Army, traditionally the officers eat after the last soldier has gone through the mess line. Not so in the Iraqi army<sup>11</sup> nor among the Bedouin troops of the Israeli Defense Forces,<sup>12</sup> and certainly not in the Egyptian army I served with. Yet again, as indicated by the IDF officer training with the Arab troops, the soldier does not expect anything more from the officer. The thought occurs then that if officer and soldier are content with the practice, why attempt to change it?

As Churchill wrote those many years ago, "Under pressure of local circumstances there has been developed a creature who can work with little food, with little incentive, very long hours under a merciless sun."<sup>13</sup> The truth of this was brought home to me by watching soldiers with bricks on their backs toiling in summer heat during Ramadan, with only a wet rag to moisten their lips. In stark contrast, the scene reminded me of our helicopters bringing in ice and beer during my Vietnam tour or the extensive establishment of post exchanges and other amenities in the many "green zones" throughout Iraq.

### **THE RAPID EVAPORATION OF WESTERN INFLUENCE**

The rapidity with which Western influence evaporates is further shown in the Egyptian case by the rapidity with which the earlier French influence had disappeared. Churchill

was not the first to overestimate the influence of his nation on the Egyptian military culture. He made much of the positive effects of the French influence on Egyptian society. In commenting on al-Jabarti's observations, Shmuel Moreh cited the profound French influence on the Egyptian military in terms of modern weaponry and tactics.<sup>14</sup> However, it may have seemed then, by the time of the British attempts to develop a new Egyptian army, little if any French influence remained. Today French influence in Egypt is negligible.

As P.J. Vatikiotis noted in his seminal study of the Egyptian army,<sup>15</sup> for centuries the people of Egypt were generally excluded from military service. It was not until the reign of Khedive Muhammad Sa'id that some Egyptians obtained officer rank, and not until 1936 that larger numbers of officers came from the general Egyptian society. As Vatikiotis observed, the officer corps of Egypt was drawn mostly from the lower middle class, who had no other hope of achieving a better station in life. As the social origins of the officer class broadened, their attitude toward political issues closely coincided with Egyptian society in general, including the propensity to blame others for their failures. George Kirk wrote that the humiliating defeat of the Egyptian army in 1948 was blamed on all sorts of reasons, few having to do with reality, most being of the "stabbed in the back" rationale. The chief villain, according to Nasser and his colleagues, was Britain.<sup>16</sup> Most of the reasons lie in the fact that it had been 66 years since the Egyptians had gone into battle under their own commanders. Their inexperience and "...congenital unwillingness to accept responsibility was among the primary reasons for their defeat."<sup>17</sup>

The turn to the Soviets in 1955 came with promises of huge deliveries of military equipment and later, after the defeat of 1967, the advisors to train the Egyptians on how to use it. The Russians carried out most of their promises, mostly to salvage their pride and credibility in the region.<sup>18</sup> It seemed a new spirit had been infused into the Egyptian military. Sadat wrote of his confidence in the Egyptian preparations for the 1967 war, but

with the outbreak of the war he gradually learned the dismal truth. He was embarrassed when he saw huge crowds celebrating a “victory” as portrayed by the Nasser propaganda machine. This turned into dismay as the Egyptian Field Forces commander, General Hakim Amer, tried to blame it on American armed intervention.<sup>19</sup> Egyptian officers told me that following that war, there was so much public resentment against the army--and particularly its officers--that they tried to avoid wearing their uniforms whenever possible.

With renewed massive Soviet equipment assistance, and a determination to redress the previous humiliations, the Egyptians rebuilt their army, absorbing Soviet instruction on weapons and tactical employment, but also taking Soviet doctrine and weaponry designed primarily for a European war and adapting them to Egyptian methods and military culture.<sup>20</sup> In the final analysis, the Egyptians carefully used Soviet assistance but ensured that it was compatible with the Egyptian level of military proficiency and military culture. They thus “Egyptianized” the Soviet doctrine and training.<sup>21</sup>

The Russians confined their instruction to improving operational and tactical military proficiency, avoiding subjects pertaining to military ethos and values.<sup>22</sup> The Egyptians, for the most part, tended to eschew close relations with the Soviets, apparently an arrangement that suited the Soviets as well. With two very competent generals, Sa’d al-Shazli, the chief of staff, and Muhammad Abd al-Ghani Gamasy, the chief of operations, the Egyptians did very well without the Russians.<sup>23</sup>

## PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE EGYPTIAN ARMY

My personal observations of the Egyptian feat of crossing the canal were the result of a visit made to Egypt in 1977 with the U.S. Army assistant chief of staff of Intelligence. As the Egyptians had made a decision to turn to the West, the Egyptians were opening up to us (to a degree, of course). To a U.S.

contingent of officers, including myself, they showed many of the intelligence documents used in the preparation of the crossing of the Suez. I was amazed at the detail of the schematics. They were drawings made in pen, longhand, with every detail of the Israeli defenses shown, including the taps on the fuel lines designed to turn the Suez into a fiery inferno. All the main strongpoints of the Bar-Lev line of Israeli defenses along the Suez had been carefully pinpointed. A combination of strong commanders, troops carefully prepared, a will to win infused in the military, an excellent strategic deception plan,<sup>24</sup> and more than a little Israeli hubris, resulted in what the Egyptian public and army considers a victory. The humiliations of 1948, 1956, and 1967 were erased.

Following the 1973 war, my observations were that the Egyptian army returned to a business as usual and standards declined. The Egyptian army and its commanders became enmeshed in the economy of Egypt, with defense industries making washing machines and other consumer goods.<sup>25</sup> The army increasingly set itself apart from the people. The regime went to great lengths to ensure the loyalty of the junior officer corps, providing subsidized housing and automobiles. The old plagues of nepotism and *wasta*<sup>26</sup> returned. Weapons and equipment the Egyptians were--and still are not ready--to assimilate logistically were being bought from diverse sources based on factors other than need or logistic sustainability.<sup>27</sup>

Having gone through French, British, Soviet, and now American involvement with their military, it is evident that the pervasive and powerful Arab/Egyptian culture seeps back in as soon as the advisors leave. So today, the Egyptian army retains some vestiges of the British influence, more of the Soviet, and about the same amount from the United States. None of it is pervasive or permanent. In the midst of the “Arab Spring,” the Egyptian army is still operating primarily as a regime preservation institution--albeit under new management--with all the detriment to soldering that this factor produces.<sup>28</sup>

## THE IRAQI ARMY EXPERIENCE

In the case of the Iraqi military, the vaporous influence of Western, or even Soviet influence, is to a degree even more dramatic. The Iraqi army, originally a creation of the British after World War I, seems to have had every factor in its favor to create a permanent effect. The prime mover among the Iraqis was Jafar Pasha al-Askari, whom Gertrude Bell described as a man of “integrity and moderation.”<sup>29</sup> He comes through the pages of his memoirs as an Anglophile with a great deal of admiration for the British military. He became known as the father of the Iraqi Army.<sup>30</sup>

Less than 20 years later, the Iraqi Army, infected by the new surge of Arab nationalism with German encouragement, was fighting the British in World War II. Their performance was mediocre.<sup>31</sup> Following the Second World War, the pan-Arab nationalism of Nasser and Communism pushed Iraq in a different direction. Soviet influence in Iraq as well as Egypt became paramount. Soviet influence was again overlaid on a British framework. As in Egypt, the combination proved to be unwieldy and excruciatingly complex. Iraq participated in both the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel. In both cases their performance was marginal at best.

However, they created an image of aggressiveness and militancy. In the 1967 war, they were the only allies that came to the aid of the Jordanians on the Palestinian front;<sup>32</sup> and in the 1973 war, the Iraqis made an 800-mile trip across the desert with two divisions to assist the Syrians. That was impressive, but both the Israelis and Jordanians were unimpressed with the Iraqi army’s battle performance.<sup>33</sup>

The inept performance of the Iraqi army against the Iranians, particularly in the early stages of the war, has been fully chronicled in the Institute for Defense Analyses study of the war.<sup>34</sup> Basic concepts of strategy and tactics were ignored. Of course many of the generals blamed it all on Saddam, much as the German generals blamed their defeats on Hitler. There was plenty of blame to go around from top to

bottom. In fact, tribal culture seems to have had an inordinate amount of influence on Saddam’s conduct of the war. While there was ample residue of the Soviet footprint illustrated by warehouses of older equipment, unused field manuals, and some older officers enthusing about the Soviet military education, there was little to indicate any overall Western or Soviet influence in the tactical or strategic planning or execution of their operations.<sup>35</sup>

Of course against tribes or small minorities such as the Assyrians, or weak foes such as the Kuwaitis, they performed well enough (and brutally). However, despite decades of war against the Kurdish rebels, they were never able to subdue them. In essence, after all the years of training by the British and the Russians, very little was absorbed into their military system. The Iraqi army labored under the same problems and cultural blinders evident in all Arab armies. These included a predilection to confuse facts with wishes, inability to coordinate combined arms operations, logistics problems, lack of professional non-commissioned officers, and a lack of cohesion between officers and enlisted men.<sup>36</sup> With the Iraqis one could also add an attitude of superiority over their Arab and Iranian neighbors.<sup>37</sup>

With the disappearance of American advisors and technicians from Iraq, the paltry eight or nine years during which Americans were closely involved with training the Iraqi Army will have little lasting effect or influence. As many of the Saddam-era officers began returning to the units, there was an improvement in effectiveness but also a return to the old Iraqi mindset.<sup>38</sup> Our advisors also noted a greater reluctance to incorporate American logistics procedures and training methods. The reluctance, however, was always expressed with the usual Arab politeness, which American advisors and or senior American officials sometimes confused with acceptance.<sup>39</sup> This is a predictable trend in that the Iraqi army was considered a noble profession among the officers and was considered so by most of the general populace, including the Shi’a (but not the Kurds). This is understandable given the many years of

deep propagandizing of the role of the military profession.<sup>40</sup>

A point to remember in addressing the temporal nature of Western or Russian influence throughout the Arab world, but particularly in Iraq, is the successive waves of officer replacements based on political or regime preservation measures.<sup>41</sup> There has seldom been a long period of officer corps stability in Arab military history.

### **WESTERN VERSUS RUSSIAN TRAINING AND LOGISTICS SYSTEMS**

At this point, the issue of Western versus Eastern European, particularly Russian, should be considered. The Russian system of training, doctrine, and logistics differs considerably from the Western, at least in their application in the Arab world. From my observations and the observations of others,<sup>42</sup> the Russian system is more compatible with Arab culture in a number of ways. Their logistics system is predicated on less operator maintenance, with greater reliance on depot maintenance. The non-commissioned officer (NCO) is not as important in the Russian system and certainly the paranoia and secrecy of the Soviet system was much more in keeping with the Arab style. The author often heard from the Egyptians that Soviet equipment was easier to repair and keep operable. Our equipment was often termed “delicate.” On the other hand, just as the Iraqis did, they often blamed their reverses in battle on the better Western equipment of their adversaries or on some failure of their outside support.<sup>43</sup>

At this point the American influence on the Iraqi military is rapidly dwindling and will gradually disappear. We were there much too short a period to have any lasting effect. It is unfortunate because the U.S. officers who served with the Iraqis and trained them, although they experienced the usual frustrations of working with Arab militaries, also expressed admiration for their bravery and willingness to learn.<sup>44</sup>

### **THE SAUDI EXPERIENCE**

In terms of the amount of time U.S. military advisors have spent on the ground with Arab counterparts, Saudi Arabia has the distinction of hosting the U.S. military for the longest period. The U.S. involvement with the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) was organized as the United States Military Training Mission to Saudi Arabia (USMTSA) in 1953. The U.S. involvement with the Saudi National Guard began in 1973, organized as the Saudi Arabia National Guard (SANG).<sup>45</sup> The British were heavily involved with what was then called the “White Army” before we began training them. The Saudi system presents a prime example of how Arab regimes divide Western training missions to minimize Western influence. Access is always carefully regulated and no one foreign nation is allowed or granted exclusive control over the military supply or training of the Saudi military forces. The equipment has a wide diversification or origin. For instance, their tank inventory is composed of U.S., French, and German armored vehicles. The British train the elite units of the Saudi National Guard. Weapons systems have also been supplied by Great Britain, Sweden, Brazil, and China. One can imagine the logistical and training nightmare in keeping these diverse training systems and inventory operational.

In the case of the U.S. involvement, the two training organizations are controlled by different U.S. military organizations. There is little if any coordination between the two organizations, a circumstance insisted upon by the Saudis.<sup>46</sup> The SANG is a regime protection force, with troops drawn primarily from the Saudi family’s historical domain in the tribal Nejd. Their number one mission is to protect the regime, from the Saudi army if necessary. The training mission has long been outsourced to the Vinnell Corporation, using mostly retired officers and NCOs. There are also many regular U.S. Army officers and NCOs involved in their training, and have been for many years.

Since involvement with Saudi training began in the 1950s, we have trained literally

thousands of Saudi officers in U.S. courses. We have sent a like number of our officers there to train the Saudis. With many of these, I was able to communicate during or after their deployment. Certainly top-level unclassified reports on the state of the Saudi forces are difficult to find, as are candid articles by their U.S. army and corporate trainers in official publications.

In keeping with the Arab distrust and “divide and rule,” there are still other Western militaries or police forces involved with the Saudis, such as the British training SANG in riot control. Moreover, as in most Arab countries, they maintain an inventory of many types of Western equipment, really a mishmash of equipment, often purchased based more on political rationale, or for corrupt personal reasons.<sup>47</sup> The diversity of equipment creates a horrendous logistics problem, particularly for a country such as Saudi Arabia with a weak indigenous logistic infrastructure.

It should be pointed out that there has been a great deal of improvement in the military effectiveness of the SANG, and many of the advisors speak well of their more recent performance. They are far and away better soldier material than the RSLF, whose mission is predicated on defending from external threats.<sup>48</sup> Not coincidentally, their combat units are stationed far away from the center of Saudi Arabia, and moving them involves approval from various levels of the Saudi bureaucracy, all of which are coup-preventive measures. Both Saudi organizations are completely dependent on outside support for logistics and maintenance. While the RSLF has been in combat, most recently in 2009 with the Houthi tribesmen on the Yemeni border, their performance, based on the available information, was less than stellar.<sup>49</sup> The same could be said for their performance in the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, the SANG has not been tested in combat at all. They were marginally involved in the 1991 Gulf war, but not at all in the Houthi rebellion. They did move into Bahrain to help a fellow Sunni regime survive a Shi'i uprising, and

they have been used to quell Shi'i disturbances in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia.<sup>51</sup>

The same problems that afflict all Arab armies are even more pronounced in the Saudi military: refusal to take responsibility, fragmented command relationships, avoidance of “dirty hands” work on the part of the officers, little responsibility delegated to NCOs, etc. As an astute former member of the SANG training cadre once remarked to me, “To the Saudis, the army is a job, nothing more.” Another told me his cohort commander asked him to rate his officers so as to avoid any unpleasantness should a subordinate take issue with his evaluation.<sup>52</sup> The Saudi commander would simply blame it on the American officer. Over the years, all these anecdotes paint a mosaic of the problems with which an American advisor must contend.

They labor under the principle of scarcity.<sup>53</sup> There is simply not enough of what we value to go around. Those who are quick and powerful get the most. As a facet of this cultural trait, Arab militaries tend to hoard supplies at every level, and, unfortunately, at the end of the food chain, those who need it the most are least likely to get what they need. Parts and ammunition are conserved as if there is no hope of resupply and a final decisive battle is close at hand.<sup>54</sup>

In Iraq, very often, Iraqi units would buy the parts they needed for their vehicles, even though the parts were available at a higher level unit. The principle at work here is the all-important trappings of power.<sup>55</sup> To a supply officer managing a supply depot, the repair parts and equipment are his personal responsibility. The power to give or deny is his source of power. To let the supplies go easily is a diminishment of his power.<sup>56</sup> This is was the story from Cairo to Baghdad. Units starved for parts, with depots loaded at near-capacity levels.

## CONCLUSION

As Bernard Lewis pointed out, one of the aspects of Western and Soviet influence on the Islamic and Arab world was, unfortunately, to

provide the ideological foundations and coercive tools for dictatorial regimes.<sup>57</sup> As Elie Kedourie wrote, while the constitutionalist spirit failed to thrive in the Arab world, the “enlightened absolutism” of Western governments, with their penchant for centralized control, blended more easily with the Arab autocratic tradition.<sup>58</sup>

More to the point, it was the new and much more invasive coercive apparatus of the state that appealed to the rulers of the Arab world. From the Lebanese Kata’ib imitators of the Italian Black Shirts to the Iraqi and Syrian facsimiles of the Gestapo and KGB, the power of the state was made more pervasive by the doctrine of the Ba’th party and other socialist parties with an “Arab face.”

The Arab militaries of today came into existence under colonial rule.<sup>59</sup> For the most part they were colonial creations, but they were not created, as the modern Arab historian would claim, as part of a divide-and-rule policy. Unintentionally, they provided a way for the lower middle class to move up in static, class-conscious society.<sup>60</sup>

The difference between the village people and Bedouin of the desert is significant, as is the culture of Egyptians from that of Iraqis, but nevertheless the social class composition of the Arab militaries contains overriding commonalities, promoted by the impact of military cross-training within the Arab League, and similar educational programs at the university level. The infusion of mass pan-Arab communication has also had a unifying effect in attitudes on the Arab societies, and, consequently, the militaries of the Arab world. From my observations over the years, the commonalities of the Arab culture far outweigh the differences.

In summary, the Arab world has resisted deeper Western influence on Arab military traditions for a number of reasons. First is the rapid turnover of officers as a result of recurring coups (or regime fears of one). As a layer of officers begins to absorb Western military values, they are dismissed, not just because of the Westernization but rather because with each regime change, they are considered politically unreliable. This has

been particularly true in Iraq and Syria, and to a certain extent in Egypt and Jordan as well. The new regime in Egypt is gradually remolding the army leadership to be more compatible with the Muslim Brotherhood. Under former Egyptian President Husni Mubarak, an officer suspected of fundamentalist sympathies was carefully watched.

Second, the regime leadership constructs political barriers to keep Western influence at a minimal or acceptable low level. This is done to ensure that Western political values are not too deeply embedded, as exemplified by the classic divide-and-rule policies of the Saudis. The Egyptians and Iraqis were also careful to insure that Soviet influence did not become entrenched within their militaries.<sup>61</sup>

Third, despite decades of demonstrated military weakness compared to Western militaries, there is still a feeling of superiority over the West,<sup>62</sup> particularly among the more educated elite and the military leadership, often accompanied by a dose of occidentosis.<sup>63</sup> This phenomenon is found in the documents of al-Qa’ida and Hizballah, and harkens back to the time of the Arab conquests. Islam was the religion of the Arabs and a mark of caste unity and superiority.<sup>64</sup>

Fourth, the burden of historical baggage weighs heavily on the Arabs, and more so than the military. Once the greatest military power on earth, crushing the enemies of Islam beneath them, conquering and incorporating peoples of all colors and religions into their orbit, today they have experienced humbling defeats by people once their vassals. How can this be explained? Only by a return to a past, real or imagined, and by denial of the impediments to true modernization, using the blame game to explain defeats.<sup>65</sup> This has been explained by enumerating the factors that contribute to the Arab burden of history. Among these is the inability to absorb Western concepts, which have been introduced to the Arab world but to this point have been overcome by the strength of radicalized notions of Islamic law, and oversimplification of modernization.<sup>66</sup>



Last, the strength of a pervasive Arab culture--which I have attempted in the core of this article to show--must, along with political ramifications, be impervious to the quick-fix solutions so popular in the West and particularly in the United States. As a number of scholars have pointed out, the malaise within the Arab culture requires solutions from within, and attempts to graft Western culture onto the Arab society have failed.<sup>67</sup> Some commentators have seen the reserved response of the militaries in Tunisia and Egypt toward demonstrators as a consequence of U.S. and Western influence. Unfortunately this has little validity.<sup>68</sup> It was far more a result of military leaders correctly assessing where their best interests lie.

Imparting Western values and soldierly ethos to the Arab armies has been, as someone once observed, like teaching dance steps without the music. They memorize the steps but never get the tempo or the rhythm of the Western military traditions. While there is some evidence that Arab soldiers historically performed better under European officers, there is no evidence that the tradition of command ethos outlived the departure of the officers.<sup>69</sup>

Recently there has been a great deal of punditry on the “wrong army” being trained by the Western powers in Afghanistan, the argument being that the Afghan army has been trained more for conventional war than unconventional. That really misses the point. Just as we have done in the Arab world, we attempted unsuccessfully to graft our military culture onto an impermeable society.

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*special operations students and closely followed their experiences in the Arab world.*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Norvell B. DeAtkine, “Why Arabs Lose Wars,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (December 1999), <http://www.meforum.org/441/why-arabs-lose-wars>.

<sup>2</sup> As Director of Middle East Studies at the JFK Special Warfare Center and School for 18 years, one of my additional duties was the country orientation training of teams deploying to the Middle East. I kept in contact with many of these officers and soldiers, during or after their deployments, particularly to get their insights. Other than my own observations, these are the core of my analysis of the Arab militaries in this article.

<sup>3</sup> A basic problem I have found over the years is that senior Arab military officers do not readily accept the premise that they need help, especially from the West. They tend to look elsewhere for answers to any failure. I once gave a talk to Arab military attachés at the Virginia Military Institute, using a diplomatic version of my article on why Arabs lose wars. At the conclusion, only one attaché came up to talk to me. He said that the problem was not so much why the Arabs lose but rather why they do not accept that they have lost.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Cordesman and Sara Bjerg Moller, “Iraq’s Evolving Insurgency” (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2005), [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/050805\\_iraqi\\_insurgency.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/050805_iraqi_insurgency.pdf). It should also be pointed out that, despite the huge size of the Iraqi conventional forces with ample equipment, the only effective Iraqi force against the Americans in 2003 was the Fidayin Saddam, a militia force. Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II, The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 580.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad S. Hashim, “Why the Insurgency Won’t Go Away,” *Boston Review*,

October/November 2004,  
<http://bostonreview.net/BR.5/hashim.php>.

<sup>6</sup> Youssef Aboul-Enien and David Trandberg, "Arab Thoughts on the Italian Colonial Wars in Libya: Rediscovering Arab Insurgency Tactics and Military History," *Small Wars Journal*, March 6, 2012, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/arab-thoughts-on-the-italian-colonial-wars-in-libya>.

<sup>7</sup> Norvell B. DeAtkine, "The Arab as Insurgent and Counterinsurgent," in Barry Rubin (ed.), *Conflict and Insurgency in the Contemporary Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 24-40.

<sup>8</sup> Yehosshafat Harkabi, "Basic Factors in the Arab Collapse During the Six Day War," *Orbis*, No. 11 (Fall 1967), pp. 678-79.

<sup>9</sup> Sir Winston Churchill, *The River War*, reprint (Doylestown, PA: Wildside Press, undated) of original *The River War: Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan* (1899), p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> The cantonment areas in which the Egyptian soldiers lived were austere and devoid of amusements or sporting facilities. Many were simply the cantonment area in which the Egyptian Army dug in after the 1973 war. Little if anything had been done to improve their living area since that time.

<sup>11</sup> Wesley Gray, *Embedded: A Marine Corps Advisor Inside the Iraqi Army* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009), p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Lazar Berman, "Understanding Arab Culture," *Small Wars Journal* (April 2008), pp. 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> Churchill, *River War*, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> Shmuel Moreh, "Napoleon and the French Impact on Egyptian Society in the Eyes of Al-Jabarti," in *Al-Jabarti's Chronicle of the French Occupation; 1798 Napoleon in Egypt*. Translated by Shmuel Moreh (Princeton: Marcus Weiner, 2006) pp. 183-200. Equally impressed with the imprint of French influence on Egypt was the historian A.Z. (only his initials were used) in his book *The Emancipation of Egypt* written in 1905, Nook version (Charles River Editors, undated), pp.

3-5. He wrote of the imprint of the French language into "the very soul of Egypt."

<sup>15</sup> P.J. Vatikiotis, *The Egyptian Army in Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1961).

<sup>16</sup> George Kirk, "The Role of the Military in Egypt," in *The Military in the Middle East* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1963), p. 75. Saddam Hussein loyalists came up with the same excuse for the Iraqi army in the 1991 war. Kevin M. Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein's Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), p. 248.

<sup>17</sup> Kirk, "Role of the Military," p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> Dasni Asher, *The Egyptian Strategy for the Yom Kippur War*, translated by Moshe Tlamim (Jefferson NC: McFarlane and Company, 2009), p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> *Anwar el-Sadat: In Search of Identity; An Autobiography* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), pp. 174-75.

<sup>20</sup> Asher, *The Egyptian Strategy*. Asher concludes that top to bottom assistance of Soviet advisors at every level helped the Egyptians assimilate Soviet doctrine for the 1973 war. Egyptians dispute this completely. In a symposium after the war, the Egyptian commanders, other than one cursory thanks for Soviet support, do not even mention Soviet involvement or help. *The Book of the International Symposium on the 1973 October War* (Cairo: Egyptian Military Sector Military Sector, 1975). After reading and listening for many years, it is my belief that Israeli authors give the Soviets too much credit and the Egyptians take too much. The lower ranking Egyptian officers tended to be more appreciative of Soviet efforts.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), p. 344.

<sup>22</sup> Some Egyptian officers felt the Soviet training was better in that they did not bother with subjects such as civil-military relations or the role of a non-commissioned officer, etc. Others complained Americans complicated

subjects too much. However, they also stated that the Soviets were always difficult to deal with and heavy handed in their methods of instruction.

<sup>23</sup> Lt. General Saad el Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez* (Washington D.C.: American Mideast Research, 1980), *passim*. By his and other accounts, Shazly turned the training of the Egyptian army around. He concentrated on the small unit commanders, instituted better treatment of soldiers, athletic competition, adventure training, and “ate sand,” spending a lot of time in the field with the troops. An excellent source for study of the Egyptian high command has been written by American naval officer, Lt. Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein in *Infantry Magazine*, March/April 2004; *Infantry Magazine*, July/August, 2006; and *Military Review*, January/February 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Uri Bar-Joseph, “Israel’s 1973 Intelligence Failure,” in P.R. Kumaraswamy (ed.), *Revisiting the Yom Kippur War* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 24-25.

<sup>25</sup> Shana Marshall, “Egypt’s Other Revolution: Modernizing the Military-Industrial Complex,” in *Jadaliyya*, February 12, 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4311/the-military>.

<sup>26</sup> The use of a go-between to secure contracts, jobs, a decent education, or even sometimes a marriage partner.

<sup>27</sup> There are acres covered with older Soviet model tanks, older American M-60’s, and now even M-1’s. Warehouses are full of end item equipment that are of dubious usefulness.

<sup>28</sup> Other than observations of the author and other U.S. officers involved in Egyptian training, this material is drawn from my presentation “Cultural Implications of the Gulf War: Observations on American Coalition Warfare with Arab Allies,” presented to the International Studies Association, Mershon Center, October 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Georgina Howell, *Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert: Shaper of Nations*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), p. 362.

<sup>30</sup> Jafar Pasha al-Askari, *A Soldiers Story: From Ottoman Rule to Independent Iraq*,

Translated by Mustafa Tariq Al-Askari (U.K.: Arabian Publishing, 2003), p. 185.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Lyman, *Iraq 1941: The Battles for Basra, Habbaniya, Fallujah, and Baghdad* (Kent U. K.: Osprey Publishing, 2006), pp. 90-91.

<sup>32</sup> Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 226.

<sup>33</sup> Information gathered by the author during briefings provided by the Jordanian Army as part of a post 1973 war “lessons learned” survey in Amman, 1974. It was unusual in that the Jordanians were laudatory of the Syrians and dismissive of the Iraqis. There has always been a close relationship between the Iraqis and Jordanian army.

<sup>34</sup> Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, with Mounir Elkhamedi, *Saddam’s War: An Iraqi Military Perspective on the Iran-Iran War, McNair Paper 70* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> While Saddam drew heavily upon the Soviet style of centralized control mechanisms and coercive instruments of political power, because of his fear of Communist party subversion, he kept the Soviets at arms length, sending some officers, but not many, to schools in the Soviet Union. Soviet equipment came with trainers, but short shrift was given to the logistics aspect. Much was inoperable after a short interval of use.

<sup>36</sup> Much of my information on current conditions in the Iraqi military comes from observations of an American Arab who spent three years with the Iraqi army. His observations are referred to as *Jamil’s notes*. As he still is employed with Arab forces elsewhere, he prefers his name not be used. Drastic punishment was meted out to Iraqi soldiers to keep them obedient. An Arabic speaking American NCO gathered Iraqi battalion journals after the 1991 war, and it was not unusual to see that up to 15 soldiers in a single battalion had been executed for homosexuality, desertion, disloyalty, consorting with enemies of the state, etc.

<sup>37</sup> Woods et. al, *Saddam’s War*, pp. 5-8.

<sup>38</sup> *Jamil's notes.*

<sup>39</sup> In the author's experience, it was a common and frustrating experience when senior American officials took Arab generosity and politeness for agreement to a policy being discussed. One example was the American military delegation to Egypt being convinced that Egypt would agree to a plan to establish a CENTCOM forward at Ras Banas. Nothing could have been more preposterous.

<sup>40</sup> Surprisingly, I found this to be true even among the Shi'a who suffered at the hands of Iraq's military. Decades of propaganda had entrenched the image of a victorious and noble army in the minds of the people. See Sami Shawkat, "The Profession of Death" in Sylvia Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim, *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), pp. 97-99. This speech to secondary students in Baghdad became a famous rallying cry for militant Arabism.

<sup>41</sup> See Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2004), p. 1011.

<sup>42</sup> The seminal study of Soviet influence on Arab militaries is in Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth Pollack, "Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries," *Middle East Journal* Vol. 55 (Autumn 2001). In this article, I only point out some differences.

<sup>43</sup> There is little doubt that the Soviet training and logistics systems were more in accordance with Arab military culture. The duties and authority of non-commissioned officers, logistics philosophy, security emphasis, deception planning, and many other aspects of the Soviet systems fit more closely with the Arab. See DeAtkine, "Why Arabs Lose Wars." *Passim*. Nevertheless Arabs were never very effusive in their opinion of Soviet military support. The Egyptians alternately thanked their Russian political leaders for support while spreading rumors their support was less than that of the Americans. Vadim Kirpitchednko in Richard B. Parker (ed.), *The*

*October War; A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Typical was one American officer who summed it up this way. "Overall I respected their attempts to secure and conduct operations given their circumstances." Their circumstances were poor living conditions, lack of logistic support, and ill-trained junior officers and NCO's, but they had a former Saddam army commander who was charismatic and kept the unit going. American Captain in email to author, June 3, 2012. The American Arab with the Iraqi troops was also very laudatory of the Iraqis courage. *Jamil's Notes.*

<sup>45</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia Enters the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Military and Internal Security Dimension. V. The Saudi National Guard." Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 30, 2002. Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Sippel, USA, "Saudi Arabia; The Changing Paradigm and Implications for the United States Military Training Mission," *The DISAM Journal* (Summer 2003), <http://www.disam.dsca.mil/pubs/Archives/Web%20Journal%2025-4.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> The DOD component for SANG is the Army Materiel Command (AMC) while the USMTSA is a component of CENTCOM. In the earlier days of our training these organizations, mixing even socially between the two organizations was frowned upon. The two Saudi organizations have no grass roots cross or joint training. The Iraqi Military was similarly organized to protect the regime by institutionalizing competing forces. Norman Cigar, *Saddam Hussein's Road to War: Risk Assessment, Decisionmaking, and Leadership in an Authoritarian System*, No. 5, (Quantico, Virginia: USMC Command and Staff School, 2004), p. 26.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard "Background and U.S. Relations," 7-5700, Congressional Research Service, April 30, 2009, pp. 18-19.

<sup>48</sup> An American retired officer who has spent many years with the Saudis paints a more optimistic picture but also observes:

“SANGers (Saudi SANG personnel) show deep ability to select and adapt what they like from the U.S. Those Saudis who returned from attending CONUS military courses or university programs at first seem to be big fans and imitators of U.S. methods, although the home culture becomes another story.” Email to author, July 12, 2012. Over the years, the author has observed the same story: An eager young officer returns from the United States filled with enthusiasm and a desire to put into his job what he has learned, only to crash into the brick wall of the home military culture.

<sup>49</sup> The Saudi losses in dead and missing as well the conditions set down by the Houthis would indicate the Saudis came out second in a battle they were happy to get out of. The Houthis at the end of the day were still on Saudi soil.

<sup>50</sup> Scot Williams, “The Battle of Al-Khafji,” Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, June 2002.

<sup>51</sup> American officer with many years experience with the Saudis. Email to author, July 12, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Though declining, there is still a problem with tribal ties taking precedence over military rank, e.g., a captain from a noble tribe may take exception to orders from a major from a sheep herding tribe.

<sup>53</sup> Dr. Gary Weaver, American University, Washington D.C., from a series of lectures presented at JFK Special Warfare Center and School to the Regional Studies Class, over the years from 1991 to 2005.

<sup>54</sup> While many Egyptian units were complaining of spare parts shortage, and blaming U.S. lack of speed in the logistics system, there were caves along the Nile River housing huge inventories of Russian and American parts.

<sup>55</sup> In my time with the Egyptian army, when a unit used up its limited allotted spare parts, a small item such as a road wheel for a tank required the signature of a brigadier general.

<sup>56</sup> *Jamil's Notes*. This was equally true in the Iraqi army.

<sup>57</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Faith and Power: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 198.

<sup>58</sup> Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and the Arab Political Culture* (Washington D. C.: Washington Institute, 1992) p. 104.

<sup>59</sup> James A. Bill and Robert Springborg, *Politics in the Middle East*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Longman, 2000) p. 174.

<sup>60</sup> Be'eri, *Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society*, pp. 463-81.

<sup>61</sup> As one who has worked closely with Arab armies, it should be noted that our friends in the Arab world are also careful to keep us at a respectable distance. As the Arab proverb goes, today's friends are tomorrow's enemies.

<sup>62</sup> The feeling of superiority, as described by Bernard Lewis in his many historical accounts of the clash of the West and the East, was still evidenced in the thinking of Saddam Hussein in his view of an the impending war between the United States and Iraq. See, for instance, Kevin M. Woods, David D, Palkki, and Mark E. Stout Eds. *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime 1978-2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 194-95.

<sup>63</sup> A belief among the Arab elite that the West brought a moral infection to the East rendering them hapless and defenseless. See David Pryce Jones, *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs* (London: Paladin Books, 1990), pp. 385-86.

<sup>64</sup> Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 41. See also Jacques Berque, *Cultural Expressions in Arab Society Today*, Translated by Robert W. Stookey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), p. 322.

<sup>65</sup> Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and the Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 158-59.

<sup>66</sup> Hillal Khashan, “History's Burden,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 1998), pp. 41-48, <http://www.meforum.org/385/the-arab-worlds-travails-historys-burden>.

<sup>67</sup> This is a major theme in Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

<sup>68</sup> Majors William Parsons and William Taylor, "Arbiters of Social Unrest: Military Responses to the Arab Spring," paper on line from *The U.S. Air Force Academy*, 2011, <http://www.usafa.edu/df/inss/Research%20Papers/2011/Arbiters%20of%20Social%20Unrest>.

<sup>69</sup> That has been the story of the British officers with the Egyptian Army and Jordanian Arab Legion.