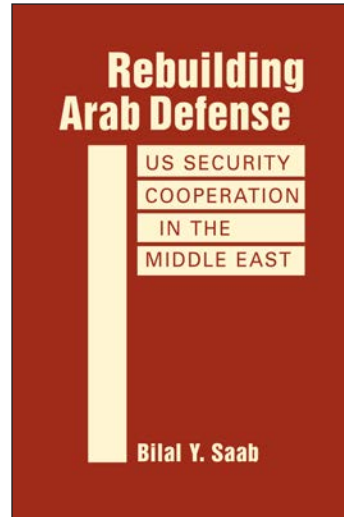


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**Rebuilding
Arab Defense:
US Security
Cooperation in
the Middle East**

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1

The US-Arab Security Partnership

TERRORISTS. INSURGENTS. PIRATES. MILITIAS. CRIMINAL NETWORKS. Mad dictators. Radical regimes. There is no shortage of odious actors constantly vying for influence, causing bloodshed, and sowing disorder in the Middle East.

Even for the United States, a power with vested interests and considerable military force in the region and beyond, that can be a lot to handle. And in fact, it has been. Washington would have been able to pursue a more sustainable policy in the Middle East and manage many of these problems with a bit more ease had it enjoyed stronger defense ties with its Arab friends. Yet, the reality is that no effective US-Arab defense bonds exist, like they do in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), for example, and it is the relative military weakness of most of the Arab partners that has exacerbated all of the above-mentioned challenges, preventing the United States from drawing down in the Middle East to desired levels and pursuing its new, Asia-centric foreign policy priorities.

Why do America's efforts to help its Arab partners build military capability have such an unimpressive record, what can be done to improve this record, and why does it all really matter? These are the main questions I seek to answer in this book.

An Enterprise in Disarray

Ever since the Pentagon issued its 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), there has been a flurry of US strategic documents emphasizing

the goal of helping to build the capabilities of foreign partners to promote collective action and burden sharing.¹ Yet despite the increasing policy prominence of this objective, in the Middle East the fruits of this US effort have been underwhelming and at times downright embarrassing.

Just on Iraq alone, since the 2003 US invasion Washington has spent north of \$32 billion in military aid, and we know what happened during that period: Iraqi security forces melted away in 2014 as Islamic State fighters swept across Iraq.² Since then, the Iraqi government has done much better in fending off terrorists, but it has had a very hard time containing Iran-backed militant groups who have sabotaged politics in Baghdad and repeatedly targeted US personnel and interests using Katyusha rockets and explosive-laden and precision-guided drones.³

The picture in Afghanistan, where the United States sought for two decades to create strong local security forces that can protect the country from terrorists, is a lot bleaker. From 2002 to 2021, Washington spent more than \$83 billion in US security assistance to Afghanistan only to see the Afghan army disintegrate in a matter of eleven days after US troops withdrew from the country in August 2021 and the Taliban swiftly established control.⁴ There are several reasons why the Afghan military fell, some having nothing to do with the Afghans and everything to do with US policy. But the outcome was hardly surprising. According to confidential documents obtained by the *Washington Post*, over all those years most parts of the Afghan military were “incompetent, unmotivated, poorly trained, corrupt and riddled with deserters and infiltrators.”⁵

Though Iraq and Afghanistan are the latest and perhaps most troubling examples of unsatisfactory US military assistance programs in the broader Middle East, they are not the only ones. Consider Egypt, a major regional partner of the United States. The country is one of the largest recipients of US aid in the world, with \$1.3 billion per year in military assistance.⁶ Yet the Egyptians struggle in battling Islamic militants in Sinai and in securing their border with Libya. Although Egyptian soldiers are some of the bravest and most experienced in the region, they are poorly trained for counterinsurgency operations, and their Soviet-based doctrine is largely designed to fight the conventional battles of the past, not the hybrid threats of the future.

Then there is Saudi Arabia and its highly ineffective military campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen since 2015, which until very recently was enabled by American bombs.⁷ Many of Riyadh’s air strikes, partly due to the Saudi pilots’ unskillfulness despite years of US training and advice, have killed thousands of innocent Yemeni civilians, including children on school buses and elderly men in funerals, while also worsening a humanitarian catastrophe.⁸

The overwhelming unproductiveness of US military assistance programs in the Arab world has clearly manifested itself in various wars and US military interventions in the region. For example, during the Iran-Iraq War in 1980–1988, the Gulf Arabs were nowhere near capable on their own of deterring and responding to Iranian aggression and intimidation at sea, and as a result they had to rely almost exclusively on the United States for protection.

In 1990–1991, the majority of the Arab states provided Washington with diplomatic cover to defend Saudi Arabia from Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and dislodge Iraqi forces from Kuwait. But in Operation Desert Storm, the United States did all the planning and the bulk of the fighting because it had no confidence in the abilities of its Arab partners. Whenever those partners took part in US-led military operations, they performed rather poorly even though they possessed a boatload of lethal and sophisticated American weapons.

One would think that roughly two and a half decades after Desert Storm, the Arabs would be stronger militarily, and Washington would enjoy greater success with its US military assistance programs in the region. However, Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the 2014 US-enabled campaign to combat the Islamic State and destroy its caliphate mainly in Iraq and Syria, would clearly show otherwise.

Once it became clear to Washington that the Arab partners were in no position to stop this expanding terrorist army from wreaking havoc across the region and elsewhere, it had no choice but to step in forcefully and once again come to the rescue. Arab members of OIR did pack a punch from the air using their US-purchased fighter jets, but other than the Iraqis and a handful of Syrian rebels, they shockingly contributed almost nothing to the ground war, an outcome that much delayed military victory and raised the costs of war.

How did it all go so wrong? What can Washington do differently to achieve greater returns on its defense and security cooperation investments in the Middle East? What roles do the Arab partners themselves have to play in this process? And why does the issue of Arab military capability matter now more than ever for the United States and the region? I intend to address these increasingly important policy issues in these pages with candor, pragmatism, and humility.

Building Arab Military Capability Was Not a US Priority

To begin to understand why most US military assistance programs in the Arab world have gone awry, one has to address the basic issue of

willingness on the part of Arabs and Americans. Let's start with the American side. Until recent years, the Arab partners' possession of military capabilities that could be used to contribute to collective security interests was not a serious concern of Washington. Even more so, it was not an explicit goal or preference for three main reasons.

First, the Middle East was critical in US foreign policy for the better part of the twentieth century. Few regions were more indispensable to America's economic well-being and geostrategic position in the world than the Middle East. At the time, US interests centered on maintaining the free flow of cheap oil to the US (and international) economy, preventing any hostile power from dominating the region, and ensuring Israel's survival.

Because the stakes were so high and the margin for error was so small, Washington saw the need to adopt a more hands-on security approach to the region to protect its core interests there, eschewing any direct and substantial military help from less capable friendly powers, both Arab and non-Arab. Washington's priority vis-à-vis its Arab partners was not necessarily to strengthen their military capabilities, but rather to acquire access to their territories to permanently or temporarily station US troops and materiel and to get their permission to use their ports and airspace.

Arab money was another major motivation for the United States, and it was more valuable than Arab military capability. Washington needed its Arab partners' financial resources to wage war when necessary, like it did in Desert Storm, and to support various elements of the US defense posture across the region during peacetime. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) took on most of the costs of US military operations in Desert Storm, for example, all totaling \$84 billion in direct payments to the United States, Britain, and France.⁹ In addition, the Saudis and the Kuwaitis covered the expenses—roughly \$51 billion—of logistical support for the hundreds of thousands of American and allied troops in Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ The Arab partners also bankrolled various US clandestine activities in the region that served collective security interests, such as the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA's) Operation Cyclone in the 1980s—meant to kick the Soviet army out of Afghanistan—and more recently Operation Timber Sycamore in Syria in 2013—intended to combat al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

But the US interest in and use of Arab financial resources extended beyond the military realm. A major reason why Washington sold arms to the Arabs in such large quantities was, and to a large extent still is,

because this pumped millions and then billions of petrodollars back into the US economy.

Second, the United States did not need much military help from its Arab friends because all its regional adversaries had vastly inferior military capabilities and thus did not pose significant security problems. Once the United States expanded its footprint in the Middle East following the issuance of the Carter Doctrine in 1980 and created a full-fledged regional combatant command three years later (the Rapid Deployment Task Force became US Central Command, or CENTCOM), it quickly attained regional military superiority. With it, Washington was able to contain and in some places even roll back Soviet regional influence, check both Saddam and the Iranian mullahs for most of the 1980s and 1990s, and liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, all largely by itself. The US military also relied on minimal Arab military support to secure the critical waters of the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

Third, the United States was highly committed to preserving the Qualitative Military Edge (QME) of Israel. This is a US tradition that was written into law in 2008 but dates back to the Lyndon Johnson administration and has been honored by every US president since.¹¹ It means that Israel is to possess strategic and tactical advantages, enabled by the United States, that can help it deter its numerically superior foes and win in any conventional military confrontation.

In many respects, QME placed tangible constraints on any US attempt to seriously upgrade the military arsenals of its Arab partners. The idea was that as long as the Arab states were weaker militarily, they could not defeat Israel or threaten its existence.

Bolstering Self-Defense Was Not an Arab Priority Either

During that same period, the Arab partners, with the exception of Egypt and to some extent Jordan and Morocco, did not consider the development of indigenous conventional military capabilities as a pressing priority either. To defend themselves against external threats, they focused most of their efforts on incentivizing the United States to play the role of protector. And US policymakers much obliged because the US national interest commanded it.

If the United States needed access, basing, and overflight rights, that's what the Arab partners readily provided. They also purchased American arms, frequently and in big amounts, not necessarily to improve their own military abilities but to preserve their political

equities in Washington and the special political relationship with successive US presidents. For the most part, the Gulf Arab partners had no intention of using the arms they bought from the United States. In many cases, Washington sold equipment to them with explicit agreements that the US military could use it if it needed to defend them, which was another incentive for the Americans.

The wealthier Gulf Arab states happily bought their security by financing a good bit of America's deterrence and war-fighting architecture in the region. Some—like Kuwait, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—continue to do so to this day. For example, Doha covered all the costs of construction of Al Udeid Air Base—CENTCOM's forward headquarters in the region and the home of the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC)—spending \$8 billion since 2003 and committing another \$1.8 billion since 2018 to expand the facility.¹² Riyadh helped finance the US return to Saudi Arabia in 2019 after a sixteen-year absence,¹³ and Abu Dhabi paid for the building of permanent structures at Al Dhafra Air Base, where the United States has anywhere from 3,500 to 5,000 American military personnel and periodically deployed F-22 Raptors.¹⁴

It's hard to fault the Arab partners for not prioritizing self-defense capabilities in the pre-9/11 era. The United States had not only a relatively large and powerful military presence on their soil but also the *willingness* to protect them at any time from outside aggression. Moreover, the external threats to the Arab partners' safety weren't unmanageable or acute, especially after Tehran was severely battered following the Iran-Iraq War, the Soviet Union disintegrated, and Saddam's army was crushed by the United States in the sands of the Kuwaiti and Saudi desert. Internally, although terrorism was always a problem, it was more or less contained and until the early to mid-2000s, with the exception of the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia by armed Islamic radicals, did not pose an existential threat to Arab governments.

A Growing US and Arab Concern

Today, much of this Arab and American picture has changed. New priorities, challenges, and opportunities have emerged both in Washington and in the region, raising the strategic significance of Arab self-defense. Whereas US-Arab security cooperation was more or less a fiction throughout the twentieth century, in today's strategic environment both sides view it with a bit more seriousness and urgency.

First, there's a bipartisan consensus in Washington that the Middle East matters less to the United States in relation to other priority

regions. The region still impacts long-standing US interests, including the safety of the US homeland, the stability of world energy markets, and the security of Israel. However, an outsized US military presence in the region may no longer be needed to defend those interests. There is now a greater US propensity to involve Arab partners in regional security designs, and concomitantly, there is a lot more room for their military contributions than in previous decades.

As Washington seeks to deprioritize the Middle East and shift its attention to Asia, it desperately needs its Arab partners to be able to stand on their own feet and share the burden of regional security. The US thinking, sharpened in recent years, is that with stronger Arab partners, the United States can afford to reduce its military engagements in the region and allocate more resources to the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

Regional access, basing, and overflight continue to matter a great deal to the US military, but these tools can no longer be relied upon almost exclusively to provide security for the region. US political and military leaders increasingly recognize that Arab military capability could be an additional and untapped contributor that ought to be effectively integrated into America's present and future approach to regional security.

Second, threats to US interests in the region have grown significantly in part due to the emergence of new security vacuums caused by the collapse of governance in various parts of the Arab world following the 2011 Arab Spring. In addition, to improve their capabilities and more effectively pursue their strategic agendas, America's regional adversaries have acquired more advanced, lethal, and dual-use technologies.

Transnational terrorist entities such as al-Qaeda and more recently the Islamic State have spread quickly and struck in all four corners of the globe, most shockingly on US soil on September 11, 2001. Though their military and fundraising capabilities have been degraded lately thanks to various US-led counterterrorism missions across the region, including OIR, these resilient actors were able not too long ago to shake the foundations of the Arab state system, particularly in Iraq and Syria, and they could do so again if the political and economic conditions that led to their rise in the first place continue to go unaddressed. Militant proxies with allegiances to Iran also have proliferated and now operate with more potent arms and greater political influence in places like Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen. They have either weakened or destroyed state structures, threatened their neighbors' borders, and served as hotbeds of violence and extremism.

Iran itself has expanded its military capabilities and is believed to have technically gotten closer to producing an atomic bomb.¹⁵ It has

improved the range and accuracy of its missiles, while also procuring unmanned aerial systems that today pose serious problems for the US military and Arab partners.¹⁶ It has intensified its efforts to provide advanced arms and technical know-how to its allies in the region.¹⁷ And its elite military forces, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), have gained expertise in cyber warfare and used it in offensive operations against Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and others.¹⁸

The problem of piracy in the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean, once manageable, now has grown, threatening some of the world's most vital oil supply routes. Bolder and better armed and organized pirates operating in those areas have been able to conduct hijacking, kidnapping, and extortion operations against merchant ships using high-speed boats, night-vision equipment, waterborne improvised explosive devices, and sophisticated technologies including radar and Global Positioning System (GPS).¹⁹ These actors have exploited conditions of state failure and the absence of local law enforcement, especially in places like Somalia and Yemen.

Yet, the maritime threat is not limited to piracy. Iran is a menace too, and a much bigger one, frequently endangering commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. The country has enhanced its ability to hit military ships with longer-range and more precise antiship missiles and to plant more lethal sea mines to deter and deny US access to key Arab ports.²⁰

Then there is Russia, who never had as firm and strategic a military presence in the region as it does currently. Thanks to its rescuing of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad from a growing insurgency that almost toppled his regime in 2011, Moscow now has a long-term footprint in Syria—a “permanent group of forces” at the port of Tartus and an air base in Khmeimim²¹—and in the natural gas-rich Mediterranean near NATO's southern flank. The conflict in Syria has allowed Iran and Hezbollah, who also sent troops to Assad's aid, to set up shop near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Iran's fast-developing military infrastructure in Syria is a major concern for the Israelis, who often have resorted to force to manage that threat.

Third, QME, while still a sensitive issue in US Middle East policy, is not as rigid a political and legal requirement as it once was because of new regional dynamics and much-improved Arab-Israeli relations. Ever since Egypt and Jordan signed peace agreements with the Jewish state in 1978 and 1994, respectively—thus minimizing if not eliminating the chances of another major Arab-Israeli war—Washington has been more than willing to bend the QME rules to some extent and equip its Arab partners with more powerful arms.

This trend has accelerated recently with Washington agreeing to sell dozens of F-35 American fifth-generation aircraft to the UAE in a side deal to a historic normalization accord between Israel and the UAE in August 2020 (shortly after, Bahrain joined the so-called Abraham Accords and normalized its relationship with Israel).²² That Israel didn't oppose the sale, as it often used to do (for example, the Israelis rejected, though ultimately failed to stop, the sale of sophisticated surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia by Ronald Reagan's administration in the early 1980s),²³ underscores how Arab-Israeli ties have changed considerably for the better.²⁴

Today, Israel has key interests in common with several Sunni Arab states as both sides seek to deter and counter the same foes, be it Iran and its proxy network or jihadists belonging to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. And with Washington's decision in January 2021 to move the military responsibility for Israel from US European Command (EUCOM) to CENTCOM, the opportunities for greater security cooperation between Israel and the Arab states abound.²⁵

On the Arab side, the interest in developing stronger self-defense capabilities has gone through a remarkable evolution too. Decreasing Arab trust in US policy has been a major factor. This process may have started with the 2003 Iraq War, which several Arab capitals, including Riyadh, thought was thoroughly misguided and a major distraction from the bigger and more pressing challenge of the hostile regime in Tehran.

How Washington responded to the 2011 Arab Spring didn't help in bridging the gap either. The Saudis and the Emiratis accused the Barack Obama administration of failing to save the regime of their ally, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, from a popular uprising (whether or not Washington could have done that, even if it wanted to, is a separate matter). Riyadh also was furious and perturbed over the perceived lack of US support for the Bahrainis, whose monarchy in February through March 2011 was under siege by protesters, some of whom were linked to the Iranian regime.

Exacerbating the mistrust in US-Arab ties was the infamous "red line" fiasco in Syria in the summer of 2012 when President Obama suggested resorting to military force if Assad used toxic agents against those who wished to depose him.²⁶ A year later, the Syrian leader did precisely that, killing more than 1,400 people with sarin gas.²⁷ However, Obama did not follow through with his threat, shocking many Arab and world leaders.

Yet, the one episode that most strikingly underscored the level of Arab concern over America's dependability as a protector is the fall 2019 attack by Iran against Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure, to which President

Donald Trump did not respond. (Months later he went on to kill Iran's top military commander, Qassem Soleimani, but the operation arguably had nothing to do with the Iranian strike in Khurais and Abqaiq.)²⁸ This experience sent shivers down the spines of Gulf Arab monarchs who began to genuinely question America's security commitment.

Adding to those increasing Arab anxieties about American security reassurance is the reality that the domestic and foreign threats to the Arab partners' safety, as discussed previously, have proliferated. The growing problems of Sunni jihadism and Iran's intensified political violence in the region have compelled the Arab partners to get more serious about augmenting their self-defense capabilities and reducing their dependence on what they increasingly see, not unjustifiably, as an unpredictable and disinterested Washington.

Areas of Improvement

Where Washington needs Arab military help the most is, quite logically, in the one area where it has struggled the most: combating violent extremism. Improved Arab capabilities in law enforcement, intelligence sharing, counterterrorism financing, terrorism prevention, and deradicalization would go a long way toward effectively and collectively tackling this resilient phenomenon.

Border security in the region is another area desperately in need of better US-Arab cooperation. Porous and dangerous frontiers—a key source of instability across the region—require much more reliable Arab skills in reconnaissance, surveillance, rapid reaction, and counterinsurgency. Washington has no desire to deploy more American soldiers to the region to prevent smuggling and halt cross-border infiltrations and attacks against Arab partner interests. The Arab states have to be able to secure their own borders and protect their own populations from rebels, militants, and criminal networks.

To counter the growing missile threat of Iran, the United States needs its Arab partners to be able to leverage their advanced, US-made missile defense assets and, with US help, commit to the critical mission of regional air and missile defense integration.²⁹ This is an old, shared priority but one that has yet to be met. Without it, Iran will continue to have an offensive aerial advantage, which it remarkably demonstrated in its successful 2019 strike against Saudi Arabia's oil facilities.

Yet, it's not enough to wholly rely on defense to deal effectively with Iran's more powerful and accurate missiles. Deterrence has to be a big part of the equation too. And to create a stronger joint deterrent

against Tehran, the United States needs its Arab partners to more ably augment their offensive capabilities. Some of these partners, including the UAE, have more dependable air power capabilities than others.

At sea, the United States cannot further reallocate resources from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific if it cannot rely more on its Arab partners' maritime forces to help police the regional waters.³⁰ Those Arab capabilities are slowly improving thanks to many years of cooperation with the Bahrain-based US Fifth Fleet.³¹ However, the Americans are still doing the heavy lifting, and the Arab partners are still far from being able to take on more significant security responsibilities in those maritime areas largely because all of them have failed to make serious investments in naval power.

In the cyber domain, stronger Arab defensive capabilities are irreplaceable because, unlike other areas, the United States is simply in no position to directly contribute to the safety and security of its Arab partners. Washington can help with training and technology transfers, but it is not able to deploy a "cyber army" in the Middle East tasked with defending them against Iranian cyberattacks.

The United States may have American advisers embedded in the governments of some of these Arab partners, or American cyber experts based in US embassies in the region serving as liaison officers, but it doesn't have a cyber force constantly monitoring and responding to threats against Arab oil installations, power plants, and other critical infrastructure. Only the Arabs can be responsible for such missions and functions.

Defense Institution Building

Some US decisionmakers and military leaders are coming to grips with the reality that the old model of US-Arab defense and security cooperation—where, in short, the Americans pretended to teach and the Arabs pretended to learn—has expired. However, the question remains *how* the United States can transition to a new model—one that is responsive to its new global priorities and can strengthen Arab military power more effectively.

In my view, the chief lesson Washington can learn from its efforts thus far to assist its Arab partners in developing effective and sustainable military capability—which, for reasons laid out above, didn't really commence until after 9/11 and the 2003 Iraq War—is that transferring more arms and conducting more tactical and/or operational training, while politically, economically, and sometimes practically beneficial, on

its own is not going to make those partners more capable over the long run. That is my main argument in the book.

Defense institution building (DIB), also known as institutional capacity building (ICB), is the most critical ingredient that is missing or insufficiently incorporated into America's approach to strengthening the military capabilities of partners in the Arab world. The effects of this major shortcoming in US military assistance programs are more clearly felt in the Arab world (and other developing regions) because the Arab partners, unlike most NATO and other treaty allies of the United States, lack a proper civilian defense infrastructure to begin with and thus are less able to effectively absorb US equipment, technology, and advice.

Contrary to Britain, for example, which only needed American weapons to survive Adolf Hitler's vicious aerial bombing of London, the Arab partners need a lot more than US "tools" to "finish the job," as Winston Churchill confidently told Franklin Roosevelt at the height of World War II.³² They badly need stronger defense institutional capacity to better employ and sustain the sophisticated military hardware, knowledge, and technologies they receive from the United States.

What is defense institutional capacity? It is a country's ability to create and enforce defense rules and effectively perform the critical duties of policymaking, planning, budgeting, managing, employing, training, equipping, and sustaining. It involves structures, norms, procedures, and most importantly people. It helps provide coherence and organization to the mission of national defense. Institutional capacity serves as the foundation of military capability development, which is the process to create the ability to deter and defend against threats and achieve a specified operational and/or tactical objective during wartime.³³ To attain a joint capability, the US military relies on the famous DOTMLPF-P formula, which stands for doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy.³⁴ Each of these terms constitutes a critical element of defense institutional capacity.

Think of a business that is well positioned to create a product because it has a large financial endowment, relatively easy access to top raw materials, and the best engineers and designers in the world. Yet, if that firm does not have a coherent plan and effective mechanisms for quality control, accounting, human resource management, distribution, logistics, storage, and creative marketing and advertising, the odds are that it will not succeed in selling that product, generating profit, and sustaining its growth. This in a nutshell is the story of the armies of America's partners in the Arab world and other developing regions.

Before I go any further, let me clarify right up front what defense institutional capacity can offer and, equally important, what it cannot. Defense institutional capacity, no matter how robust, does *not* guarantee military effectiveness. Neither does military capability, for that matter. Centuries of human warfare have taught us that it's one thing for an army to possess tools and skills and show high levels of military readiness, but it's another altogether to leverage all these assets and enablers and proficiently execute on the battlefield.

How the Arab states fight and why they display military ineffectiveness more often than they should is not the focus of this book. There is a growing body of analytical work, to which Kenneth Pollack has made an unparalleled contribution, devoted just to that particular subject.³⁵ Instead, what I hope to do here is to try to modestly complement this scholarship with an examination of how the national defense establishments of the Arab states are postured *prior to* their armed forces entering the battlefield and firing a single shot.³⁶ The US military calls this Phase Zero, that is, “everything that can be done to prevent conflict from developing in the first place.”³⁷ It consists of activities meant to favorably shape the environment through better training, readiness, and management of national defense.

Existing analyses on civil-military relations in the Middle East explore parts of this dimension, but many areas remain understudied.³⁸ For example, Nathan Toronto's investigation of the relationship between human capital and battlefield effectiveness, in which he analyzes the experiences of Egypt, Turkey, the UAE, and others, is a welcome attempt to address this gap in the literature.³⁹

Some armies are able to show degrees of operational and tactical effectiveness despite suffering from significant weaknesses in defense institutional capacity. The UAE's military intervention in Yemen in 2015–2020, hardly supported by its nascent defense-reform experiment, is a perfect example of that.⁴⁰ Egypt in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War is another (although some aspects of Egyptian defense institutional capacity, including strategic planning and military professionalization, had much improved by the time Cairo launched its operation).⁴¹ It is also not uncommon for a country to have a highly functioning defense institutional apparatus, able to effectively plan, budget, force generate, manage, and run day-to-day affairs, but either suffer military defeat or perform poorly during combat. The list of historical examples here is quite long, with France in both world wars being a glaring one.

That said, it is generally harder to overcome operational challenges on the battlefield, especially during long and drawn-out military contests,

and to achieve *strategic* victory with a dysfunctional defense institutional infrastructure. Weak defense governance was one important reason, for example, why both the Iraqis and the Iranians in their conflict throughout most the 1980s could not sustain their war machines or devise more effective military strategies and as a result each lost more than half a million men.⁴² It is also the same reason why the Saudis are still stuck in Yemen, seven years after they launched Operation Decisive Storm. Providing food and water supplies to soldiers; conducting search and rescue operations; issuing orders to and communicating with commanders in the field; moving men and materiel; fixing damaged equipment; rotating forces; acquiring, deploying, and integrating new weapons; and so on—all of these functions and many others require a measure of administrative capacity not only in the military but also in the larger civilian defense establishment (assuming one exists).

For the United States, Arab defense institutional capacity is vital because, at the very least, it allows the Arab partner to better utilize and *sustain* US military assistance. It bears repeating that better defense governance will not robotically enhance the Arab partners' fighting prowess. But it *does* put them in a better position to build military capability, a process itself that has an effect on their ability to conduct more effective operations. Better combat performance, partly resulting from meaningful institutional capacity investments over several years, is what the Lebanese military, for example, was able to show in its 2017 campaign against the Islamic State along the country's northern border.

US Security Cooperation Reforms

In Washington, some progress has been made over the past few years, both legislatively and bureaucratically, to steer military assistance programs in the Arab world and elsewhere in the right direction. In December 2016, Congress formulated a set of security cooperation reforms that were published in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). These reforms, designed primarily by the late senator John McCain and his staff, were monumental and unprecedented. They officially recognized for the first time in the history of US defense policy the strategic importance of integrating institutional capacity building into US security cooperation activities with allies and partners by codifying a stand-alone authority for the Department of Defense to conduct it—Section 332 of Title 10 of the US Code of Law. Moreover, the new, consolidated train-and-equip authority, Title 10's Section 333 (previously 1206), now requires the Department of Defense to certify it is

undertaking defense institution building programs to complement train-and-equip efforts with foreign partners.

The gist of Congress's security cooperation reforms is that the United States would no longer throw money and hardware at its less capable partners around the world and expect them all of a sudden to become more competent and responsible fighters on their own. Rather, the United States would seek to help them develop the institutional capacities that are necessary to strengthen and sustain their national defense establishments, and it would establish mechanisms to assess, monitor, and evaluate its own assistance efforts in ways it had shockingly never done before, at least not systematically and consistently. Some of the fruits of this security cooperation reform process in Washington have been apparent in the region, as this book's case studies will demonstrate.

Lingering Challenges

Despite these positive changes in US security cooperation both on paper and on the ground in the Middle East, Washington's goal of helping its key Arab partners develop real military capability still has a very long way to go. The entire US security cooperation enterprise, of which defense institution building is now supposedly an integral part (at least by law), remains far too heavily biased in favor of US arms transfers and military exercises and insufficiently attentive to defense governance. The United States continues to provide copious amounts of lethal and sophisticated weapons to its Arab partners worth trillions of dollars with little regard to their capacity to use and maintain them.

There are multiple reasons for this, as I explain in Chapter 7, but it all starts with the acute lack of American leadership of security cooperation in the Department of Defense. There is no way defense institution building can become a firm and integrated part of the US security cooperation ecosystem, consistently preached and practiced, if there is no one at the top taking on the mantle of this crucial domain. And to this date, no one in the Pentagon has seriously assumed that responsibility.

The US military, which understandably has emphasized regional access and basing in security cooperation above all else, still dominates the planning and prioritization processes, partly because of the lack of effective civilian oversight in the Pentagon over security cooperation. Further, the Pentagon technically has no official strategy for security cooperation like it does for irregular warfare or cybersecurity, for example. As a result, there is some confusion and lack of clear guidance in the Department of Defense regarding how this increasingly important

functional area, especially as it pertains to institutional capacity building, is practiced with partner nations.

How Arab rulers assess the risks and rewards of defense institution building ultimately will determine the likelihood of success and failure of this process and whether or not it even takes off. The good news is that more key Arab leaders, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the UAE (known as MBZ), Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia (known as MBS), and King Abdullah II of Jordan are eager to reform elements of their defense establishments and to some extent reconsider the strict hierarchical structures their predecessors had imposed for many decades. The bad news is that the executional struggles of holistic military capability development among *all* of Washington's Arab partners are wide and deep. This is so for the simple reason that the Arabs have not worried about how to properly build military capability for many decades. And because of that, all of their defense institutions are a mess and in need of overhaul.

Not unlike their economies and various parts of their social and governance systems, the Arab partners' militaries and ministries of defense require *structural* reforms. Both the remarkable longevity of the Arabs' neglect of military capability development and the very dire state of their defense establishments should very clearly point to the fact that the journey of Arab defense reform will be a very long and demanding one.

Looking at the various elements of defense institutional capacity as laid out here, perhaps the most obvious and common Arab deficiency is in the area of acquisition. Even if someday they kick the habit of buying prestige US weapons they don't need, most if not all Arab partners are unable to effectively address their security requirements because they have largely dysfunctional and sometimes even nonexistent defense procurement processes. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Egypt are obvious examples.

The existing civil-military imbalance in the Arab world suggests that national defense governance is dominated by military personnel. Arab soldiers are responsible for not only fighting but also strategizing, planning, equipping, analyzing, managing, force generating, and intelligence gathering. Arab defense continues to receive very little guidance and input from defense and national security professionals because very few of those exist and even fewer are competent and empowered.

It's doubtful that any Arab defense establishment has useful job descriptions and qualification documents to attract the right kind of talent and assign them to the right job. As I will show in this book's case studies, abilities in this space vary across the Arab world, but

only very little. Personnel development in most cases is not based on specific and strict merit criteria, and performance assessments are not standardized. Arab officers tend to be promoted primarily because they are loyal to the leadership, come from an influential tribe, and/or are connected to power circles.

Military universities and staff colleges in the Arab world range from awful to mediocre, and very few teach anything useful in the field of military sciences. Indeed, the educational material in military universities and staff colleges in the Arab world is not a dependable source of knowledge on strategic, operational, and technical issues for officers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and regular soldiers.

Managing defense resources is not the Arab partners' strongest suit either. Decades of wasted US military assistance funds by the Egyptians, the Bahrainis, the Omanis, the Jordanians, the Moroccans, and others offer plenty of evidence to support this argument. Accounting in Arab defense ministries is optional. Costs for military capabilities as well as the employment of such capabilities are hardly ever collected and analyzed, which has always made planning and budgeting for the future virtually impossible.

In terms of logistics, not one Arab partner has effective automated systems, proper inventory control and distribution, and enough stockage levels. Some, like the Saudis and the Emiratis, seem to be more interested lately in doing maintenance, repair, and overhaul, but their logistics systems, strategies, and workforces still require a ton of development.

Why the Arab partners run their defense affairs the way they do is no mystery. Their societal cultures and their bureaucracies are two important factors. An in-depth analysis of the role of culture, in all its different dimensions, manifestations, and levels at which it operates, is outside the scope of this book.⁴³ I tip my hat to Pollack for taking on this vastly complicated issue with grace and precision. But suffice it to say here that Arabs, more so in government than in the private sector, tend to jealously guard information, memorize more than they engage in critical learning, shirk responsibilities, centralize decisionmaking, and insufficiently coordinate in group activities.⁴⁴ That's why the Arab bureaucracy, which at the end of the day is a reflection of societal and political culture, generally is hierarchical, inefficient, and inflexible.

Many of these cultural patterns are reinforced by the Arab rulers' priorities, which center on upholding political control and protecting economic privileges in the system. It's no wonder, then, that the Arab bureaucracy, without which defense institution building practically cannot be pursued, has historically underperformed.

That's not to say that the Arab bureaucracy is destined to frustrate all attempts at building Arab defense institutional capacity. Several examples of administrative success in the Arab world over many decades, including Egypt's Suez Canal and Aswan High Dam and Saudi Arabia's national oil company, Aramco, show that, if properly enabled and incentivized by political leadership, the Arab bureaucracy can be as competent and productive as any other in the world.

Arab governments and militaries have been unable to build stronger defense institutional capacity not because they do not know that there are different and better ways of doing things, but because that is how they have always done things, and they are comfortable doing them *their way*. In their eyes, they have not resisted "best" practices (as the United States sees it); they are resisting *American* practices. And they are not always wrong about that, because often what Americans claim are best practices are simply how *they* like to do things. Let's be honest, sometimes there is a good bit of illogic and inefficiency in the preferred approaches of Americans.

The Plan of the Book

The book proceeds as follows: In the next chapter, I begin by briefly discussing what US military assistance in the Arab world primarily consisted of from the 1970s to the early to mid-2000s. This is what I call the "old model" of US military assistance, where the train-and-equip approach reigned supreme in US policy and process. Then I examine how in recent years US officials began to incorporate some elements of defense institution building into US military assistance in the region. I highlight the drastic changes in US security cooperation policy since 2017, both legally and administratively, and introduce the concept of defense institution building, providing some historical background and defining various elements of this process.

After that, I assess the challenges and opportunities of US military assistance programs in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon—three countries that lately have shown more interest in defense institution building than the rest of America's Arab partners. I also shed light on the UAE and its own attempts in more recent years to create military capability and pursue some measure of defense reform without the official involvement or help of Washington. I have selected these countries as case studies because they have been more eager to comprehensively reform their defense and military structures than the rest of America's Arab partners.

Saudi Arabia (Chapter 3) is the model of dysfunctional US military assistance in the Arab world, representing everything that has gone wrong in US-Arab defense and security cooperation. In that respect, Saudi Arabia provides this book's baseline. Many of the insights gained from US-Saudi military ties very much apply to all other cases of US military assistance in the region.

In addition, Saudi Arabia is one of the most important and long-standing Arab partners of the United States. Therefore, success and failure in US-Saudi defense and security relations carry greater policy and strategic significance for Washington than in most other US relationships in the region.

Jordan's example (Chapter 4) is important because the country has occupied a special place in US foreign policy toward the Middle East for several decades. The Hashemite Kingdom's role in the Israeli-Palestinian so-called peace process and the direct impact of its stability on Israeli security continue to matter a great deal to the United States.

Jordan in many respects is similar to Saudi Arabia in terms of US military assistance, but also very different because Amman is a pure *recipient* as opposed to a buyer of US security sector assistance. This distinction and several others demand scrutiny because they have real implications for how Washington administers, and how Amman utilizes, US military assistance.

Lebanon (Chapter 5) is an interesting case from both an analytical and policy perspective in large part because of how peculiar it is. Indeed, even outliers have merit. The country suffers from old, structural problems that typically would make any external attempt at helping to rebuild its armed forces virtually impossible. And yet, over the past decade or so, Washington has succeeded in transforming the Lebanese military from an irrelevant force into a respectable and competent national institution. Important US lessons can be gleaned from the Lebanese example.

Finally, there is tremendous value in looking at the UAE example (Chapter 6) for two main reasons. First, the UAE today is the closest and most militarily dependable partner of the United States in the Arab world. How US military assistance may have contributed to the UAE's elevated status certainly is worth investigating.

Second, the UAE has been able to achieve a higher level of military effectiveness than that of all other Arab partners despite possessing some considerable, albeit not unique, gaps in defense institutional capacity. This outcome potentially challenges my main argument in this book, which emphasizes the role defense institution building plays in overall military development.

In Chapter 7, I analyze more broadly the cultural and structural challenges of defense institution building both in Washington and in the Arab world. In Chapter 8, I conclude by identifying possible steps the United States and its Arab partners could take to develop Arab military capability more effectively. I also discuss the tradeoffs Washington might have to make as it seeks to build the military capabilities of its Arab partners, before tying the whole analysis to the important subject of the future of America's military presence in the Middle East, which is frequently in the US news headlines.

Notes

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