



## Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 5: The Saudi Arabian National Guard

### I. Introduction

The Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) constitutes one of the five branches of the Saudi military. Though it ostensibly serves as an all-purpose military reserve for the standard external and internal security forces managed by the Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI), the SANG does not fit the common understanding of a “national guard.” Unlike its American counterpart, which acts as an inactive component of the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force, the SANG maintains approximately 125,000 active soldiers, as well as its own reserve.<sup>1</sup> While the U.S. National Guard is integrated within the greater military chain of command, the SANG is managed by its own dedicated ministry, the Ministry of the National Guard.<sup>2</sup>

The SANG’s institutional separation from both the MODA and the MOI has ensured that it serves a variety of independent security functions. According to Anthony H. Cordesman, currently the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the SANG’s primary duties include “the protection of the royal family and maintaining order and security by protecting key religious sites, oil infrastructure, and by acting as a rapid reaction force for operations that increasingly target Al Qa’ida and other extremists.”<sup>3</sup> P.W. Singer of the New America Foundation has written, “the Saudi National Guard...functions like a praetorian guard to the regime, protecting important strategic sites.”<sup>4</sup>

Others compare it to the region’s more notorious police forces. Former U.S. Marine officer David J. Morris observed after the Gulf War that “the SANG functioned much as did Saddam’s Republican Guard: as a counterweight to the regular army and as an instrument for quelling internal dissent.”<sup>5</sup> *Business Insider’s* Jeremy Bender argues that the SANG “has proven its capabilities by keeping a vast country under the full and unquestioned control of one of the world’s most authoritarian governments.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to maintaining internal security, the Saudi government has increasingly utilized the guardsmen in its projection of external force. By 2011 it had become a key component of the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) joint military command. The PSF’s March 2011 intervention in Bahrain revealed the intent of the Saudi government to further orient the SANG toward foreign counterinsurgency. At the time of this writing, the Saudi government has deployed the SANG to the Yemeni border in order to guard against Houthi rebels and prepare for a potential ground incursion.<sup>7</sup>

While it is not directly implicated in the kingdom’s more systematic human rights violations, the SANG has come to play a significant role in the maintenance of authoritarian power in Saudi Arabia. As such, the first half of this report will examine the SANG’s history, organization, and foreign military assistance in order to delineate its distinct place in the Saudi state’s structure. The second portion of the report will draw on this information to enumerate relevant human rights concerns. It will conclude with related policy recommendations for the Saudi, American, and British governments so that they can better address the SANG’s institutional failings and prevent serious human rights abuses in the future.



## II. History

Precursors to the SANG played a key role in the founding of modern Saudi Arabia. Abdulaziz al-Saud (also known as Ibn Saud), the first Saudi king, sought the needed support of local tribes as he consolidated his authority over the Arabian Peninsula. Ibn Saud gained this support—and legitimized his claim to power—through his alliance with the Wahhabi *ulama* (or religious establishment), supporting their expansive proselytization efforts.<sup>8</sup>

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Wahhabi *ulama* had successfully converted much of the Peninsula's nomadic tribesmen, and a number of these communities had formed religious militias to fight alongside Ibn Saud. The most significant of these—and the foundation for what would later become the SANG—was the Ikhwan militia, an irregular cavalry force primarily made up of men from the Bedouin community.<sup>9</sup>

After Ibn Saud conquered what is now the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, he chose not to extend his control beyond the Peninsula. This decision was met with contempt amongst the Ikhwan leadership, who sought to expand Saudi territory and continue the spread of Wahhabism.<sup>10</sup> In 1929, after several years of unsanctioned raids into what was then Iraq and Transjordan, a contingent of militiamen openly rebelled.<sup>11</sup> With the help of British forces, the Saudi national army subdued the Ikhwan in 1929.<sup>12</sup> Afterward, according to Commins, Ibn Saud employed a “deft mix of punishment and rehabilitation to complete the job of rendering the larger body of Ikhwan—who did not join the rebellion but sullenly looked on—docile in the political field.”<sup>13</sup> A former rebel leader, Majid ibn Khathila, cooperated with the king and helped rally the remaining militiamen into a force known as the White Army.<sup>14</sup>

The Saudi government organized the White Army into the modern SANG in 1955, and, seven years later, King Faisal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud chose Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to command the units and oversee its modernization.<sup>15</sup> By the 1970s, Abdullah had transformed the SANG into a premiere military institution. Nonetheless, it became clear that the SANG required more logistical support than the Saudi government could provide.<sup>16</sup> In 1973, Saudi need met U.S. supply, and the U.S. military established the Office of the Program Manager, Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program (OPM-SANG).<sup>17</sup> Alongside the U.K., the U.S. has substantially contributed to the training, equipping, and institutional character of the SANG.

In 1979, the SANG saw its first significant deployments in both the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the suppression of unrest in the Eastern Province. The former operation began when Sunni extremists seized the grand mosque on the first day of the Islamic New Year. The long standoff ended with SANG forces reportedly killing or wounding hundreds of civilians in a poorly-executed attack.<sup>18</sup> Almost simultaneously, in the Eastern Province, SANG units reinforced local security when thousands of Shia publicly celebrated Ashura in contravention of Saudi law. When protestors began to clash with security forces, the SANG opened fire on the crowds, killing dozens of Shia civilians.<sup>19</sup>



During the First Gulf War in 1991, the SANG earned conventional combat experience by repelling Iraqi forces along the Saudi border.<sup>20</sup> The SANG did not participate in another major external action until 2011, when it served as the Saudi contingent of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) intervention in the Bahrain.

In 2013, then-King Abdullah established a formal ministry to house the SANG and appointed his son, Prince Miteb, as its minister.<sup>21</sup> Most recently, in 2015, the Saudi government has deployed the SANG to the Yemeni border as part of an ongoing Saudi-led intervention in that country's civil war. It is unclear if the SANG are actively involved in military operations or simply reinforcing the border.

### III. Structure and Organization

As the government reformed the Ikwah and White Army units into the contemporary SANG, it created a separate paramilitary hierarchy with its own unique character and mission profile. The ongoing modernization of the SANG has sought to build on this paramilitary foundation, evolving the guardsmen into a self-contained, semi-autonomous light army—one that answers directly to the monarchy. Accordingly, the following section of this report will detail the distinct structure and military capacity of the SANG.

#### A. Order of Battle and Location of Facilities

The SANG currently maintains between 100,000 and 125,000 combat-ready troops at approximately 300 internal security sites across the Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> In 2009, Cordesman provided a review of contemporary troop estimates indicating that the SANG had over 100,000 active members: 72,000 soldiers with 6,000 officers, in addition to 28,000 Foudj "tribal levies," a contingent of 27 semi-active tribal militia units that serve as the SANG's internal reserve.<sup>23</sup> At that time, however, Cordesman acknowledged that the SANG was "far larger than it was at the time of the Gulf War," and that its "manning is increasing each year."<sup>24</sup> He predicted that recruitment and equipment-acquisition programs would soon expand the SANG by an additional 25,000 active guardsmen, and that these men would be assigned to new formations such as the 5<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Brigade, likely to be stationed in Riyadh.<sup>25</sup> In the last five years, total Saudi defense spending has increased by over 17%, and the SANG continued to expand its military capacity; it is probable that Cordesman's forecast is accurate.<sup>26</sup>

As noted, the SANG maintains its forces at strategically important locations throughout Saudi Arabia. The national headquarters of the SANG is located in Riyadh, and the guardsmen operate two other main bases: the Eastern Regional Headquarters in Dammam, near the causeway to Bahrain by the Persian Gulf, and the Western Regional Headquarters in Jeddah, outside Mecca on the Red Sea.<sup>27</sup> The main body of the SANG is stationed at the primary headquarters in the capital city, while the remainder of its forces are distributed across the commands in Dammam and Jeddah.<sup>28</sup> In addition to these three facilities, the SANG also recently established another base in the central city of Buraydah.<sup>29</sup> This facility is expected to house the new Kalefah Omar bin Abdulaziz Brigade Headquarters, as well as the SANG's three independent light infantry battalions.<sup>30</sup>



According to Cordesman’s analysis, each of the four SANG headquarters also commands an ambiguous number of Fouj.<sup>31</sup> As they are irregularly organized, technically inactive when not deployed, and capable of self-recruiting “above their authorized overstrength,” it is difficult to accurately determine the current capacity or location of the Fouj, though they have a particularly large presence in Riyadh and Dammam.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, it is estimated that the SANG typically maintains 28,000 Fouj militiamen divided amongst 27 units, resulting in average Fouj unit strength of approximately 1,100 men.<sup>33</sup> The militia units are generally stationed near urban areas and are often temporarily activated to guard oil facilities or patrol borders.<sup>34</sup> In times of emergency, such as the Grand Mosque seizure, the SANG can also forego piecemeal activation and call up the Fouj as a whole.<sup>35</sup>

Besides its military bases, the SANG also maintains a number of medical and social facilities in order to provide a broad range of support services for guardsmen, the Fouj, and their families. In keeping with its institutional separation from the other military branches—and its basic autonomy—the SANG has established its own self-sufficient healthcare system. The SANG has included these facilities in the overall modernization program, and they reportedly provide high quality care to both the guardsmen and the Saudi public.<sup>36</sup>

## **B. Equipment**

The SANG’s mechanized brigades—which make up its core force—have “standardized on some of the best-wheeled armored weapons available on the world market,” known as Light Armored Vehicles (LAVs).<sup>37</sup> The SANG’s modernization efforts have centered on these state-of-the-art light armor vehicles “because of their superior speed, endurance, and ease of maintenance.” As such, since 2009 the guardsmen have amassed a formidable arsenal of multi-purpose LAVs, including command-and-control, light artillery, and anti-tank variants.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the SANG maintains a large contingent of heavy artillery and fire support vehicles to supplement its light armor vanguard.<sup>39</sup>

Even with this formidable arsenal, the SANG has focused its ongoing modernization program on continuously upgrading or purchasing new equipment. In 2009, for example, the guardsmen purchased 724 General Dynamics Land Systems LAVs for \$5.8 billion and a set of CAESAR heavy artillery vehicles for an unknown sum.<sup>40</sup> At a cost of \$84 million, the SANG has also purchased a large number of advanced communications equipment called Single Channel Ground and Airborne Radio Systems (SINCGARS) in order to extend its long-range command and control capabilities.<sup>41</sup> Overall, this consistent turnover of equipment has played a key part in the SANG’s gradual transition into “one of the Middle East’s most capable” rapid response armed forces—if also one of its “most efficient tools of internal control.”<sup>42</sup>

## **C. Leadership**

The most recent restructuring of the SANG occurred in 2013 when King Abdullah established the Ministry of the National Guard (formerly just a Presidency) and appointed his son Prince Miteb bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud as minister. Prince Miteb was born in Riyadh and attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in the U.K. before completing an M.A. in Military Science at the Command and Staff College in Riyadh.<sup>43</sup> A career soldier and bureaucratic functionary, Miteb served as a member of the faculty of the SANG’s military school, the Deputy Assistant Chief of the National Guard for Military



Affairs, Minister of State, member of the Council of Ministers, and SANG's pre-ministerial commander before his appointment to minister.<sup>44</sup>

## IV. U.S. and U.K. Assistance

The ongoing modernization and reorganization of the SANG has made it dependent on foreign support in order to train its personnel and maintain its increasingly advanced equipment.<sup>45</sup> To service this need, the U.S. and (to lesser extent) the U.K. have provided extensive public and private assistance to the SANG's development initiatives.

### A. U.S. Aid

As part of the broader U.S.-Saudi security relationship, the Office of the Program Manager, Saudi Arabia National Guard Modernization Program (OPM-SANG) provides priority service to the SANG. Jointly established by the U.S. and Saudi governments in 1973, the OPM-SANG is a subdivision of the U.S. Army Materiel Command that facilitates the purchase and provision of military equipment, maintenance, and training from the U.S. government and U.S. corporations. While the U.S. government officially administers the OPM-SANG and the Saudi government finances it,<sup>46</sup> its operations have been largely contracted out to US private military firms since 1975, when Vinnell Corporation won the first 5-year National Guard Modernization Program contract.<sup>47</sup>

According to a preliminary report released by the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency in 2013, the most recent SANG modernization contract was valued at an estimated \$4 billion.<sup>48</sup> The principal contractor is currently Vinnell Arabia, a division of Vinnell Corporation, which itself became a subsidiary of TRW International and Northrop Grumman in 1998.<sup>49</sup> Vinnell Arabia consists of the following "defense services": "OPM-SANG operation, support and equipment, and Modernization Program support, personnel training and training equipment, transportation, repair and return, spare and repair parts, automation initiatives, SANG Health Affairs Program support, construction, communication and support equipment, publications and technical documentation, U.S. Government and contractor technical, engineering, and logistics support services, and other related elements of program support."<sup>50</sup>

Over the last decade, approximately 1,400 Vinnell employees have serviced the OPM-SANG and associated modernization contracts at any given time.<sup>51</sup> Cordesman indicates that these employees are supplemented by other U.S., Saudi, and international subcontractors, as well as local hires.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the 2013 renewal noted that there are "250 U.S. Government personnel and 650 representatives in country supporting" the OPM-SANG and overseeing advisory, training, and maintenance operations.<sup>53</sup> The SANG has also contracted services from Vinnell directly; in 1995, for example, they signed a separate training support contract valued at \$163.3 million.<sup>54</sup>

As of 2003, the OPM-SANG maintained "advisory groups" in Dammam, Hofuf, Jeddah, Taif, and Riyadh, which also houses OPM-SANG headquarters.<sup>55</sup> Notably, the OPM-SANG facilities in Riyadh were the target of a car bomb attack on 13 November 1995.<sup>56</sup> An extremist group called The Islamic Movement



for Change claimed responsibility for the explosion at the U.S.-leased building. The attack killed six people, including five Americans, and injured another sixty.<sup>57</sup>

## **B. U.K. Aid**

Prior to the establishment of the OPM-SANG, the U.K. was the primary provider of military assistance to the SANG. From 1963, a year after then-Prince Abdullah assumed command of the SANG, to the late 1970s, when the OPM-SANG became fully operational, the British Military Mission to the Saudi Arabian National Guard (BMM) served as the SANG's main point of contact for training and advisory services.<sup>58</sup>

While the BMM has played a reduced role in the overall modernization program since the late 1970s, it has remained active, with "11 British army personnel under the command of a brigadier" currently assigned to the program.<sup>59</sup> With Saudi Arabia becoming the single largest arms market for the U.K., the BMM has continued to channel much of the government's military assistance to the SANG.<sup>60</sup> In 2011, for example, the U.K. Ministry of Defence "confirmed that British personnel regularly run courses for the national guard in 'weapons, fieldcraft and general military skills training, as well as incident handling, bomb disposal, search, public order and sniper training.'"<sup>61</sup> In addition to the core staff of the BMM, the Ministry of Defence indicated that the U.K. "sends up to 20 training teams to the kingdom [to assist the SANG] a year."<sup>62</sup>

Much of the information regarding the UK government's assistance to the SANG came to light in 2011, when the Ministry of Defence confirmed that "it is possible that some members of the Saudi Arabian national guard which were deployed in Bahrain [as part of the Peninsula Shield Force] may have undertaken some training provided by the British military mission." The UK government stated that it was "deeply concerned" about potential human rights abuses committed by the SANG units it had trained but stressed that its military assistance to the SANG is designed to help combat terrorism.<sup>63</sup> A spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence also stated, "By providing training for countries to the same high standards used by U.K. armed forces we help to save lives and raise awareness of human rights."<sup>64</sup> Critics of the BMM, like Nicholas Gilby of the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), have argued to the contrary: "Britain's important role in training the Saudi Arabian national guard in internal security over many years has enabled them to develop tactics to help suppress the popular uprising in Bahrain."<sup>65</sup> Despite these concerns, *The Guardian* reported in 2015 that "the previous UK coalition government approved arms sales to Saudi Arabia worth almost £4bn."<sup>66</sup>

## **V. Human Rights Abuses and Concerns**

As Saudi Arabia continues to expand the SANG's military capacity—with direct assistance from the U.S. and U.K. governments—it is crucial to examine the institution's role in the projection of force both inside and outside the kingdom. Though the SANG is only tangentially engaged in the Saudi government's more systemic human rights violations, its operational history, recruitment practices, and overall institutional character evidence a clear propensity for misuse and are cause for significant reform.



## A. Use of Excessive or Unnecessary Force

The Saudi government has repeatedly relied on the SANG as an auxiliary force to address local and regional security crises. Since the Ikhwan first attacked Iraqi Shia villages in bloody cross-border raids,<sup>67</sup> however, the government has also struggled to effectively discipline the SANG, or at least find the will to check its excessive use of violence. Despite extensive modernization programs and ample funding, the SANG has retained a dangerous semblance of its original paramilitary order. This order has manifested itself during times of domestic unrest, and its persistence raises serious concerns for the SANG's prospective use in external counterinsurgency operations.

### *Internal Deployment*

In November 1979, the government deployed SANG units to two separate sites of internal unrest: the Eastern Province and the city of Mecca. The first deployment came during Ashura, an important religious holiday for the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia. Residents of the Eastern Province, a predominantly Shia region, had decided to challenge the government's ban on overt Shia religious practices and began to publicly celebrate Ashura, a major holiday in Shia Islam.<sup>68</sup> After 4,000 Shia flouted official warnings and gathered in the village of Safwa, near Qatif, the government deployed approximately 20,000 SANG troops to monitor the demonstrations.<sup>69</sup> On 28 November, two days after the procession in Safwa, Shia protestors allegedly began to taunt the arriving SANG forces.<sup>70</sup> According to Toby Matthiesen, a Research Fellow in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge, the encounters soon "turned violent in Saihat, Qatif, Safwa and the surrounding villages, as the National Guard opened fire on protestors."<sup>71</sup> In the week that followed, 20,000 guardsmen engaged protestors and impromptu militants armed with Molotov cocktails in "violent street clashes"; "several dozen Shiis died [sic]"<sup>72</sup> and "hundreds fell wounded."<sup>73</sup>

Toby Jones, a professor of Middle Eastern History at Rutgers University, writes that the violence in Qatif was "effectively sealed off from the world" by the Saudi government.<sup>74</sup> With this shield from domestic and international scrutiny, the SANG is reported to have employed excessive force and unnecessarily endangered the lives of Shia civilians. Upon its deployment to the initially non-violent demonstrations, the SANG utilized "clubs and electric prods to control the crowd."<sup>75</sup> After marchers began to jeer and throw rocks, the guardsmen fired into the crowd with live ammunition. Jones describes the general behavior of the SANG and the local security units as follows:

The security forces, which included 20,000 Saudi National Guard, cordoned off the major roadways, particularly those in Qatif, Sayhat, and Safwa to localize the protest, control the flow of information, as well as to prevent nearby oil facilities from being destroyed. Reports swirled that soldiers fired on virtually any public gathering of people, including at least one funeral procession in Safwa, forcing the mourners to flee and abandon the corpse in the street. State and hospital officials refused to release other bodies from the morgue for burial until the uproar quieted, leveraging the dead as blackmail. The National Guard relied on the heavy firepower of helicopter gun ships for crowd control,



turning the area into a deadly conflict zone characterized by terror, hostility, and fear.<sup>76</sup>

There is no doubt that the Saudi government faced legitimate security concerns in 1979; the civil unrest and the concomitant violence in Mecca “signaled that various forces in the kingdom stood poised to topple the al-Saud.”<sup>77</sup> But the government’s use of such overwhelming force demonstrates a clear disregard for the rights and lives of Shia civilians. Moreover, the SANG’s indiscriminate and excessive use of live ammunition—including aerial strafing—constitutes a disproportionate response to the threat posed by non-violent protestors and a loose collection of militants reportedly armed with weaponry stolen from the guardsmen themselves.<sup>78</sup> Rather than working to defuse the situation, SANG troops purposefully antagonized the protestors. Ultimately, the deployment of the guardsmen escalated civil and sectarian tensions and contributed to avoidable loss of life.

Ironically, as 20,000 members of the SANG quelled Shia unrest in the east, it was disgruntled former guardsmen who posed a more direct threat to Saudi security in the west.<sup>79</sup> Juhayman al-'Utaybi, an ex-corporal in the SANG, led a group of Sunni extremists in seizing Mecca’s Grand Mosque on 20 November 1979. During the ensuing siege, the government deployed SANG units in support of the operation to retake the mosque. These forces eventually managed to secure the facility, but not without suffering significant casualties. Concerns regarding the SANG’s military efficiency were compounded by further accusations that guardsmen acted carelessly, jeopardizing civilians. In an interview on *National Public Radio*, Yaroslav Trofimov, a reporter with *The Wall Street Journal* and author of the book *The Siege of Mecca*, notes “that hundreds, maybe more than a thousand” people died during the operation.<sup>80</sup>

### *External Deployment*

In 1984, the GCC established a joint military force to collectively respond to external threats. This joint command, known as the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), is made up of units from each GCC member state and is headquartered in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province. After earning conventional combat experience during the Gulf War, the SANG began to serve as one of the key components of the PSF.

It was as the vanguard of the PSF that the SANG embarked on its first, and so far only, foreign deployment: Bahrain. On 14 March 2011, the Government of Bahrain set a significant precedent for GCC security policy when it invited the PSF to intervene in the country’s domestic unrest.<sup>81</sup> After a month of pro-democracy demonstrations on the streets of Manama, Bahrain’s security forces had proven incapable of quelling the movement, and the government invoked the ‘collective stability’ of the GCC in order to request reinforcements. Soon, the PSF arrived to support the Bahraini security forces in the form of approximately 1,000 Saudi guardsmen and 500 Emirati policemen.<sup>82</sup> Representing roughly 5% of the PSF,<sup>83</sup> this contingent was officially intended to fulfill the “common responsibility” that is “the security and stability of the GCC.”<sup>84</sup> According to the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), the PSF was “ordered to assist Bahraini units in the protection of vital installations and sites in various parts of the country, particularly in the oil fields in the south.”<sup>85</sup> With the PSF assuming basic guard duties, the whole of the Bahraini security forces were free to engage protestors directly, and *en masse*.





Aside from this substantial support role, the exact nature of the SANG operations in Bahrain is unclear. Some commentators suggest that PSF intervention was not only a dangerous precedent for the use of collective GCC force to put down popular reform movements,<sup>86</sup> it was also indicative of growing sectarian extremism in the Saudi and Bahraini security establishments.<sup>87</sup> It is well-documented, for example, that the Bahraini government has purposefully employed foreign Sunni men in its security forces in order to more effectively control its majority Shia population; though the BICI found no evidence linking the SANG to any violence, testimony has emerged that PSF units employed excessive force against Shia protestors. An account of the unrest published in *The Guardian* in 2011, for example, describes “how Saudi soldiers wage a campaign of sectarian violence.”<sup>88</sup> The author, a Bahraini protester who used the pseudonym ‘Mahmoud’ due to safety concerns, claims that the SANG troops specifically targeted Shia civilians.<sup>89</sup> The guardsmen, identified by their Saudi accents, allegedly beat Shia protestors and referred to them with derogatory language.<sup>90</sup>

## **B. Religious Extremism**

The development of the SANG is inextricable from its history as a Wahhabi militia. The Ikhwan legacy looms large in both the organization and the recruitment policies of the SANG. Moreover, since the Grand Mosque seizure by “neo-Ikhwan” in 1979<sup>91</sup>--an iteration of the original Ikhwan rebellion and a precursor to the modern Sunni radical movement<sup>92</sup>--the SANG’s enduring foundation in Wahhabi extremism has presented a latent threat to the Saudi security establishment.

### *Influence of Extremist Ideology*

The SANG’s roots in Wahhabi militancy are most clearly reflected in its military education system and its recruitment practices. While the Saudi state derives much of its ideological authority from the spread of Wahhabism and similar Salafi movements, the semi-formal influence of religious ideology on the security apparatus has not always aligned with official policy.

The relationship between the SANG and Saad bin Ateeq al-Ateeq, director of the Guidance Office for housing at King Khaled Military Academy (KKMA), is a case in point. Al-Ateeq is a popular Saudi cleric known for extremist and often-violent rhetoric.<sup>93</sup> In his sermons, which are commonly televised, al-Ateeq has routinely used derogatory language to describe other sects of Islam, and has explicitly incited violence against Shia, Christians, and Jews. According to Oren Adaki and David Weinberg in *Foreign Policy*, in 2015 al-Ateeq “delivered a televised sermon at Qatar’s state-controlled Grand Mosque beseeching God to ‘destroy the Jews and whoever made them Jews, and destroy the Christians and the Alawites and whoever made them Christian, and the Shiites and whoever made them Shiite.’” Adaki and Weinberg describe al-Ateeq’s “radical preaching” as a parallel narrative to that of “terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda.”<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, al-Ateeq has been “treated as an establishment figure in the Gulf,” invited to speak at everything from state-sanctioned award ceremonies in the UAE to government security conferences in Qatar.<sup>95</sup>

The KKMA is one of the chief producers of the SANG’s officer corps; its graduates “automatically earn the rank of lieutenant.” In his capacity at the KKMA, al-Ateeq regularly advises and preaches to active guardsmen, serving as authority figure to the future leadership of the SANG.<sup>96</sup>



## *Shia Discrimination*

Aside from the formal inclusion of clerics like al-Ateeq in the military-educational structure, the SANG has maintained a *de facto* ban on Shia membership for the duration of its existence. Though the prohibition does not appear to be official policy, as late as 1992 the Library of Congress Country could describe the involvement of Shia in the development of the Saudi state as follows: “They were excluded from the upper levels of the civil bureaucracy and rarely recruited by the military or the police; none was recruited by the national guard.”<sup>97</sup> According to a more recent report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Shia are also excluded from sensitive government organs, such as the Ministry of Interior, the National Guard, and the Ministry of Defense.”<sup>98</sup> In a 2015 article, Matthiesen notes that the Shia are “largely banned” from the SANG and the MOI.<sup>99</sup>

The SANG has been able to maintain this effective prohibition by relying on traditional recruitment practices within non-Shia communities. Unlike the Saudi army, which draws on the disparate Saudi urban populations, the SANG continues to recruit primarily from tribal and rural communities.<sup>100</sup> Aside from simple tradition, Cordesman writes that the SANG targets these communities for recruitment “because tribal members from rural areas are often less well-educated and competitive in the Saudi labor force and often need jobs. It also, however, means that the SANG must accept some illiterate recruits, particularly into the Fowj [reserve militia force]...the Kingdom’s economic problems have greatly improved SANG recruitment [in the early 2000’s] and SANG soldiers are often the sole breadwinner in extended families.”<sup>101</sup> Jonathan Manthorpe, a Canadian journalist, also suggests that “battalions and their commanders usually all come from the same extended family.”<sup>102</sup> Cordesman concurs, noting that tribal leaders are “carefully chosen [to join the SANG] for their loyalty to the regime.”<sup>103</sup>

The monarchy has encouraged and benefited from these recruitment practices, as they have helped to make the SANG a homogenous, unified force on which it can depend during security crises. Nevertheless, these same practices have also grounded the SANG in explicit sectarianism. By using an exclusionary tradition as an organizing principle for the SANG, the Saudi government has retained the guardsmen as a means to manipulate Shia-Sunni divide. At the same time, however, the SANG’s inherently sectarian foundation has served to ground the increasing formalization of its other tradition: Wahhabi militancy. These trends problematize the government’s common use of the SANG to manage sectarian unrest and may inform concerns regarding its previous deployment history.

## *Potential Collusion with Radical Militants*

The SANG’s institutional sectarianism is not just discriminatory; it has had direct and dangerous consequences for Saudi security. Since 2003, when al-Qaeda began a violent terror campaign in the kingdom, both independent journalists and Saudi government officials warned of extremist sub-movements within the Saudi security forces. In 2004, Prince Turki al-Faisal, then-ambassador to the US, specifically cited the SANG, telling the BBC of “growing evidence of collusion between the Saudi national guard and the [al-Qaeda] militants.”<sup>104</sup>



Though the Saudi government reveals little to no information regarding its internal security investigations, the SANG's 'collusion' with extremist groups has apparently ranged from allegations of mass defection<sup>105</sup> to complicity in al-Qaeda attacks on SANG-guarded infrastructure.<sup>106</sup> According to a report from *The Telegraph*, for example, unnamed American intelligence sources determined that a "significant level of 'insider' knowledge" was necessary for the completion of the Jeddah and Khobar compound attacks, two of al-Qaeda's most infamous attacks in Saudi Arabia.<sup>107</sup> The sources explicitly stated "that al-Qa'eda even infiltrated the elite National Guard, which is involved in compound security." Abdel Bari Atwan, a London-based journalist who has written extensively on al-Qaeda, cites figures indicating that, between 2003 and 2004—the height of the terror group's insurgency in the kingdom—at least 500 Saudi guardsmen defected to join extremist groups in Iraq.<sup>108</sup>

### *Coup-proofing and Royal Misuse*

Though the permeation of *takfiri* ideology in the SANG presents a substantial security challenge, the Saudi government has worked to balance the threat of extremism with the advantages offered by a second, highly-motivated army. Like the original Ikhwan, the SANG provides the monarchy with direct access to a deeply loyal contingency force. To this end, some commentators argue that the monarchy has purposefully fostered the traditional distinction between the more cosmopolitan national army and the predominantly conservative, rural SANG in order to ward off military coups (see *Shia Discrimination* section above). Cordesman specifically cites the SANG's Fouj militia units as "being useful in securing Saudi Arabia against infiltration and terrorists in a way that limits the ability of the Army to conduct a coup."<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Manthorpe notes that Saudi army and air force bases are "in isolated regions of the country from where it would be almost impossible to launch a coup," whereas SANG facilities "are spread throughout the cities—where they can be deployed quickly to protect the royal family and quickly squash any civil unrest."<sup>110</sup>

While these theories are unconfirmed, one of late-King Abdullah's daughters, Sahar, has told reporters that the monarchy employs SANG units to extra-legally manage disputes within the royal family. Specifically, she claims her father used guardsmen to enforce her arbitrary detention.<sup>111</sup> Before his death, King Abdullah reportedly held Sahar and her three sisters, Jawaher, Maha, and Hala, under house arrest for over a decade after they called for progress on women's rights in the Kingdom.<sup>112</sup> According to Sahar, the SANG is directly responsible for the sisters' continued confinement and abuse: "It's a battle for survival...we're literally facing a vicious army: the Saudi National Guard, headed by our half-brother Mitab. He along with our half-brother AbdulAziz, Deputy Foreign Minister, have been issuing orders to abuse us along the years."<sup>113</sup> In an interview with *Muftah*, Sahar said that guardsmen physically restrained her sisters as they were forcibly administered medications. She stated that they had "been threatened and there were attempted attacks...systematic drugging and abuse are ongoing."<sup>114</sup>

## **VI. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Although the SANG takes part in a wide variety of internal and external security operations, it operates independently, rarely participating in the clear and systemic human rights violations committed by the standard Saudi security forces. Nevertheless, SANG has displayed a consistent disregard for human



rights and has faced routine accusations of poor discipline, religious extremism, and excessive force. Moreover, the guardsmen have exhibited institutional patterns of religious discrimination and corruption.

Rather than comprehensively addressing these failings, the Saudi monarchy has accepted or even encouraged them. Despite its history of rebellion and extremism, the SANG presents too-tantalizing an opportunity to the insecure royal family: a loyal private army. To this end, the monarchy has seized on the same recruitment and education policies that foster discrimination and extremism in the SANG, for example, as a means of leveraging more power over internal political dissent. The monarchy, perpetually wary of the national military, has flooded potentially restive urban centers with members of its traditional rural power base in the form of Saudi guardsmen.

As the SANG continues to expand its military capacity with considerable logistical support from the international community, the Governments of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the United Kingdom must work to bring it further in line with human rights norms. Ultimately, these governments must take concrete measures to ensure that the SANG is not used to violate human rights in the future.

To these ends, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) calls on the Government of Saudi Arabia to:

**Limit** the SANG to domestic employment;

**Impose** greater oversight on the operations of the SANG;

**Restrict** direct executive influence by incorporating the SANG within the standard military chain of command;

**Provide** greater training on the appropriate use of force and protection of human rights;

**Eliminate** Shia discrimination and extremist ideology from SANG recruitment and educational practices;

**Investigate** all allegations of excessive force, extremist collusion, and executive overreach, with particular attention paid to the specific case of late King Abdullah's imprisoned daughters;

And, finally, significantly **downsize** the SANG and reorganize it into a reserve force for the MODA.

For the Government of the United States:

**Impose** greater restrictions on the OPM-SANG and general military assistance;



**Require** the SANG to meet continuous human rights standards in order to access military aid;

**Provide** mandatory human rights training to the SANG;

And **supervise** more thoroughly the operations of Vinnell Arabia, the OPM-SANG, and the SANG to ensure that all standards of human rights training are met.

And for the Government of the United Kingdom:

**Impose** greater restrictions on the BMM and general military assistance;

**Require** the SANG to meet continuous human rights standards in order to access military aid;

**Provide** mandatory human rights training to the SANG;

**Investigate** independently allegations that SANG units trained by the BMM have committed human rights violations in Bahrain;

And **suspend** particular training courses or arms agreements implicated in human rights violations in Bahrain until the results of aforementioned investigations.

## VII. Notes

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