



Mapping the Saudi State, Chapter 6: The Saudi Armed Forces

I. Introduction

Though some commentators locate the origins of the contemporary Saudi armed forces in the few dozen tribal warriors that helped Abdulaziz Al Saud reconquer his family's ancestral base of Riyadh,¹ a quick study of the historical record reveals a starkly different picture. The Saudi government's army, navy, and air force, organized by the Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA), are largely foreign constructs. From their haphazard conception in the 1930s and '40s through the present day, these forces have owed what prowess they possess to the equipping and training efforts of Egyptian, British, and US missions and even private firms. In a certain sense, the Saudi military and the ministry that oversees it are contractual, and not national, bodies.

The government's willingness to place its national defense in international hands, though crucial to understanding the armed forces' historical development, is a symptom of the ruling family's larger political calculus. Governing a fractured populace along patrimonial lines, the Saudi elite want an army strong enough to dominate their neighbors and fend off regional competition, but weak enough to never challenge their absolute rule. Oscillating between viewing the armed forces as both threat and tool, the ruling family has created a body organized along sectarian and tribal lines, incapable of effectively operating without significant foreign assistance.

Chapter 6 of *Mapping the Saudi State* charts the development of these forces, outlines their current strength, and underlines their damaging utilization. Though the Saudi government rarely deploys its military, the armed forces' most recent action has come coupled with a host of human rights violations committed against the people of Yemen.

The recent deployment of the Saudi armed forces presses home the need for serious institutional reform. As with previous installments, the chapter ends with recommendations for how the Government of Saudi Arabia, the Government of the United States, and the international community at large can bring the armed forces in line with basic international norms of human rights.

II. History

As with the [Saudi Arabian National Guard](#) (SANG), the Saudi ruling family has managed the development of the armed forces, and the ministry that oversees them, with an eye towards its own security. Unlike the SANG, however, that grew organically out of the pre-existing militia force which ushered Abdulaziz Al Saud (hereon referred to as Ibn Saud), the armed forces developed top-down. This development was halting, largely foreign-supported, and vacillated according to the extent to which the royal family viewed the forces as a threat to its continued rule.

A. Early formation: 1930s through the early '50s



From its earliest origins, the Saudi armed forces have relied on direct foreign assistance. Ibn Saud's desire to organize a modern military on top of his traditional tribal levies stemmed from apprehension over the growing power of Transjordan and Iraq, whose Hashemite rulers he had driven from the Arabian Peninsula.² Ironically, the new king had to build this modern force on the foundation that the Hashemites had left behind. Syrian, Iraqi, and Kurdish officers directed the few regiments that the Saudis could raise. The first leader of the Directorate of Military Affairs, a forerunner of the MODA, was a Kurd who had served as colonel under the Hashemite leader Sharif Hussein.³ He and his successor oversaw a relatively small force: by 1940, the Saudi government employed some 1,500 ground troops.⁴

The following decade saw the establishment of the MODA, the frustrations of a British military mission, and the first foreign deployment of Saudi troops. After prodding from the British, the Saudi government established the ministry in 1946.⁵ The defense ministry, however, neglected its British allies, leaving them to carry out their program of force modernization with little support.⁶ This lack of engagement impacted troop readiness; volunteers remained low, pay was poor, and many soldiers were illiterate and thus unfit for official advancement.⁷ When Ibn Saud reluctantly committed two battalions to the liberation of Palestine in 1948, Saudi Arabia's representative armed forces were insufficiently armed, poorly-trained, and lacked combat experience.⁸

B. Upheaval: 1950s through the early '70s

Broadly speaking, the 1950s and '60s witnessed two major military trends. The first was the emergence of the developing military as a threat to the ruling family. The second was the supersession of the British military mission by intensive and permanent U.S. support.

Attempted *coups d'état* and defections highlighted this roughly twenty-year period. The rising tide of Arab nationalism, particularly that exemplified by the Free Officers' revolt in Egypt in 1952, permeated regional militaries, and Saudi Arabia's nascent forces were not immune. In 1955, after Ibn Saud's successor invited an Egyptian military mission into the kingdom to train his officer corps, a group of nearly 100 Saudi officers conspired to overthrow the monarchy.⁹ The government weathered this blow, and within months had executed the ringleaders and their immediate supporters.¹⁰ In October 1962, four Saudi aircraft, bearing weapons meant for royalist Yemenis resisting nationalist forces backed by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, defected to Egypt.¹¹ Finally, in 1969, authorities arrested over 100 officers after uncovering a plot to besiege the ruling family and announce a Republic of Arabia.¹²

In addition to arrests and executions, the Saudi government attempted to counteract the oppositional momentum of the armed forces by other means. Following the 1962 defection, for example, officials close to the monarchy grounded the air force and "asked Washington to patrol Saudi airspace."¹³ Yet the most significant move followed the 1955 coup attempt, when King Saud delinked the developing SANG from the MODA.¹⁴ This established the SANG, first and foremost, as a loyal paramilitary force that would counteract any sustained uprising from the armed forces.¹⁵



Into this milieu entered the US. In 1951, an aging Ibn Saud invited the establishment of a US Military Training Mission (USMTM), which operates to this day.¹⁶ The initial agreement had the US organizing an army of over 17,000 men, in addition to the continued development of the Saudi air force.¹⁷ Since striking this relationship, the Saudi government has relied on the US to serve as the ultimate backstop of its security. It is the United States, and not US-trained Saudi troops, that guarantee the inviolability of Saudi borders.¹⁸

C. Acquiescence: 1970s through the First Gulf War

Greater national control over the oil industry coupled with geopolitical power plays caused Saudi oil profits, and thus governmental revenue, to spike. Increasing wealth led to the rapid expansion of Saudi government agencies. Higher pay and greater benefits began to ameliorate the grievances that had pushed officers to rebel.¹⁹ Excepting a final, and quickly-uprooted, coup attempt in 1977,²⁰ oppositional elements within the armed forces abandoned the internecine struggles, if not the tensions, that had defined the preceding decades.

The rise in revenue also firmly established the power of the MODA vis-à-vis the troops it had only sometimes controlled. In this period, Prince Sultan solidified the functioning of the MODA around his personal authority,²¹ and would directly manage the ministry until his death in 2011. Sultan and his ministry competed against that of his brother Prince Nayef (MOI) and half-brother Prince Abdullah (SANG), for greater shares of escalating revenues;²² by 1986, the military budget had reached \$17.4 billion, or 21 percent of Saudi GDP,²³ even in the midst of a recession. Personalized rule facilitated the acquisition of arms and military equipment. Mostly through Prince Sultan's efforts, Saudi Arabia became the largest importer of US arms.²⁴

Though the Saudi armed forces expanded rapidly during this period, they failed to become self-sustaining national institutions and continued to rely heavily upon foreign training and equipping missions. Scholar Stephanie Cronin writes that, by the mid-1980s, a 45,000-strong Saudi army received training and logistical support from some 38,000 advisors of US, British, and French origin.²⁵

Thus, the Saudi armed forces that fought alongside US troops during the First Gulf War were highly-equipped but largely incapable of independent action. American officials managed (and minimized) Saudi participation in the conflict with Iraq. The Royal Saudi Air Force, despite significant technical investment, gained negative attention for lacking "any real ability to operate in large formations or to handle particularly complex missions."²⁶ The decision of the Saudi ruling family to invite the presence of 500,000 US troops into the kingdom in the face of significant public backlash²⁷ revealed the government's lack of confidence in its military's ability to repel Saddam Hussein's forces.

D. Armament: the First Gulf War through the present day

Over the past 25 years, the Saudi government, through the MODA, has accelerated the trends that hampered the effectiveness of its forces during the First Gulf War while adopting a more aggressive



military posture. Arms acquisitions and training programs have ballooned. In 2014, Saudi Arabia became the largest global weapons importer, purchasing \$6.4 billion in arms that year alone.²⁸ In addition to a continued and intensive security partnership with the US, the Saudi government has become increasingly reliant upon private military firms, so much so that “even simple military exercises” are planned and organized by firms.²⁹ Much of this expenditure is geared toward ensuring that the Saudi military, at least in terms of technical capacity, remains superior to that of Iran.

For much of this period, the government continued to utilize its armed forces sparingly. This policy, however, has shifted dramatically in recent years. In November 2009, the Saudi government mobilized air and ground forces along its southwest border after a conflict between Houthi militia and the Yemeni central government spilled into Saudi Arabia.³⁰ That smaller conflict presaged the full aerial campaign that the Saudi government, in conjunction with GCC allies and US logistical support, would wage against Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen in 2015.

A changing of the guard has driven this unprecedented aggressive projection of military power. Following Prince Sultan’s passing in 2011, Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz took control of the MODA. Upon assuming the throne in January 2015, he immediately installed his 30-year-old son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as defense minister.³¹ To this date, bin Salman has prosecuted a war that, while achieving moderate gains against Houthi militia in recent months, has killed thousands of civilians and contributed to the significant deterioration of Yemen’s already beleaguered municipal and medical infrastructure (refer to Section IV for further detail).³²

III. Organization and Structure

With the exception of the SANG, the MODA oversees the kingdom’s four main military branches: the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLFs), the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF), the Royal Saudi Navy (RSN), and the Royal Saudi Air Defense Force (RSADF). Together, these four services of the Saudi military number approximately 207,500³³ to 227,000³⁴ personnel, with an estimated 125,000³⁵ in the RSLFs, 40,000-60,000³⁶ in the RSAF, 13,500³⁷-28,000³⁸ in the RSN, and 23,000³⁹ in the RSADF.

Though the kingdom’s military hierarchy is susceptible to change corresponding to shifts in the royal power structure, the standard chain of command is arranged as follows: each individual commander of the four MODA branches reports to the MODA Chief of General Staff, who in turn reports to the Defense Minister, who answers to the king. Anthony H. Cordesman, a defense analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, writes that the military command is staffed by ruling family members and officers with proven loyalty to the monarchy.⁴⁰ This royal influence also permeates the larger officer corps, wherein junior princes and loyalists permeate the lower rungs.⁴¹

Despite this straightforward chain of command, the Saudi military faces significant joint operations challenges, as the four services exercise considerable autonomy from each other.⁴² For example, the MODA’s core operational spending and equipment procurement remains “heavily” managed by each individual service.⁴³ According to Cordesman, this separation has aggravated other structural problems



facing the greater Saudi defense establishment, making it difficult for the military to establish effective cooperation procedures.⁴⁴

To allay these difficulties, the Saudi military depends upon foreign sources for guidance, equipment, and training.⁴⁵ Defense analyst P.W. Singer describes how, in 2003, MODA operations were virtually reliant on the international private military industry: “BDM provides logistics, training, intelligence, and comprehensive advisory and operations services to the Saudi Army and Air Force; Booz-Allen Hamilton runs the military staff college; SAIC supports the navy and the air defense; O’Gara protects the royal family and trains local security forces; and Cable and Wireless provides training in counterterrorism and urban warfare.”⁴⁶

The kingdom’s dependence on both private and governmental foreign military support has only deepened since 2003.⁴⁷ In 2011 and 2012, the kingdom spent a total of \$99 billion on its military,⁴⁸ including a \$33 billion arms agreement with the US.⁴⁹ By 2014, annual Saudi military spending had grown by 17% to \$80.8 billion.⁵⁰ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, this was the largest annual increase by any country during that year,⁵¹ putting Saudi Arabia on track to become the world’s fifth-largest military spender by 2020.⁵²

The following sections will summarize the organization and capability of each individual branch of the MODA, paying attention to both their independent characteristics and their developing roles in the ever-expanding Saudi military establishment.

A. Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLFs)

The RSLFs are organized as an all-purpose, standard ground army, designed to fulfill whatever land-based defense functions the kingdom may require. The RSLFs are typically responsible for securing Saudi Arabia’s borders, but they are also capable of undertaking offensive operations. Since the end of the first Gulf War in 1991, the RSLFs have undergone extensive modernization and steadily increased in size.⁵³ Cordesman writes that, as of 2009, the RSLFs consisted of five mechanized infantry brigades, four armored brigades, one airborne brigade, two army aviation brigades, one Royal Guard Brigade, and eight independent artillery battalions.⁵⁴ These units are staffed by an estimated 125,000 active servicemen, and maintain approximately 1,016 main battle tanks, 4,500 miscellaneous armored vehicles, and 280 heavy artillery weapons.⁵⁵

The 13 brigades and 8 independent artillery battalions of the RSLFs are distributed across six Area Commands located in King Khalid Military City, Tabuk, Khamis Mushayt, Dhahran, Jeddah, and the RSLF headquarters in Riyadh.⁵⁶ These bases anchor entire military cities that contain extensive facilities for housing, training, and equipment.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it is rare for the full RSLF body to be stationed at these facilities, as a substantial force is perpetually forward-deployed to border regions.⁵⁸ Critical observers of the Saudi security establishment have suggested that the monarchy purposefully relegates the RSLFs to border duty in order to separate them from linking up with potential sites of domestic opposition located deeper in the Saudi interior, thus safeguarding against military coup attempts.⁵⁹ These same



critics note that—while the SANG are typically stationed near key urban centers and locations of strategic importance to the monarchy—a large contingent of the RSLF is scattered at the far-reaches of Saudi territory, fighting off Houthi cross-border raids. Internal politics aside, the MODA has ensured that RLSFs act as the kingdom’s first line of defense against conventional military threats.⁶⁰

B. Royal Saudi Air Forces (RSAF)

The RSAF, which defense analysts argue is one of the most advanced forces in the Gulf,⁶¹ is composed of six air wings with 15 squadrons operating roughly 300 fixed-wing combat aircraft.⁶² In 2009, these six air wings were staffed by an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 personnel stationed at facilities in Dhahran, Taif, Khamis Mushayt, and Tabuk.⁶³ Reflecting the RSAF’s original defensive orientation, each of its four bases houses a specific command tasked with protecting the nearby airspace: forces at Dhahran are responsible for guarding the oil facilities in the Gulf, forces at Taif are responsible for guarding the holy sites near the Red Sea, forces at Khamis Mushayt are responsible for guarding the Yemeni border region and the upper Red Sea ports, and forces at Tabuk are responsible for guarding the Jordanian and Israeli border region.⁶⁴

From the mid-1990s to 2001, the RSAF suffered from a variety of institutional shortcomings that effectively constrained its development.⁶⁵ Though some of these struggles have persisted, the RSAF has reportedly transitioned into a sophisticated, combat-ready air service. By 2015, the RSAF’s modernization program has also seen it equipped with state of the art warplanes, such as the U.S.-manufactured F-15 fighter jet. Described as both the “backbone” of the RSAF and one of Saudi Arabia’s “most lethal weapons of war,” the kingdom currently possesses approximately 238 F-15s.⁶⁶ Combined with its development of an Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (IS&R) command, this equipment modernization program has effectively completed the RSAF’s shift from a purely reactionary service to a modern multipurpose air force.⁶⁷

C. Royal Saudi Navy (RSN)

The RSN is a small naval force that still stacks up well against its regional peers.⁶⁸ It is primarily tasked with guarding the kingdom’s maritime interests in the Gulf and the Red Sea by defending against piracy, terrorism, and external aggression.

Separate eastern and western fleets, corresponding to the Gulf and the Red Sea, comprise the RSN. Riyadh serves as the overall headquarters for the RSN, while the major Eastern Fleet base is located in al-Jubail, and the major Western Fleet base is located in Jeddah.⁶⁹ RSN personnel are stationed at these three locations as well as at additional facilities in Jizan, Al Wajh, Dammam, Ras al-Mishab, and Ras al-Ghar.⁷⁰ Out of roughly 28,000 men, Cordesmen’s research indicates that 12,500 to 20,000 are sailors and 8,000-10,000 are members of the Royal Saudi Naval Marine Forces (RSNMFs).⁷¹ Based out of Ras al-Mirat, the RSNMFs are organized into a single infantry regiment (the 1st Marines) composed of 5 battalions and equipped with 140 amphibious armored personnel carriers (APCs).⁷²



Despite its relative military capacity, however, the RSN continues to face considerable modernization challenges and has had difficulty coordinating with either allied navies or other Saudi military branches. As of 2009, neither RSN fleet had been integrated into a GCC or Saudi-US-UK “concept of operations” in order to streamline joint operations, and the western fleet still requires significant development assistance. The RSN has reportedly begun to address some of these failures: in early 2015, it started planning to recapitalize and upgrade its entire Eastern Fleet, negotiating a possible \$20 billion contract with the US Navy.⁷³

D. Royal Saudi Air Defense Force (RSADF)

Established as an independent military branch in 1984, the RSADF originally served as the air defense division of the RSLFs.⁷⁴ While the RSAF continues to serve as the primary aerial defense and deterrent force in Saudi Arabia, the RSADF plays a substantial supplementary role in protecting vital infrastructure, including ports, terminals, and oil installations.⁷⁵

In 2009, the RSADF maintained an estimated strength of 23,000 personnel and operated approximately 49 surface-to-air missile (SAMs) batteries, each with mobile and fixed subunits (some reports indicate the RSADF possesses at least 60 SAM batteries,⁷⁶ with a variety of short range and high-to-medium range missile systems).⁷⁷ The RSADF operates an assortment of different specific air defense equipment under six different commands.⁷⁸ Though it typically operates as an autonomous fourth branch of the military, in times of war the RSADF falls under the command of the RSAF.⁷⁹

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

Despite recent moves to diversify the MODA’s sources of foreign military support, including the notable commencement of major arms sale negotiations with Russia,⁸⁰ the kingdom has long relied on the US and the UK for the majority of its required security assistance. Without a developed domestic arms industry,⁸¹ Saudi Arabia has grown increasingly dependent on the external defense market to meet its substantial equipment, training, advisory, and logistical needs; to illustrate, a Security Assistance Monitor reports notes estimates suggesting that over 80% of the Saudi arsenal is US-manufactured.⁸² Given that the kingdom surpassed India to become the single largest importer of US weapons and defense services in 2014,⁸³ it is unlikely that this lucrative military partnership will decline in the short-term.

The following section briefly reviews the depth and breadth of security support provided to the MODA by both the US and the UK.

A. US Aid

The US Military Training Mission (USMTM) has served as the primary American Security Assistance and Security Cooperation organization in Saudi Arabia.⁸⁴ The USMTM was established through the *Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949* and the *Mutual Security Act of 1951* with, in the words of the USMTM,



the directive to provide “training instruction at all levels, advisory services, studies and recommendations, and administration of all aspects of the US military cooperation program.”⁸⁵ A further Memorandum of Understanding signed in February 1977 has since governed the specific daily relationship between the USMTM and the Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA).⁸⁶ Former Chief of the USMTM Major General Silas R. Johnson, Jr. describes the relationship between the two institutions as follows: “Simply put, USMTM provides MODA with a single point of contact to facilitate coordination between the Office of the Secretary of Defense, USCENTCOM, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, and the American Embassy in KSA.”⁸⁷

As of 2001, the USMTM is structured as three service divisions: a joint advisory division, a directorate staff, and a headquarters under the ultimate command of USCENTCOM.⁸⁸ The USMTM reports in 2015 that approximately 140 advisors constitute its core in-country strength, while these personnel are often supplemented with temporary training and technical assistance groups as determined by agreements between the USMTM Chief and the Saudi Chief of General Staff.⁸⁹ Cordesman states that the USMTM maintained 316 total employees in 2001, for example.⁹⁰ Though the USMTM is headquartered in Riyadh, these personnel carry out a variety of training and advisory tasks at over ten other Saudi military facilities.⁹¹ These same personnel also serve as the link to US military commanders should the MODA cooperate with US forces in broader training or combat operations.⁹²

Besides its extensive training and advisory functions, the USMTM also supervises Foreign Military Sales (FMS) case coordination with the Saudi military, from start to finish.⁹³ During the mid-2000s, the USMTM oversaw upwards of 300 sales cases at any given time.⁹⁴ This process has persisted into 2015, as the USMTM continues to manage FMS sales cases and “advocate for US business to supply defense goods and services to the SAAF [Saudi Arabia Armed Forces]”⁹⁵ –paid for by the Saudi government— while the US secures approximately \$10,000 in annual appropriations of International Military Education and Training assistance funding for the kingdom in order to encourage repeat purchases through the USMTM.⁹⁶ According to Christopher Blanchard of the Congressional Research Service, these appropriations render the kingdom eligible for a significant discount on any purchases placed through the USMTM and the FMS program, perpetuating the cycle.⁹⁷

The USMTM-FMS arrangement has proven extremely lucrative for the American defense industry, and has facilitated a substantial expansion in Saudi military import expenditures. From October 2010 to October 2014, the United States authorized almost \$60 billion in arms sales to MODA-related forces.⁹⁸ With the MODA revealing its intention to modernize the RSAF with US-manufactured F-15 fighter jets in 2010,⁹⁹ the kingdom has only entrenched its dependence on the American security relationship.

Most recently, the US has provided the MODA with advisory and logistical support for its ongoing operations in Yemen. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the US has supplied the Saudi-led coalition with munitions, targeting intelligence, mid-air refueling flights, and has even deployed warships to participate in the naval blockade.¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch has found evidence to suggest that coalition forces have also deployed US-manufactured cluster munitions with the knowledge of US Defense Department officials,¹⁰¹ raising further concerns that the US is actively facilitating Saudi violations of



international humanitarian law and indirectly contributing to the worsening humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Over 117 states, excluding the US and Saudi Arabia, have joined the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which prohibits the manufacture, sale, and use of cluster munitions due to their severe and indiscriminate humanitarian impact.¹⁰² Nonetheless, the *Los Angeles Times* reports that the US has escalated its role in the Saudi-led intervention since the operation began. As of August 2015, six months into the campaign, the US has increased the number of military advisors deployed to joint command centers in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain from 20 to 45.¹⁰³

B. UK Aid

Although Saudi Arabia is currently the largest defense market for the US,¹⁰⁴ the kingdom has not relied solely on American military imports to support its massive modernization programs. At present, Saudi Arabia is also the largest importer of UK armaments, having agreed to at least £4 billion worth of weapons sales during the tenure of the last British coalition government.¹⁰⁵ The UK also provides Saudi Arabia with a military cooperation program comparable to the American USMTM, called the Ministry of Defence Saudi Armed Forces Programme (MODSAP), as well as similar programs for the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG).¹⁰⁶ According to the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), the MODSAP employs approximately 240 UK government and military personnel in both the UK and Saudi Arabia in order to fulfill a variety of advisory, training, logistics, and weapons contracts with the MODA.¹⁰⁷ As the result of a series of multi-billion-pound arms agreements, the RSAF, in particular, has developed a substantial reliance on UK hardware and maintenance.¹⁰⁸ The *International Business Times* reports that the RSAF actually possesses twice as many UK-manufactured warplanes as the British Royal Air Force (RAF), and that roughly half of the approximately 100 aircraft used daily in the MODA's Yemen campaign are UK-made Typhoons and Tornado GR4 fighter jets.¹⁰⁹

The Yamamah Deals, which initiated the original sale of the aircraft to Saudi Arabia, have also been the subject of corruption investigations in both the UK and the US. In the latter case, the arms manufacturer BAE pleaded guilty to “conspiring to defraud the US by impairing and impeding its lawful functions, to make false statements about its Foreign Corrupt Practices Act compliance program, and to violate the Arms Export Control Act and International Traffic in Arms Regulations,” and was fined \$400 million.¹¹⁰ Given that the RSAF has used large amounts of these same BAE-manufactured aircraft—sold¹¹¹ as part of the Yamamah Deals—in its devastating aerial operations in Yemen,¹¹² such arms agreements have left the UK government and its contractors open to allegations of not only fraud and corruption, but also violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

V. Human Rights Violations during Yemen Conflict

Since March 2015, the MODA has overseen a sustained aerial bombing campaign in Yemen. Six months after Houthi rebel forces assumed control of Sanaa, Saudi Arabia initiated a joint military campaign with the objective of restoring the exiled government of Yemeni President Abed Mansour Hadi. Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman has personally led the operation,¹¹³ deploying the Saudi and Emirati air



forces, with varying levels of support from Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco,¹¹⁴ on nearly daily sorties over Yemen.¹¹⁵

Despite both its extensive modernization efforts and the direct assistance of foreign militaries—including US intelligence and logistics support—the Saudi-led coalition has unnecessarily targeted Yemen’s non-military infrastructure and inflicted disproportionate harm on the Yemeni civilian population; since the air operations began, at least 2,000 civilians have been killed and more than 13 million forced into emergency food insecurity.¹¹⁶ While ADHRB cannot document this destruction in its entirety, the following section presents five cases in which the Saudi-led coalition has needlessly killed, harmed, or further isolated Yemeni noncombatants as representative of the Saudi government’s broader negligence and excessive use force.

Despite the robust documentation of these attacks, governments that are party to the Yemen crisis, such as Saudi Arabia and other Arab coalition members, refuse to investigate the violations that they engendered.¹¹⁷ It is likely that the death toll of noncombatants will continue to rise, especially without any investigation into the perpetration indiscriminate civilian targeting.

A. Air Strikes

1. Al-Mazraq

On 30 March 2015, one of the first Saudi-led airstrikes targeted the al-Mazraq refugee camp, located in northern Yemen near the Saudi border. Al-Mazraq harbors approximately 1,100 refugees and was established in 2009¹¹⁸ to support civilians fleeing earlier fighting between loyalist government forces and the Houthi rebels.¹¹⁹ Prior to the Saudi operation, many civilians had traveled to al-Mazraq to escape the pervasive violence in other areas of Yemen,¹²⁰ but were unfortunately met with further violence upon their arrival.

Due to the complex nature of the crisis in Yemen, eyewitness and resident accounts of the attack on al-Mazraq often conflict. According to Al-Jazeera, some survivors attest that Houthi forces controlled the camp at the time of the attack, and that the majority of those killed were rebel fighters.¹²¹ A preponderance of sources, however, claim that al-Mazraq still functioned as a camp for displaced persons, and that women and children comprised many of the 40 civilians killed and the 200 wounded in the assault.¹²² The operational manager for *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) in Yemen, Pablo Marco, confirmed that al-Mazraq residents have been living in harsh conditions since 2009, and that the escalation in violence only aggravated their desperate situation.¹²³ He called on “all parties to spare civilians from violence, respect the neutrality of medical facilities and staff, and allow unhindered access to medical assistance for the wounded.”¹²⁴

According to the World Food Programme (WFP), “food insecurity and malnutrition in Yemen are reaching critical emergency levels as one in three Yemenis struggle to access the food they need for their families, making Yemen one of the countries worst affected [sic] by hunger in the world.”¹²⁵ Given Yemen’s widespread poverty and food insecurity, refugee camps like al-Mazraq may serve as a family’s only means of survival. The targeted destruction of refugee and displaced persons camps not only kills



individuals, it also destroys food, water, and medical supplies, damaging the shelter upon which the most vulnerable populations rely.

2. Saada

On 18 April, one month after Saudi Arabia began its air campaign against the Houthis, the Saudi-led coalition made international headlines when it attacked an Oxfam storage facility in Saada, killing at least one innocent civilian. Oxfam, an international humanitarian aid organization, had established a warehouse in Saada to store relief and aid supplies that were then administered to local populations and refugee camps.¹²⁶ The facility was civilian-run and only contained aid supplies; it had no military affiliation and its destruction had no military value.¹²⁷ A Saada resident confirmed that, in addition to the warehouse itself, the areas surrounding the facility were largely commercial or residential. He had no knowledge of any military targets near the facility.¹²⁸ Although Houthi forces are very active in the province of Saada, the warehouse was not close enough to a legitimate military target for the attack to be in any way justified.¹²⁹

Oxfam's country director in Yemen, Grace Ommer, denounced the airstrike, maintaining that the warehouse "had no military value. . . it only contained humanitarian supplies associated with our previous work in Saada, bringing clean water to thousands of households."¹³⁰ He even related that Oxfam had previously informed Saudi Arabia and other coalition partners of the storage facility's location and function.¹³¹

3. Faj Attan, Sanaa

On 20 April, coalition warplanes targeted a suspected military compound in the heavily-populated Faj Attan district of Sanaa, Yemen's capital. Houthi forces seized the city in September 2014, and they have continued to hold the city despite frequent coalition attacks.¹³² By April 2015, Sanaa had suffered almost daily airstrikes for more than three weeks,¹³³ and the large-scale strike on Faj Attan came just two days after Saudi forces destroyed the Oxfam storage facility.

Some observers speculate that Saudi forces targeted the compound "over fears that Houthi fighters could use scud missiles at the base to target the kingdom."¹³⁴ Nevertheless, the strike caused a massive blast in a densely populated urban center, "flattening homes close to the site and shaking buildings as far away as the outskirts of the city."¹³⁵ Thousands of homes and cars were destroyed, streets were filled with debris and smoke, and civilians were forced to flee the area for their own safety.¹³⁶ More than 300 individuals were injured, and at least 46 civilians were killed, including diplomats and staff from nearby embassies that were affected by the explosion.¹³⁷ As one resident told the Associated Press, "it was like the doors of hell opened all of a sudden."¹³⁸

4 Sanaa Airport

As they worked to isolate Houthi forces in the capital, Saudi-led forces bombed the runway at the Sanaa airport on 28 April 2015.¹³⁹ According to Saudi officials, the strikes were intended to prevent an Iranian flight from landing in Sanaa, but accounts differ.¹⁴⁰ While a Saudi spokesman reported that coalition



forces bombed the airport after the Iranian plane refused to coordinate with orders, Iran's state news agency countered that the flight was carrying humanitarian aid to Yemen, and that pilots refused "illegal warnings."¹⁴¹ Meanwhile, Houthi-run television claimed the plane was commissioned to fly wounded Yemeni victims back to Iran for treatment.¹⁴²

Debate aside, the damage caused to the Sanaa airport has had consequences beyond deterring an Iranian flight. Missiles launched during the airstrike demolished the runway, a civilian aircraft, and a terminal building attached to the airport.¹⁴³ The destruction made it impossible for other planes carrying humanitarian and aid supplies to land in Sanaa, whose civilian population is in dire need of food, clean water, clothes, medical assistance, and other relief aid.¹⁴⁴ The ongoing air and naval blockade, "which chok[es] off imports of food and medicines to the country's 25 million people and leaving thousands of Yemeni nationals stranded abroad," has only exacerbated the situation.¹⁴⁵

5. Mokha

On 24 July 2015, four months into the Saudi air campaign against the Houthis, coalition forces launched an attack on the port city of Mokha, Yemen. Saudi-led warplanes dropped bombs upon the Mokha Steam Power Plant, located approximately 800 meters north of the nearest military base, which would have been the only justifiable target in the region.¹⁴⁶ The military base had previously been used as a defense base, but had little observed activity before the attack on Mokha.¹⁴⁷ According to a Human Rights Watch investigation, despite the absence of a Houthi stronghold at the plant, six bombs hit the plant's primary residential area where approximately 200 families lived.¹⁴⁸ Several residents had family visiting them to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, a holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan.¹⁴⁹ The seventh bomb demolished the water tank used for the compound, while the eighth and ninth bombs destroyed a nearby beach and intersection.¹⁵⁰ Eyewitnesses claim that all nine bombs were dropped in just a few minutes, and "appeared intended for the compounds," which housed employees and their families.¹⁵¹ The strikes killed 65 civilians, ten children among them.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights had previously revealed, "as of July 21, the fighting in Yemen had resulted in at least 1,693 civilian deaths, the majority from airstrikes."¹⁵² With no evidence that Mokha constituted a legitimate military target, some human rights and humanitarian organizations are concerned that the Saudi strike violated the laws of war.¹⁵³

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

In a few short decades, the Saudi armed forces have shifted from a consistent source of internal unrest to a tool through which an emerging generation of ruling family members can better project power over neighboring countries and demonstrate strength to potential enemies. The MODA has shifted as well, from a ministry that primarily processes arms purchases to a government body that oversees major external military operations. To the Saudi kings and princes that suppressed the coups of the 1950s, and even to the foreign officers that attempted to organize the first troops under Ibn Saud, this progress would seem remarkable.



Progress, however, has not yielded positive results. There is space for a well-managed Saudi military that competently protects its people and the wider Gulf Cooperation Council from external threats while reducing the need for heavy foreign military intervention in the Gulf. Yet the current Saudi armed forces demand greater and greater US and European involvement while exacerbating regional conflagrations. Yemen, already fractious and host to a resilient network of al-Qaeda fighters, will have little chance of reuniting if the aerial bombardment continues, thus empowering violent non-state actors that will further destabilize the region. The Saudi government has raised its army, and overseen this recent aggression, not for the protection of a nation, but for the advantage of a ruling elite. If the current conflict in Yemen is to exemplify the Saudi government's new, muscular foreign policy, external investments in a stabilizing Saudi military will prove ephemeral, and basic human rights will suffer.

To avoid these future repercussions, Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) calls on the Government of Saudi Arabia to decelerate the Yemeni crisis:

Cease attacking major ports and terminals that serve as a conduit for humanitarian supplies to Yemeni civilians;

Cease launching indiscriminate aerial attacks in densely-populated urban areas of Yemen;

Investigate and discipline the military officers and MODA officials that have authorized strikes on civilian or otherwise non-military targets, including the Oxfam storage facility;

Compensate the family members of Yemeni civilians that have perished as a result of Saudi air strikes;

Cease the use of cluster munitions within Yemen;

Commit to funding the reconstruction of Yemen's basic infrastructure, including hospitals and municipal facilities;

Fully comply with the Geneva Conventions, to which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a signatory;

Submit to an international investigation and review of the Saudi military's compliance with the Geneva Conventions and other relevant international humanitarian law, and accept the recommendations of this review.

To reform the MODA, ADHRB recommends that the Government of Saudi Arabia:

Reduce its reliance on foreign governments for training and equipping its military personnel;

Reduce its reliance on private military firms to execute basic training exercises and equipping functions;



End the budgetary autonomy of individual armed force branches;

Establish a transparent system for investigating and disciplining officers involved in the commission of human rights abuses;

Limit the number of ruling family members within the officer corps.

For the Government of the United States:

Halt all outstanding arms sales to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia;

Prohibit the future sale of cluster munitions to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia;

Suspend logistical support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen until such a time as the Saudi government takes formal and public steps to avoid civilian casualties in Yemen;

Formally condemn Saudi military attacks that fail to account for or prevent the loss of innocent civilian life;

Review and fully disclose the impact of US-manufactured munitions in the current Yemeni conflict;

Reduce USMTM personnel presence in Saudi Arabia by 50%.

For the Government of the United Kingdom:

Halt all outstanding arms sales to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia;

Reduce MODSAP personnel presence in Saudi Arabia by 50%;

Suspend support for the Royal Saudi Air Force until such a time as the UK has fully reviewed and disclosed the impact that UK-manufactured weapons and airplanes have had on civilian casualties in Yemen;

Formally condemn Saudi military attacks that fail to account for or prevent the loss of innocent civilian life.



VII. Notes

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