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**TITLE:**

**The Saudi Arabian Armed Services: The Dance in the Desert**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** The Saudi Arabian Military: The Dance in the Desert

**Author:** Major Julian Tsukano, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** The Saudi Arabian Armed Services (SAAS) are currently confronting unprecedented security challenges. The SAAS must secure the border region with the failing state in Yemen, prepare a crisis-response force for post-Assad Syria and western Iraq, tie counter-terrorism activities with the Jihadi rehabilitation program to counter DAISH, and increase capability of forces to counter the Iranian threat.

**Discussion:** The Saudi Ministry of Defense administers seven different services: the Royal Saudi Land Forces, the Royal Saudi Air Force, the Royal Saudi Navy, the Royal Saudi Air Defense, the Strategic Missile Force, the Saudi Royal Guard Regiment, and the Saudi Emergency Force. An eighth service, the Saudi Arabian National Guard is now a ministry, the Ministry of the Saudi Arabian National Guard. The SAAS require substantial improvement in order to face the diverse regional threats: Iran, the civil conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and domestic terrorism. The Saudi ground forces have not proven their ability to assure the kingdom's security. The SANG succeeded in expelling Iraqi forces from Saudi territory at Al-Khafji in 1991 only with significant US assistance. In 2010, SAAF elements conducted operations against Houthi Rebels in concert with Yemeni military forces with mixed results. In 2011, SANG units assisted the Bahraini government to restore civil order. The SAAS thus have limited operational experience and worse still, limited operational success. This study analyzes the SAAS in order to determine the actions necessary to meet the Kingdom's future security needs.

**Conclusion:** The SAAS must secure the border region with the failing state in Yemen, prepare a crisis-response force for post-Assad Syria and western Iraq, tie counter-terrorism activities with the Jihadi rehabilitation program to counter DAISH, and increase capability of forces to counter the Iranian threat. Taken together, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will be able to further the security and stability of the nation.

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## *Preface*

The research project was born out of a deployment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a military advisor to both the leadership of the Saudi Arabian Eastern Fleet Brigade Commander and the Saudi Arabian Naval Special Forces Battalion Commander. The countless strategic discussions with my fellow Marines in Al-Jubail, US Embassy diplomats and US Military Training Mission leadership provided the framework for this body of work. Key were countless observations, conversations, and the support of Col David Coggins, USMC, the staff and faculty of US Marine Corps Command and Staff College, and my fellow students who both supported and kept the fire going. The research conducted included the review of modern works on Arab security affairs, interviews with key leaders, and Middle-East experts on the region. Ultimately, I choose this subject to shed additional light on the most critical partner the US government has within the Middle East and provide new insight on the how the SAAF and SANG may address the regional security challenges it faces.

## Acronym list:

KSA:	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
SAAF:	Saudi Arabian Armed Forces
SAAS:	Saudi Arabian Armed Services
SANG:	Saudi Arabian National Guard
RSLF:	Royal Saudi Arabian Land Forces
RSNF:	Royal Saudi Arabian Naval Forces
RSAF:	Royal Saudi Arabian Air Forces
SRF:	Strategic Rocket Force
MENA:	Middle East and North Africa
MOI:	Ministry of Interior
MOD:	Ministry of Defense
AQAP:	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQAI:	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
SSM:	Surface-to-Surface Missiles
AWACS:	Airborne Warning and Control System
SNEP II:	Saudi Naval Expansion Phase II
OPM:	Office of Program Management
SANG:	Saudi Arabian National Guard
USMTM:	United States Military Training Mission
SMF:	Strategic Missile Force
RSADF:	Royal Saudi Air Defense Force
RSNMF:	Royal Saudi Naval Marine Force

RSSMDF: Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Defense Force

DAISH: Degrading name for Islamic State in the Levant and al-Sham

The recent takeover of the Government of Yemen by Houthis, the seizure of territory by DAISH (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), and the persistence of Iranian military threats form a constellation of security challenges to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The KSA must transform the Saudi Arabian Armed Services (SAAS) defense architecture to set the conditions for long-term security solutions, or become tied to undesirable larger scale military options. The SAAS must secure the border region with Yemen, prepare a crisis-response force to address DAISH, tie counterterrorism activities with the Saudi Rehabilitation Program (SRP) to counter DAISH, and better equip Saudi Arabian Armed Forces (SAAF) forces to counter the Iranian military. The reform of the SAAS must fit within a larger whole of government approach and support the Saudi diplomatic, informational, economic forms of power.

This paper review of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) and Saudi Arabian Armed Forces (SAAF) understand the service dynamics within the Saudi Arabian security architecture. Following the review, an analysis of the Yemen, DAISH, Iran, and domestic foreign fighter threats provide the foundation for recommended limited military options to mitigate Saudi security threats.

### **“Keeping the King the King”**

**-Colonel David Coggins, USMC<sup>1</sup>**

**Saudi Arabian National Guard**

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<sup>1</sup> Colonel David Coggins (USMTM Chief of Staff), interview by Major Julian Tsukano, December 24, 2014

The oldest armed service within the KSA is the SANG and is critical to both the dynamics of the organization and how it meets the security challenges within the KSA. In the era of consolidation from 1902-1920s, Ibn Saud used the Ikwhan, (the brothers) to exert control and maintain stability to quell dissent against the newly formed kingdom. The lack of uniforms in the era of consolidation, gave the name “the White Army” as the Ikwhan are generally known.

The Ikwhan originated from the band of fighters that allied with Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, as he retook the family palace lost to the Rashidi family. The allied fighters then became incorporated into the defense of Ibn Saud and formed the core of the Saudi Arabian National Guard. The Bedouin of the new kingdom were esteemed for their warrior traditions, but lacked discipline to counter the diminishing though potent presence of the Ottomans in the Southern Arabian Peninsula, varied resistance to Ibn Saud’s rule, the presence of colonial powers in the region, and a strengthening Iraq in the north. In 1929, a segment of the Ikwhan forces separated, forcing Ibn Saud to give chase, culminating in a significant battle known as the Battle of Sabilla. The Ikwhan have been loyal ever since and the King continues to maintain direct influence on Saudi Arabia’s security matters. The strategic defense policy flows directly from the King and Commander-in-Chief, Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud to the Minister of Defense, Mohammad bin Salman al-Saud. Leadership of the SAAF and the SANG remain under tight control within the Al Saud family.

Nearly 20 years after formal KSA independence in 1932, the Ikwhan were formally reorganized as the SANG in 1956. The SANG’s transformation from a disorganized tribal force to a regional military power, began with the arrival of advisors

and the creation of the United States Military Training Mission (USMTM) in 1953 and continues today through the Office of Program Management-SANG (OPM-SANG), founded in 1973.

The SANG was moved from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to the Ministry of the National Guard (MONG), its own ministry, in 2013 with Prince Mutaib bin Abdulla bin Abdulaaziz al-Saud as Minister. The King continues to place family members into key positions throughout the government, and the establishment of MONG is no different. The SANG forces are organized into eight combat brigades, four independent light infantry battalions, a military police battalion, 24 independent Al-Fawj (tribal) battalions, the King Khaled Military College, and a ceremonial Calvary unit. SANG forces are estimated to total over 100,000 active and reserve soldiers.<sup>2</sup> SANG bases are generally located near the capital, Riyadh, with one in Jeddah on the west coast and one in Dammam on the east coast. Keeping the SANG bases in and around Riyadh serves as the last line of defense for the King against internal strife.<sup>3</sup>

The SANG, as is the case with the rest of the SAAS, maintains a very large social services network of medical clinics and hospitals. In contrast to the SAAF, the Saudi National Guard's social services extend only to the various tribes that comprise the SANG, regardless of the presence of units and are generally seen as "way to retain the favor of various tribes."<sup>4</sup> SANG connection to the tribes serves as a method to extend influence and service tribes that have been critical to the stability of the KSA. In

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<sup>2</sup>Janes International Defense, *Saudi Arabia Special Forces*, April 22, 2014, <https://janes-ihsc.com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=Reference&ItemId=+++1308779>

<sup>3</sup> Ambassador James Smith (former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia), interview by Major Julian Tsukano, December 16, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ambassador James Smith, December 16, 2014.

addition, the SANG's social services are "routinely understood to be of the very best quality and are well known in their quality especially within the medical field."<sup>5</sup>

The Saudi National Guard is a staple of Saudi Arabian national security architecture and its Leaders of the SANG have generally become Prime Ministers and Kings of the KSA. The SANG ultimately comprise the regime protection element within the KSA and is the counterbalance to SAAF.<sup>6</sup>

### **Saudi Arabian Armed Services**

The SAAF comprise the remainder of the armed forces within the KSA and fall under the MOD. The SAAF can trace its lineage to the Ikwhan much like the SANG; however 1923 is the birth of the first service, the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF). The creation of the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) in 1925, the Royal Saudi Navy Forces (RSNF) in 1960, the Royal Saudi Air Defense Force (RSADF) in 1970, and the Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Force (RSSMF) in 1987 followed. The establishment of USMTM in 1953 significantly accelerated the modernization and professionalism of the SAAF with updates to equipment, ordnance, and tactics.

The SAAF primarily serve to defend the KSA against external threats and are not as well trained and equipped as the SANG. The SAAF modernized to meet emerging threats from Iran and Iraq. The lead service within the SAAF is the Royal Saudi Land Force (RSLF) is the greatest force presence throughout the KSA and a limited ability to deploy beyond the borders of the KSA. Active and Reserve members of the RSLF number two hundred and twenty five thousand. The RSLF is a capable, but less than the

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Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia*. (Viking Penguin, 2009), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom*, 42.

SANG. Keeping the SANG better equipped is considered a hedge against internal security threats and maintain the balance of power well within the Royal family.

The RSAF is understood to be the premier Arab Air Force throughout the Middle East. The RSAF defends the KSA against airborne threats from major bases in the western city of Jeddah and in the eastern city of Khobar. Numbering just over twenty five thousand personnel, the RSAF uses a mix of US, UK, and French aircraft to defend the KSA. The Saudi Air Force's social services network is significant with many hospitals, schools, family housing, to service members and their extended family throughout the KSA. Unlike the SANG, the Saudi Air Force's social services are not particularly tied to certain tribes and are generally located near major military installations. The Saudi Air Force's capability and capacity are a matter of prioritization, representing the myriad of security threats, and the influence of the Commander-in-Chief.

The RSNF serves to defend the waterways against seaborne threats in two key areas, the Red Sea in the west and the Persian Gulf in the east. The RSNF has generally lagged behind the RSAF and RSLF in terms of modernization. With a force of about thirty thousand, the RSNF counter balances the larger Iranian naval threat in the region and keeps petroleum exports uninterrupted.

There is no joint special operations command within the SAAF, however Special Operations Forces do exist. Currently, SOF is considerably advanced after continued work with US, UK, and French SOF training, advising, and assistance. The RSLF, RSNF, and the SANG all retain a SOF force of varying degrees of capacity.

The KSAs other forces are the RSADF and RSSMF, which serve unique positions within the KSA. The RSADF operates ground based air defense radars and surface-to -

surface missiles that would potentially intercept and defeat inbound aircraft or ballistic objects. The RSSMF operates Chinese made short, medium, and long-range ballistic missiles, which deliver conventional warheads, but can also be quickly adapted to a nuclear capability. Together the RSADF and the RSSMF have an estimated twenty-five to thirty thousand troops. The forces within the MOD and MOI present the KSA most concentrated effort to deter and defeat terrorist threats from Yemen, Iranian military influence in the Persian Gulf, and domestic terrorism within the KSA.

### **“Keeping the Kingdom the Kingdom”**

**-Col David Coggins<sup>7</sup>**

#### **Yemen**

Yemen’s current slide into civil conflict caps a tumultuous era of descent, with Ottoman, Communist, and Colonial influences. The addition of religious differences and tribal factions warring over territorial claims and power has only added to the chaos inside Yemen. The fracturing of Yemen, entrenchment of al-Qaeda, capitulation of the US supported government, Iranian influence, and the Houthi capture of Sana’a have only added to Yemen’s longstanding woes.

Saudi Arabia’s recent security challenges began with the uprising of Houthi Rebels, who comprise a religious sect along the Yemeni-Saudi Arabian mountainous border region. Originally from the Saada region in northern Yemen, the Houthis uprising came out of a 2004 “effort to win greater autonomy for their heartland of Saada province

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<sup>7</sup> Coggins, interview, December 24, 2014.

and also to protect Zaidi religious and cultural traditions.”<sup>8</sup> The Houthi movement gained significant traction as the Houthis, whom comprise nearly one third of the Yemeni population and whom are a subset of Zaydi religion, were backed by Iran.

In 2009 Houthi rebels crossed the border of the KSA, captured villages in the mountainous terrain, and Yemeni government border military positions, and killed one Saudi soldier and wounded 11. The KSA responded with an initial deployment of land (Army, Marines, Special Forces) forces to the southern provincial city of Jizan. The SAAF that launched both a ground and air campaign to eject Houthi elements and to disrupt Houthi rebel camps just across the border. The Saudis ejected the Houthi forces from their territory but at a significant cost. Because Iran apparent backs the Houthis, the KSA is determined to limit Houthi influence on their border. Recently, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s senior advisor remarked that Iran “supports the rightful fight”<sup>9</sup> of the Houthi rebels. Houthi elements recently captured the capital of Saana in 2014 and have effectively completed a coup d’état, 20 January 2015. The KSA has conducted an air and limited ground campaign to push back Houthi elements from power and as of 28 April 2015 have succeeded in preventing the fall of the port of Aden.

In order to deter further incursions, the KSA employs a layered defense. The primary layer is the Ministry of Interior’s Border Force which it defends against illegal border crossings, smuggling, and incursions within its territory. The Ministry of Defense’s SAAF reinforces the MOI, with a robust, multi-service effort against most

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<sup>8</sup>BBC News, “Yemen crises: Who is fighting whom,” *BBCNews.com*, March 26, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>

<sup>9</sup>Al Jazeera, “Fighting greets arrival of Yemen’s new PM,” *Aljazeera.com*, October 19, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/10/yemen-houthi-rebels-storm-governor-house-2014101992733886793.html>

conventional threats along the border region. The KSA has nearly completed a second layer to defend the border, the construction of a 900-mile border fence. The border fence will use electronic surveillance and border personnel to prevent illegal crossings into the KSA. The tumultuous border region with Yemen is considerably more difficult to secure with the mountainous terrain and ancient smuggling routes to contend with. The border fence, although a large step in the right direction, may require much more in additional military measures to defeat extremists.

### **DAISH**

As violence began to rage in the Syrian Arab Republic, out of the burgeoning uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, fractured elements of rebel groups and foreign fighters began to carve out territory in the chaos. Syrian Army hold the pro-Assad south, the Free-Syrian Army hold small territory in the north west, and DAISH holds a majority of the Sunni territory. The uprising centered heavily along Sunni Syrian majority and Shia backed Alawite forces, with a 2012 United Nations report describing the violence as “overtly ethnic.”<sup>10</sup>

The influx of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq have bolstered organizations like DAISH, however those returning fighters having been further radicalized by the extreme interpretations of Islam, bring significant threats within the KSA. DAISH is a Sunni Islam insurgency that seeks the return of the Islamic Caliphate and the creation of a worldwide Islamic state. Radicalized Saudi citizens to include Osama bin Laden

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<sup>10</sup> United Nations. In latest update, UN independent panel finds more breaches of human rights law by parties to Syrian conflict. New York, NY, December 20, 2012, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43820#.VL7u5E3u3cs>

presented significant threats after returning from the Soviet-Afghan conflict to carry out attacks within the KSA and the world.

In order to meet the returning fighter threat, the KSA has enacted, but loosely enforced, a ban on travel to Syria and Iraq, funding to foreign groups, and the processing of returning fighters through Saudi Arabia's Rehabilitation Program. The KSA efforts have been met with mixed results, as foreign fighters are able to slip into the ungoverned spaces from loosely managed border area along Turkey without knowledge of the KSA authorities. Saudi foreign fighters typically fly from Saudi Arabia into Turkey and then transit over land to the Turkey/Syrian border.

The official support from the KSA evolved in February 2014 with the transition of the "Syrian covert-action portfolio, which was then transferred to Saudi Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef"<sup>11</sup> from the head of the KSA intelligence services. Previously, Saudi efforts were focused on covert transfer of armament and funding to rebel groups fighting against the Assad regime. The transfer was a signaling of the growth of the covert-action program to a large-scale overt activity.

The KSA has reacted to both the humanitarian situation in the form of medical supplies, medical personnel, and funds to Islamic charities that seek to aid the displaced persons in affected areas. In addition, the KSA has participated in air strikes against DAISH as part of a broader coalition and supporting strikes through basing of materiel, aircraft, and over-flight of the KSA.

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<sup>11</sup> Steve Clemons, "Thank God for the Saudis': ISIS, Iraq, and the Lessons of Blowback," *TheAtlantic.com*, June 23, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-saudi-arabia-iraq-syria-bandar/373181/>

The ability for the KSA to take overt action within Iraq has been significantly limited due to Iranian influences with the Shia led Iraqi government. The KSA has “not taken part in air strikes over Iraq”<sup>12</sup> due to a caveat and is currently in limited contact with Sunni tribal leaders in Al-Anbar<sup>13</sup>. The Iraqi government will not permit Saudi airstrikes over Iraqi territory, Saudi Arabia has honored the restriction and caveated its forces from participating in airstrikes over Iraqi territory. It is unknown what role if any the KSA may have in either defeating DAISH or providing non-humanitarian assistance in Iraq.

Saudi Arabia’s position as a member of the coalition against DAISH has been instrumental. An early advocate for action in Syria, the KSA has energized the support of fellow GCC nations against ISIS, especially in the form of air strikes. Saudi Arabia’s support in the form of airstrikes, training of anti-Assad Sunni fighters, basing, and diplomacy, though instrumental, has not destroyed DAISH in Syria and Iraq or alleviated the humanitarian situation.

## **Iran**

The KSA and Iran have been locked in a tumultuous battle of ideals since the 1979 Iranian Revolution and at times in proxy wars over influence throughout the MENA. The Saudis regard the Islamic Republic of Iran as the heir to the Persian imperial expansionism and of Shia Islam throughout the world. Shia Muslims believe not only that Ali, Mohammad’s assistant, son-in-law, and cousin should have succeeded him as leader of the Muslim community, but through him and his successors in a manor the Sunnis consider unacceptable. Under the Shah, whom had been a key KSA ally but

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<sup>12</sup> Ambassador Smith, interview, December 16, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Ambassador Smith, interview, December 16, 2014.

the Iranian Revolution of 1979 forced the KSA to formulate plans for a top tier Arab military.

The alignments of the KSA with the UK and US defense industries to arm the SAAS were key to positioning the KSA for future crises. The Saudis became involved in the so-called Tanker War in 1984, when a KSA F-15 Eagle shot down two Iranian F-4 Phantoms that had crossed the “Fahd Line.” The Iraqi and Iranian “Tanker War” included tit-for-tat actions of surface combatants and aircraft that saw the employment of missiles, aircraft, and mines.<sup>14</sup> The “Tanker War” was a mostly Iraqi and Iranian conflict that was a continuation of the earlier Iran and Iraq war. The arrival of KSA operated AWACS aircraft in the late 1980s gave the KSA excellent early warning capability. The Iranians responded with increased support for the Hezbollah terrorist organization and acquisition of anti-ship silkworm missiles that could reach tankers in the Arabian Gulf. In the last two decades, Iranian activity has also focused on MENA governments in an attempt to encircle the KSA. Specifically, Iran has supported the overthrow of the government in Yemen, Shia uprisings in the KSA, uprisings in Bahrain, Syria’s President Assad, and Iraq’s Shia dominated government.

The KSA has not forgotten the intercepted 2011 assassination attempt on the Saudi Ambassador to the US in Washington DC. An effort that was clearly coordinated from the highest levels of the Iranian government. General James Mattis, who as former Commander CENTCOM, derided the US response as "Frankly, I’m not sure why, again,

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<sup>14</sup> Ronald O’Rourke, “The Tanker War,” *Proceedings, US Naval Institute* Vol 114/115 (1988) <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1988-05/tanker-war>

they haven't been held to account."<sup>15</sup> The security challenges have only escalated with Iranian nuclear ambitions.

Concerns regarding the KSA's ballistic missile program within the Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Force (RSSMF) raise questions regarding what the Saudi Arabia's intent with Chinese built East-West and TAEDONG 2 missiles are really for. The continued problems between the two nations have not seen any relief after decades of rising tensions.

### **Saudi Arabian Rehabilitation Program**

Ever since the siege of the Grand Mosque on 20 November 1979 by Juhayman Al-Otaybi and his band of jihadist fighters, the KSA has dealt with the small but vocal and at times violent forms of domestic extremism. The constant activities of the Sunni Islamic extremism were born out of the state-sponsored jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980's where thousands of young Saudis flowed to the fight against the *Kafir* (infidel). The flow of fighters has not ended, with Saudis continuing to exit the KSA to support fighting in Syria, Iraq or in Yemen. Unfortunately, the fighters hardened by "battlefield ideology" have returned to the KSA or pursued their dysfunctional view of Islam where possible.

In response, the KSA has instituted a program for rehabilitating returning foreign fighters where returning fighters volunteered by families or forced by the government attend a lengthy multi-step program. The rehabilitation program was initiated due to the events of September 11, 2001 and the constant impact of domestic terrorism throughout

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<sup>15</sup>Josh Gerstein, "Mattis: U.S. flubbed response to Iranian bombing attempt," July 23, 2013, *Politico.com*, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/under-the-radar/2013/07/mattis-us-flubbed-response-to-iran-bomb-attempt-168830.html>

the KSA. The rehabilitation program is based on the severity of extremism and is coded along low, medium, and high risk for terrorism<sup>16</sup> and is administered through the MOI and assistance from the SANG. According to the KSA the recidivism rate is about 12% with the program and incredibly former extremists can be offered jobs, new cars, and even a wife in exchange for their loyalty. The rehabilitation program includes clarification of Koranic principles and job training for those that adhere to the program, but for those who do not change long periods of incarceration await.

The rehabilitation program is challenged by the current flow of Saudi's whom are returning from battlefields in Syria and elsewhere, especially those Saudis whom have joined DAISH, where the extremism is beyond what even Al-Qaeda finds acceptable. The rehabilitation program has experienced recent high-profile failures and is beginning to show weakness in dealing with the hardened DAISH fighters whom present the greatest danger.

Iran presents likely the greatest and most dangerous threat to the KSA. The recent capture by Houthi Rebels, the capital of Yemen has only reinforced the threat of encirclement and destabilization of Al-Saud families grip on power within the KSA. In order to dilute Iranian influences the KSA employs; a capable SANG and SAAF.

The KSA has embarked on an ambitious program of military reform to check Iranian influences by first engaging in the modernization of the SANG and the SAAF. The KSA has embarked on likely the most expensive modernization effort in history, with an estimated \$67 billion in defense spending "leapfrogged the UK, Japan and France

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<sup>16</sup> Ambassador Smith, interview, December 16, 2014.

in budget terms.”<sup>17</sup> Recent spending has mostly centered on modernization of current weapon programs, not necessarily new specific programs, like the AWACS modernization for the RSAF, the procurement of upgraded TOW 2B missiles for the Land Forces, and most importantly the possible approval of the Saudi Naval Expansion Program II (SNEP II). The SNEP II will likely be the most physical upgrade to the RSNF, where a \$2.5 billion naval upgrade of US built AEGIS cruiser, destroyers, and the introduction of the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS). If implemented, the SNEP II will likely mean the greatest leap in defensive capability to the SAAF since the introduction of the F-15 fighters and AWACS in the late 1970s.

Iran’s nuclear weapon ambitions are not lost on the KSA. In an effort to check Iranian nuclear capabilities, the KSA has expanded the RSSMF, which has no US military advisors. The possession of CSS-2 Surface-to-Surface Missiles (SSM) by the RSSMF is seen as a deterrent against any potential enemies, especially Iran. The recent planned upgrades to the SSMs from Ukraine, in which the US raised objections, only fuel speculation that the SSMs will continue to a pivotal component to KSA effort to deter Iran.

## **Recommendations**

### **The Crises Response Force**

To counter the current threats, the KSA requires the implementation of new strategies to address security challenges that present the most significant threats to the Kingdom. There are the implementation of a crises response force, increasing border

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<sup>17</sup> Graeme Baker, “Saudis lead Middle East military spending.” *Al-Jazeera.com*, 15 April 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/04/saudi-leads-middle-east-military-spending-201441411547583667.html>

security to manage the growing militant threat in Yemen, tying counter-terrorism activities with the Rehabilitation Program, and better equip forces to meet the Iranian threat.

After nearly 60 years of US, UK, Pakistani, and Chinese support for the SAAF in the form of military advisors and defense related equipment; the KSA has become one of the most advanced military forces within the MENA. Much more can be done by the SAAF to address the security challenges that afflict the KSA, as the rise in defense budgets of over 20% attest. The SAAF must alter the defense policy from one of protection of the borders and limited air power projection to the creation of a multi-service civil-military “crisis response force” capable of addressing both security and humanitarian concerns in such areas as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. President Barak Obama’s statement that “I’m convinced that the United States should not get dragged back into another prolonged ground war in the Middle East”<sup>18</sup> is a shift from intervention of Afghanistan and Iraq to limited actions mostly of air campaigns and Special Forces personnel. US current foreign policy is such, that the use of conventional ground forces in a land campaign is highly unlikely. The US also seeks greater involvement from long-time partners in the MENA region.

The creation of a SAAF crisis response force will provide capabilities and capacity to allow the most influential Arab state to participate in crises that afflict the Middle East and allow for intervention instead of waiting for US action. The crisis response force would curtail Saudi citizens support of extremists groups by directly

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Baker, “Obama’s Dual View of War Power Seeks Limits and Leeway,” NYTIMES.com, February 11, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/12/us/obama-war-authorization-congress.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/12/us/obama-war-authorization-congress.html?_r=0)

responding to the ‘Muslims in distress’ grievance giving the KSA the ability to alleviate humanitarian crises, and assist in reform of SAAF. The potential foreign fighters will be dissuaded from entering the conflict zones as now there is an official government response.

The creation of a standing “crises response” headquarters will allow the SAAF to manage the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, education, and facilities (DOTMLPF) of the unit. With a mix of the necessary security force, combat engineering, internal logistics, aviation transportation assets, and naval transportation assets, the SAAF contribution will be complete. The civilian component, contributing the majority of personnel within the force, will be KSA humanitarian organizations, to include medical, life sustaining logistics, religious affairs, and the range of displaced persons relief requirements. A significant undertaking for any nation, but for the KSA a “crises response force” of the suggested capabilities and capacity could be scaled according to the size and depth of the crises both foreign and domestic.

The crises response force would permit the KSA to do officially, what many foreign fighters say they do by joining an insurgent ground like DAISH. A recent report on why foreign fighters have entered Syria conclude that the “individual obligation to help a Muslim community that is under attack, which has constituted the central narrative of Islamist extremism.”<sup>19</sup> The devoted will be afforded an opportunity to assist Muslim communities and the vast educated youth populations of KSA and GCC in particular, provide will ample sources of humanitarians. The vast youth population of the KSA

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Barrett. *Foreign Fighters in Syria*. New York, New York: Soufan Group, 2013. <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>

desire to intervention and as such the grievance must be addressed.

The MENA has been under conflict-originated duress for the last century and beyond, the migration of displaced persons has strained the resources of even the most open of Middle East states. In particular are the recently enacted restrictions in which Lebanon has imposed “visa-like requirements in an apparent effort to curb inflows of refugees fleeing Syria’s civil war in massive numbers.”<sup>20</sup> The displaced persons camps have become breeding grounds for disease, death, and most dangerously fertile recruiting grounds for extremists groups for recruits seeking to leave the squalor behind them.

A recent UNHCR reported that “teenage boys are recruited as soldiers to fight in the conflict,”<sup>21</sup> in addition, “the U.N. is almost powerless to stop suspected child soldiers because refugees have a right to return to their own country.”<sup>22</sup> The situation within refugee camps continues to worsen and may destabilize refugee laden Middle East governments, like Jordan, which has a critical water shortage.<sup>23</sup> The dire situation is a perfect mission for the “crises response force,” where Saudi led forces could alleviate the human suffering.

In order to make a crises response force possible the SAAF additionally needs to reform its C2 command structure. The immediate reform that would make a “crises response force” possible is in the C2 command structure.

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<sup>20</sup> Adam Taylor, “Saudi Arabia says 12 percent of its ‘rehabilitated’ terrorists have returned to terror,” WashingtonPost.com, 28 November 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/11/28/saudi-arabia-says-12-percent-of-its-rehabilitated-terrorists-have-returned-to-terror/>

<sup>21</sup> Tom Miles, “Audit of Syria refugees finds organized crime and child soldiers,” Reuters.com, August 5, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/05/us-syria-crisis-refugees-idUSBRE9740V120130805>

<sup>22</sup> Miles, “Audit of Syria.”

<sup>23</sup> “The Water Shortage,” *Kingdom of Jordan Official Information Ministry*, [http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/geo\\_env4.html](http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/geo_env4.html)

The C2 structure of the SAAF is in need of significant change from the “Area Command” model to the more modern Joint Force Component Command (JFCC) organizational structure, with a Joint Forces Land Forces Component Commander (JFLCC), Joint Forces Maritime Component Commander (JFMCC), and a Joint Forces Air Component Commander (JFACC) all under the control of the JFCC. The SAAF has operated under the Area Command model, an import from the US continental defense model since the mid 1960s. The SAAF has six area Commands and they are: the Eastern Area Command at Dhahran, the Northern Area Command at Hafr al-Batin, the Northwest Area Command at Tabuk, the Southern Area Command at Khamis Mushayt, the al-Ta'if Command, and the Western Area Command at Jeddah.

The Area Command model changed in the US and has since been replaced by Northern Command as part of the Unified Command Structure the Department of Defense currently employs, where a single Commander controls resources. The KSA has not evolved from the Area Command model and problems plague the SAAF's ability to respond to crises as a result. In 2009, flash floods struck the coastal city of Jeddah in southwestern Saudi Arabia. The Western Area Command was overwhelmed and unable to coordinate resources.<sup>24</sup> Making matters worse, nearby heavy equipment, aid, and logistics were “owned” by other Area Commands and the confusing SAAF bureaucracy slowed allocation of needed resources. A single Commander with control of resources and the ability to allocate as the crises demands would not have solved the problems, but would have improved the official government response. In subsequent flooding, the

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<sup>24</sup> Rob L. Wagner, “After The Flood: Rising Saudi Anger Getting Response,” MidEastPosts.com, January 29, 2011, <http://mideastposts.com/middle-east-politics-analysis/middle-east-government-analysis/after-the-flood-rising-saudi-anger-getting-response/>

official government response though improved, lacks the single coordinating body, as a JFCC organizational structure would provide. The establishment of the JFCC structure with subordinate component commanders would enhance the responsiveness of the SAAF and support the establishment of the “crises response force.”

### **Border Reinforcement**

The ongoing crises in Yemen threaten to descend into chaos similar to the failed state in Somalia. Official KSA activities have included limited operations that either served to eject incursions into Saudi territory or support of the former regime forces via monetary and military equipment support, resulting in a de-facto “containment policy.”<sup>25</sup> The KSA must shift from the “containment” policy and implement plans for a policy that centers on intervention vice containment.

In order to reduce the build-up of either AQAP or Houthi fighters, the KSA must target in Yemen in a sustained, coordinated, and deliberate effort. Continued military containment will only result in the further growth of safe havens for destabilizing forces and will overwhelm the SAAFs ability to respond effectively. The KSA will need to push back Houthi forces and reduce their presence to a manageable level that will enable a political dialogue.

Somalia serves as example of what can happen when ungoverned areas are allowed to serve as breeding grounds for extremists groups. The rise of Al-Shabab in the chaos of Somalia allowed the group to execute significant terrorist actions in neighboring Kenya. The 2013 Westgate Mall attack that resulted in the fatalities of over 62 civilians and over 120 injured are one of countless that has occurred since the group split from Al-

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Law, “Saudi security woes,” *MiddleEastMonitor.com*, October 3, 2014, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/14496-saudi-security-woes>

Qaeda.<sup>26</sup> US military targeting of Al-Shabab with raids and targeted strikes in Somalia has decreased the terror groups effectiveness, although does not solve the long-term political solution necessary, does reduce the ability for Al-Shabab to mount large scale attacks.<sup>27</sup> A similar strategy of raids and targeted killings by the KSA against the numerous terror groups in Yemen will provide an effective method of reducing the large scale attack similar to the 2013 Westgate Mall.

Risks to such a strategy does present unique challenges, principally the backlash from Saudi ideological sympathizers within the KSA. In the event raids evolve to a protracted ground campaign, the KSA may face challenges to Saudi rule in the form of uprisings amongst the large resettled Yemeni population. If Yemeni nationalists were able to align with the al-wahhabi tribe or Salafists and gain domestic support, the threat to Al-Saud rule may force a retreat from the “active defense” strategy.

The KSA can mitigate internal dissention by bringing the al-wahhabi tribe and Salafists into the decision making process, which is not without precedent. In the aftermath of the Grand Mosque seizure by extremists in 1979, the domestic Islamic leadership issued fatwas in support of armed intervention by the SAAF. More recently, the issuing of fatwas by Saudi Islamic leadership against DAISH and for the support of armed intervention only reinforces how the KSA can gain domestic support for an “active defense” strategy.

In order to prevent targeted killings or raids from turning into protracted ground

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Howden, “Terror in Westgate mall: the full story of the attacks that devastated Kenya,” *TheGuardian.com*, 4 October, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2013/oct/04/westgate-mall-attacks-kenya-terror>

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Masters, “Targeted Killings,” *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog) May 23, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/counterterrorism/targeted-killings/p9627>

campaigns, the use of Saudi Special Operations Forces (SOF) would be key. The KSA maintains well-trained, equipped, and led SOF with an operational history, that most recently includes involvement in the Houthi campaign in 2009. In addition, Saudi Arabian SOF has maintained working relationships with US SOF in the form Joint Combined Enhanced Training (JCET) events and numerous exercises including EAGER LION, is a multi-national exercises hosted by the Jordanian Armed Forces and US Armed Forces that seeks improve interoperability.

If done correctly then the KSA can mitigate the domestic threat by bringing the domestic and international Islamic leadership into the decision making process early. Leadership within Sunni Islam is needed to align the Sunnis towards defeating DAISH. The strategy of “containment” will not be as effective as a interventionist strategy in the long run and will provide both time and space until a viable political solution can be reached.

### **Counter-terrorism and the SRP**

The SRP is unable to currently address those foreign fighters that are unwilling to return to enter the rehabilitation program. Clandestine support to the Saudi Rehabilitation Program (SRP) of unconventional Saudi SOF by targeting the removal of Saudi foreign fighters off the battlefield, using covert US assistance, will assist in the kill or capture of Saudi fighters and will starve DAISH of a critical source of manning. Starving DAISH of personnel support will further degrade the organization, and help set the conditions for the destruction of DAISH.

Official Saudi results credit the SRP with an estimated 12% recidivism rate.<sup>28</sup> Though relatively successful, the SRP is unable to force Saudi foreign fighters whom have refused to return to Saudi Arabia. The 12% who return to extremism, create a dangerous situation where by there is no mechanism to remove the Saudi foreign fighter off the battlefield. The majority of the estimated 2500 Saudi citizens are known to have crossed into Syria or Iraq to support DAISH and only return after becoming disillusioned, injured, and or tired of the fighting. The remaining Saudi citizens that do not return are normally hardened veterans of the Syrian conflict and have radicalized well beyond the average returning Saudi foreign fighter.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike foreign fighters from Tunisia, most of whom are combat soldiers, Saudi foreign fighters normally “take important positions on the ground as clerics or leaders.”<sup>30</sup> They have a history of organizing, leading, and planning high profile attacks against Western interests. The Saudi foreign fighters in Syria appear to be no different. The threats posed by the Saudi fighters that do not return to enter the SRP are further radicalization and attacks in the style of the Paris, France January 2015 shootings. Closing the gap is key to western and MENA security and will serve to assist the KSA by reducing one of the largest sources of DAISH foreign fighters in the world by force or the threat of force.

Overt targeting action of Saudi security forces of Saudi foreign fighters

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor, “terrorists have returned to terror,” 28 November 2014,

<sup>29</sup> Richard Barrett. *Foreign Fighters in Syria*. New York, New York: Soufan Group, 2013. <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Anthony Zelin, *The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria*. West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-saudi-foreign-fighter-presence-in-syria>

throughout Turkey would go far to deter Saudi citizens from joining DAISH. Most Saudis enter Syria through a few well known entry points. At Turkish border towns, Saudi foreign fighters are then smuggled through routes into Syria. The flagrant smuggling is openly operated and little effort is made by the Turkish Government to interfere. According to Fehim Tastekin, “armies of smugglers”<sup>31</sup> routinely smuggle personnel and logistics to the various militant groups in Syria.

The unfettered access by DAISH and others to a foreign fighter supply can be a target by direct bi-lateral intervention by both Saudi and Turkish security forces cooperation. With Saudi assistance, Turkish forces could apprehend and immediately turnover Saudi citizens whom are in the final stages of preparation before crossing the border. Each apprehension will then be advertised through social media networks further enhancing the IO effects of SRP repatriation effort. Any effort to capture or kill Saudi foreign fighters on Turkish territory could require both the approval and coordination of the Turkish Government. Once approved, effort to forcibly return Saudi citizens to enter the SRP can begin. The ongoing coalition air strikes, the kill or capture policy will significantly reduce the number of Saudi foreign fighters in Syria. Starved of a stream of Saudi foreign fighters, DAISH will be degraded and subsequently destroyed.

## **Iran and SNEP II**

As Iran has steadily exported terrorism, continuously challenged the status quo in the Persian Gulf, and sought to acquire nuclear weapons, the KSA must respond with a comprehensive upgrade of the SAAF. The greatest upgrade will be the implementation

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<sup>31</sup> Fehim Tastekin, “Turkey’s Syria borders an open door for smugglers,”al-monitor.com, April 30, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/turkey-syria-borders-smuggling-guns-conflict-kurds-pkk-isis.html#>

of the Saudi Naval Expansion Program (Phase) II (SNEP II). The approval of SNEP II will serve as the single greatest leap in capability and capacity for the RSNF. Through the procurement of Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), AEGIS integrated radar systems, F-15 Strike Eagle upgrades, facility improvements, and modern destroyer naval ships, the SNEP II will be a significant leap in meeting the Iranian threat.

The nearly \$20.5 billion program will enable the RSNF to not only meet the Iranian naval threat, but possibly swing the balance into the favor of the KSA, by way of integration with US naval platforms like the AEGIS systems. In addition, the KSA will be able to leave behind aging 1960's and 1980's era platforms for new and highly capable systems.

Iran's recent naval threats include the deployment of Kilo-Class submarines acquired from 1992-1996. Though no match for US submarines in open water, the Iranian submarines can exploit the highly trafficked Persian Gulf to their advantage, by hiding amongst the commercial traffic transiting through the Straits of Hormuz. Perhaps the greatest threat rests from the Ghadir and Nahang Class midget submarines that are able to lay mines and launch torpedoes from shallow depths.

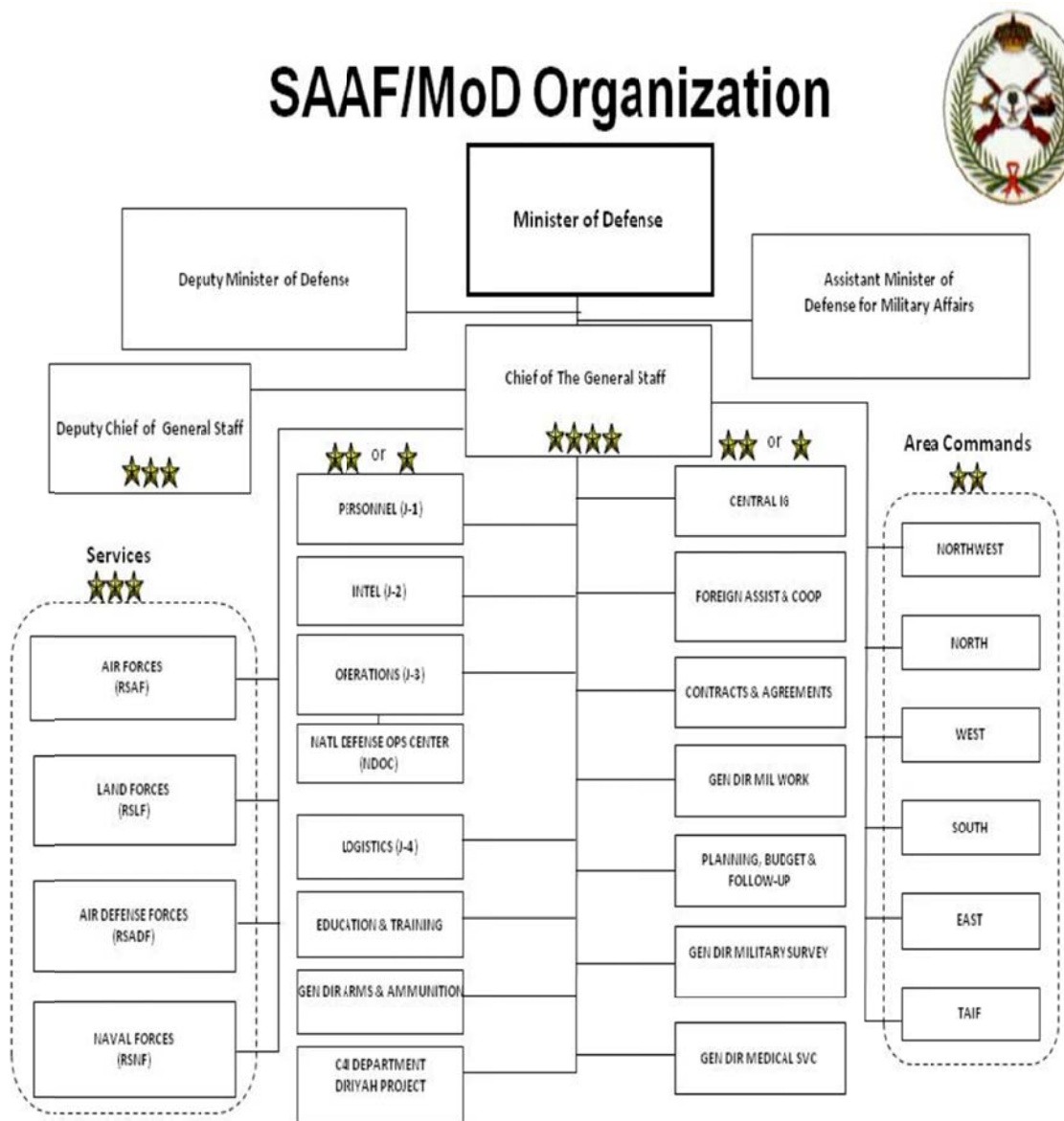
The submarine threat posed by Iran is just one of a series of threats that can be met and defeated by naval platforms and weapon systems to be acquired in SNEP II. The naval threat posed by Iran, is but just one of a myriad of threats, however the naval balance within the Persian Gulf can be met and challenged through SNEP II.

## **Conclusion**

The complex security threats that Saudi Arabia faces require a shift in the reactive defense policy to one of greater military involvement in Middle East. The KSA, known

for the economic and diplomatic efforts that have defined the last quarter century, must now employ the SANG and SAAF through a multitude of efforts. Securing the mountainous border region with Yemen will stem the threats emanating from Houthi rebels and allow for a political solution to the crisis in Yemen. Preparing a crisis-response force for post-Assad Syria and western Iraq, enables a viable effort to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq. Tying counter-terrorism activities with the Jihadi reform program to counter DAISH will strengthen the program and remove off the battlefield those that refuse to give up their dangerous ideology. Equipping the Saudi Arabian SAAF to counter the Iran, through modernization in SNEP II, will allow for a challenge to the Iranian naval threat balance. Taken together, recommended changes will allow Saudi Arabia to carry a greater burden of the security responsibility within the Middle East and continue the stability of an important US ally.

## Appendix



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<sup>32</sup> United States Military Training Mission Saudi Arabia, *Advisor Handbook* (USMTM Eskan Village, 2014).

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