

it will require most or all. A military is well integrated if its internal procedures are “consistent and mutually reinforcing” starting from individual units all the way up to the grand strategy.² Integration is vital to a functional military, since it “reduces waste and the duplication of effort;” integration allows it to be both strategically cohesive and efficient in the use of its personnel and materiel, allowing it to accomplish more with less.³ Responsiveness, “the ability to tailor military activity to a state’s own capabilities, its adversaries’ capabilities, and external constraints,” ensures that a military is aware of its strengths and limitations and can adapt accordingly to avoid falling behind rivals and to maximize its advantages.⁴ Skill, the ability of “military personnel and their units...to achieve particular tasks or carry out orders,” reflects how well basic units can adapt to rapidly changing situations and integrate new technologies and strategies with existing ones.⁵ Unsurprisingly, a more skilled military can outmaneuver a numerically and fiscally superior but inept adversary. Finally, quality is a military’s ability to “provide itself with highly capable weapons and equipment” preferably in a cost-efficient manner.⁶ Better armaments are optimal on the battlefield, especially when low costs allow a state to purchase more. By combining all these factors, a military can gain world-class effectiveness. Without, it will only be competitive with its rivals by vastly outspending them - a highly inefficient and unsustainable proposition. Saudi Arabia’s military hopes rest on its ability to meet these criteria.

Integration, responsiveness, skill, and quality determine a military’s potential, but a complex web of factors in a nation’s society determine those four influences. Here, I will focus on the impact of civilian-military relations, societal fissures, advanced technology, and Arab culture itself on military effectiveness. Considered together, these factors provide a comprehensive overview of the strengths and challenges of the Saudi military.

To develop a formidable military, a nation must enjoy good relations between its civilian government and its armed forces. This requires the balance of power between the two organizations. A military with too much political influence can block necessary governmental reforms if it considers them against its interests. In Kadercan’s words, “When the military enjoys a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis the civilian authority, it may block military reforms that would undercut its corporate privileges and interests.”⁷ If, however, a military has an excessive political role but little organizational cohesion, its lack of integration will cripple it, leaving the civilian government without viable national defense, perhaps raising the risk of a coup.⁸ Similarly, an effective military requires strong organizational identity while also holding little political power, as it will be marginalized and unable to advocate for its own development. In Kadercan’s theory, the ideal military has a strong culture but little political agency: this combination facilitates the development of effective practices while also allowing the civilian government to reform the military when necessary.⁹ When the military can block these reforms to protect its traditional interests, it will stagnate and eventually fall behind its rivals’ efficacy. Thus, proper bal-

ance of military and governmental power keeps the system up to date and effective.

A unified, stable society is also vital to the development of an effective military. Without such a society, a nation must focus much of its security apparatus inwards to stabilize the country against the threat of domestic violence or even coups.¹⁰ Furthermore, a divided society can produce ineffective social groups within units thus creating “fissures in the unit that reduce the effective military power of the unit as a whole.”¹¹ These divisions can lead military units to become inefficient as unworthy candidates from one side of the fissure are selected for promotion over better qualified candidates who are “on the wrong side.” These internal conflicts reduce a military’s efficacy and offer adversaries an obvious weakness to exploit. A military in a socially divided country can try to avoid this pitfall by distancing itself from society as a whole. This distancing, however, comes at its own cost: “it may create distrust of the military, ...the military may then be seen as an alien element by that society. This will generate civil-military friction that will reduce the military power, not of the military, but of the state as a whole.”¹² In a state facing these problems, the development of an effective military is exceedingly difficult. On the other hand, a unified nation also has no guarantee of successful integration, and must actively implement meritocratic promotion and consistent strategic systems among other hallmarks of a well-integrated military. While a divided society is no guarantee of failure and a unified one is no guarantee of success, the latter gives a country a significantly better chance to develop an effective military.

Even if a nation has the political and societal requirements to build a formidable military, it must still give its soldiers the best possible equipment to be able to compete with other elite modern armies. This requires either the creation of new technologies or the diffusion and adaptation of already developed advanced technology. If a military fails to innovate or adapt new technologies, it will be vulnerable to rivals who have continued to move forward. Conversely if a military is more advanced than its rivals, it will be able to exploit their relative backwardness. According to Horowitz, this advantage can be gained or lost through the diffusion of an innovation: “understanding the diffusion pattern of the dominant innovation of a time period and the match of adoption requirements to the capabilities of states can help us more accurately explain power transitions.”¹³ Technologies and strategies are constantly evolving; if a military is unwilling or unable to adopt these tools either due to parochial interests or lack of access to innovations, it will become vulnerable. In Brooks’ framework, this access to innovations directly impacts a military’s quality if improved training regimes are developed and adopted. This makes the access to and adaptation of military innovations key to the development of an effective military.

Finally, the development of an effective, powerful military in Arab states has often been limited by the failure of Arab cultures to produce citizens who are able to fight effectively on a chaotic and complex modern battlefield. As Pollack says, “skill in maneuver warfare is highly dependent upon aggressive, innovative, independent tactical leadership as well as the rapid, accurate transmission of information” (Pollack

32). Achieving and harnessing this skill requires soldiers who are highly capable and generals who are willing to cede much of their authority to their soldiers in the heat of battle. This, however, requires a society that produces and accepts independent and creative thinkers which is not a strength of Arab cultures. Arab military training focuses on practicing specific tasks and produces excellent “set-piece” soldiers who nonetheless rapidly wilt in battle when faced with situations they had not explicitly trained for. “[J]ust as the Arab educational system has resisted reform, so too the military training systems of most of the Arab countries have proven very difficult to change” -- this underscores the connection between Arab civilian culture, Arab military culture, and the frequent failures of Arab militaries in battle.¹⁴ Though an Arab nation may possess all other ingredients for an effective military, it may struggle to produce skilled soldiers capable of taking its army to the next level.

While the balance of power between the Saudi monarchy and its military is theoretically conducive to the formation of an effective military, there are significant challenges facing this development in practice. The armed forces of Saudi Arabia are divided into two main groups: the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) and the Saudi Arabia National Guard (SANG). Both forces are highly professional but politically distant, representing Kadercan’s ideal balance for a modern army. Though there is some overlap in their roles, the RSLF is generally expected to provide security against foreign threats and to be the main tool of Saudi power projection, while the SANG is tasked with maintaining internal peace and the rule of the Saudi monarchy.¹⁵ This balance of power is key, since it splits the armed forces into two distinct entities (neither of which has the power to overcome the government on its own, giving the monarch considerable leverage as long as one or both of the factions remains loyal). This subordinate position prevents either section of the armed forces from becoming either a “volatile partner” capable of removing the civilian leadership or from having “powers over the civilian rulers to pursue its corporate interests, which may sometimes be affiliated with policies that impede battlefield effectiveness and contradict a state’s long-term security priorities.”¹⁶ However, while Saudi civil-military relations are currently robust and the bifurcated ground forces offer a theoretically strong balance of power, this practice creates significant problems for the Saudi military’s effectiveness.

The presence of two separate ground fighting forces under different control presents difficulties for effective integration, since they are by design redundant. This structural inefficiency is further compounded by the fact that the purpose of the SANG is to “counterbalance the influence of the regular armed forces” meaning that the Saudi government explicitly favors one defense branch above another.¹⁷ The less favored (and less trusted) RSLF has seen its capabilities intentionally underdeveloped. Unsurprisingly, this has led to serious organizational problems within the RSLF, since it is more prone to corruption, poor promotion practices, and ineffective training techniques than the SANG.¹⁸ These problems further decrease efficacy, as corruption and promoting unworthy candidates reduces the army’s professionalism

and efficiency by placing unskilled soldiers in vital leadership positions and wasting state funds. Worse, RSLF training methods emphasize fighting in regimented steps, which produces an underprepared fighting force.¹⁹ This has recently been on display in the ongoing conflict in Yemen where RSLF forces “have often appeared unprepared and prone to mistakes.”²⁰ The government’s vested interest in keeping the SANG superior to the RSLF has had tangible negative impacts on the RSLF’s warfighting ability. Unfortunately for the army, these interests appear unlikely to change any time soon.

For a brief period, attitudes among the ruling Saud family appeared to be moving away from seeing the RSLF as a potential threat towards seeing it as a potential valuable tool of Saudi power projection. This shift was best seen in the creation of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2005, which “was created to coordinate Saudi strategies regarding defense, intelligence, and foreign policy with the ultimate aim to increase effectiveness and efficiency across agencies.”²¹ This was exactly the sort of integrating program needed to reduce redundancies in operations and personnel between the SANG and the RSLF, which would increase the effectiveness of the Saudi military as a whole and allow it to exert more power abroad. Unfortunately, the NSC was disbanded in 2015 and replaced with the newly formed Council for Political and Security Affairs (CPSA).²² The CPSA is expected to act as a decision-making body rather than a coordinating one (SUSRIS). While adding diversity and additional experts to the decision-making process is a positive step for the Saudi Arabian security apparatus, it does little to address the integration problems that the NSC was intended to fix. Without a suitable replacement program, Saudi military power risks stagnating in its current form which Gray describes as “arguably sufficient for internal regime security, and able to ... deter some external actors from acting hostilely.”²³ This is a rather low bar for a national security service, but reaching any higher levels of effectiveness will require significantly improved integration between the SANG and the RSLF. While it is still early in the CPSA era, this necessary reform seems to have been pushed further backwards with the dissolution of the NSC.

For all the issues the Saudi military has and likely will continue to have in projecting its power abroad, it has been exceptionally successful at maintaining control domestically in large part to a generally loyal and unified citizenry. Despite the potential problems posed by the intense and highly contagious Arab Spring to the Saudi monarchy, Saudi citizens have shown remarkably little interest in bringing revolution to Saudi Arabia. The fact that this potential conflict has been avoided despite Saudi Arabia’s “extremely young population, high youth unemployment, repression and corruption” is even more impressive.²⁴ This is undeniably due in large part to the efficacy of the state’s internal security apparatus. Between the SANG and the police, protesters and potential revolutionaries would face two extremely well equipped and efficient armed forces - a prospect that is presumably enough to put off all but the most disgruntled rabble-rousers. However, while the SANG and police amount to

a powerful tool of internal suppression, it should be mentioned that many Saudi citizens simply were not interested in revolution. Syrian protesters carried on their as their protests turned into a bloody revolution despite a strong government security; their Saudi peers never even took to the streets. This illustrates the vastly different societal conditions in each country. The Saudi citizenry's tacit acceptance of its monarchy is reflected by King Abdullah's "almost unanimous" support and the sense that while Saudi Arabia has its share of problems, "an uprising is not 'the best way' to bring about improvements."²⁵ This disinterest in joining the wave of revolutions sweeping the Arab world reflects a level of societal cohesion which should allow the Saudi government to build a well-integrated military focused on external issues rather than internal affairs.

This conclusion is slightly counter-intuitive in a nation that boasts a nominally internal security force capable of going head-to-head with the conventional army. Nonetheless, while the presence of the SANG and Saudi Arabia's impressive police force suggests serious societal issues, they represent more of an insurance policy than a necessary tool of political suppression. Instead, the combination of the day to day safety and security provided by the Saudi government; and the pacifying effect of the clergy's alliance with the monarchy makes most Saudis uninterested in revolution. This saves the monarchy from worrying about internal security as much as they otherwise might.²⁶ This is reflected in the SANG's growing role as a tool of Saudi power projection abroad - especially in the Yemeni civil war - where the SANG was called upon as the primary ground force for Saudi power projection.²⁷ The external use of the SANG reflects the Saudi government's growing trust in its citizens, which has been made possible by King Abdullah's cautious acceptance of reform movements and his generous financial programs in times of economic distress.²⁸ Though modernization has been a relatively slow moving project in Saudi Arabia, the king pursued a broad slate of progressive reforms to fight corruption, correct socioeconomic inequities, and fix educational failings.²⁹ These projects have earned the Saudi government significant loyalty and helped stave off whatever appeal the Arab Spring may have held for many Saudi citizens. This has allowed the government project the SANG outwards as an effective tool for the advancement of Saudi foreign priorities, rather than just a simply reactionary domestic force. In short, the increasing cohesion of Saudi society has allowed the government to shift its defense resources from internal security projects to external national interests allowing for a major increase in Saudi power projection capabilities.

Saudi Arabia's greatest asset for the formation of an effective, powerful military is undoubtedly its access to and adoption of advanced technologies and strategies. This access is provided by the Kingdom's tight ties to the US (and to a lesser extent Europe) and is funded by the phenomenal national wealth generated by oil. In 2012 alone, Saudi Arabia bought \$35.1 billion worth of US military products; while this was three times more than they had ever spent before in a year, there is nonetheless a long history of Saudi imports of advanced American military technol-

ogy – and the Obama presidency saw the highest sales to Saudi Arabia since George H.W. Bush.³⁰ These periodic massive investments have allowed the Saudi military to modernize with remarkable speed and consistency. The first such major push happened in the 1970's, as the Saudi government moved aggressively to modernize first the RSLF and then the SANG; this process was repeated in the early 1990's, and is once again in full swing.³¹ These periodic hardware updates are necessary for an effective military, since they preclude the quality of arms used by the army from stagnating and give Saudi soldiers access to the most cutting edge weaponry in the world.

All of the advanced arms in the world cannot benefit a military if its soldiers are incapable of using them or if their tactics are outdated and easily countered. The solution to both of these potential problems is the willingness to adopt new training techniques and strategies alongside new weaponry. Although it is easier to simply buy better weapons than to reform structural elements like training, Saudi Arabia has largely navigated this pitfall successfully. This is due in large part to the tight ties between the US and Saudi Arabia and to the Saudis' impressive ability to recognize their own weaknesses. Because of the strong American interest in seeing Saudi Arabia become a capable military actor in the Middle East, the U.S. has poured resources into training the Saudi military. U.S. Army advisors and American contractors have both been heavily involved in training the Saudi army, ensuring their ability to make full use of America's advanced arms.³² Furthermore, the army has shown good awareness of its own shortcomings in battle, though its success in adopting the necessary reforms has been more mixed. After the Gulf War, it was clear that the military needed to significantly improve its joint warfare capabilities between the SANG, RSLF, and air force. Since then, it has implemented a training regime adopted from American, French, Egyptian and Israeli military, and is "steadily reevaluating its doctrine and ways to improve joint operations."³³ While integration between the various Saudi armed forces remains suboptimal, it is clearly moving in the right direction aided by excellent organizational practices which allow needed reforms to proceed. However, this process is not guaranteed to succeed, since the army's internal reforms are ultimately still at the mercy of the government's recent shift away from integration. Nonetheless, the Saudi military is in a privileged position because of its close strategic alliance with the US.

Historically, traditional Arab culture has had a significant negative impact on the military effectiveness of Saudi armed forces. The stirrings of modernization, however, may sweep those cultural limitations away. This movement has received unexpected support from King Abdullah, who proved remarkably reform-minded. Better yet, many lower-level Saudi officials have also made highly realistic assessments of the limiting nature of some traditional aspects of culture and have acknowledged the need to change them.³⁴ According to Fatany, this openness to reform has endeared the King to his subjects, reinforcing their unwillingness to participate in the Arab spring, while also providing a vital positive feedback loop to incentivize the

royal family to remain committed to its cautious reform process. Though changing cultural norms is a difficult and slow process, the successful modernization of Saudi culture would be a massive boon to the country's military and other institutions and should provide enough incentive for the government to continue moving forward. While serious civil and human rights issues weaken optimism over positive changes in Saudi culture as a whole, reforms in education at least offer hope for the steady liberalization of Saudi society at large.

When Pollack offered his cultural explanation for the recurring military shortcomings of Arab militaries in 1996, he identified excessive the deference to authority, lack of creativity, and centralization of authority drilled into Arab students by dominant educational and societal systems as key limiting factors in Arab military effectiveness and suggested that this was unlikely to change.³⁵ Fortunately for Saudi Arabia, change is exactly what Abdullah's reforms have ushered in albeit at a carefully measured pace. Reforms in the education system aim directly at the root problem: "we no longer want the pupil to repeat mindlessly what the teacher says. Everyone has to learn to think for himself."³⁶ The success of this shift would mean a fundamental change in Saudi society. Rather than rely on rote memorization and deference to superiors, Saudi education should look distinctly Western with individual problem solving becoming a valued ability. On a modern battlefield, this is a vital skill. Soldiers who are taught only specific tasks and to follow specific plans are prone to breaking down into "a leaderless mass of individuals; their officers could pass on orders but failed to provide leadership in the absence of specific guidelines."³⁷ Conversely, soldiers with the flexibility of thought that Saudi educational reforms hope to instill are able to adapt to such situations. Furthermore, the initiative to make "the uncritical drumming in of teaching material trotted out by submissive teachers...a thing of the past" should help open the door to reforms in training and attitudes in the military which allow for more effective, realistic training of soldiers, and to produce soldiers who are capable of acting effectively even in a leadership vacuum.³⁸ Though it is too early to say with certainty that these reforms will succeed, they offer hope for the future of the Saudi military's ability to be an effective fighting force since it will reap the benefits of drawing recruits from an increasingly creative and adaptable society.

The future of Saudi military effectiveness is dependent on the country's ability to assemble a military force that is integrated, responsive, skilled, and outfitted with quality equipment. Currently, its quality is undoubtedly world class thanks to the Saudi-US alliance and the access to world-class weapons systems this relationship provides. Furthermore, while the current depression in oil prices has hit the Saudi economy hard, its defense spending binge in the early 2010s means that the army has already paid for a major modernizing program and should be in good shape for the foreseeable future. Although the Saudi economy's heavy dependence on oil may limit the nation's growth in the short term, economic, educational and social reforms offer hope that an innovative modern information economy can take its place.

Combined with the vast wealth provided by oil, this would make for a formidable economy, and one more than capable of maintaining its military quality through American imports. Even if this shift does not come to pass, the military would be set for the next 20 years based on historical frequencies of modernizing spending on the military. The quality of equipment in the Saudi Arabian military would remain high, giving it a major advantage over its potential regional competitors apart from Israel.

Saudi military responsiveness is another area of strength, as its uptake of new technologies and willingness to learn from failures allow the military to react quickly to changing strategic environments. This has been on display through the nation's adaptation of American and other advanced militaries' training techniques and weaponry after conflicts have shown either the flaws in existing Saudi military doctrine and equipment, or the merits of those of other nations. High levels of responsiveness keep a military grounded in reality, neither overestimating its own strengths nor underestimating the capabilities of adversaries, while also ensuring that its leaders and soldiers are adequately prepared. The Saudi army has proven itself adept at maintaining responsiveness in the past and is unlikely to backslide on this front.

The Saudi military's responsiveness has also allowed it to make headway in improving the skill of its soldiers - an area of military effectiveness that it has historically struggled. Ultimately the military's skill is a separate arena which may continue to be problematic. Recognition of limitations in Saudi training methods and the culture which produces them has led the Saudi military to contract with the American government and American companies to provide better training. While this exchange improves the skill of Saudi soldiers, it is not sustainable in the long term. Reforms in education and the cultural shifts may provide a long-term solution, but the reforms are new enough that it is difficult to determine with any certainty how successful they can be. Even if the reforms are eventually successful, it will be a long time before their liberalizing effects are felt uniformly across Saudi society. Until then, military skill will likely continue to be problematic as traditional modes of learning and leadership will constrain the creativity and rapid improvisational decision-making necessary for success in modern warfare.

Integration, the final aspect of a truly effective military, is also Saudi Arabia's greatest weakness, and it will require a concerted reform effort which currently looks unlikely. The structure of the country's armed forces with the SANG and the RSLF essentially acting as equal but separate ground forces is the antithesis of integration. While the short-lived NSC appeared to offer a solution to the longstanding problems created by this separation, its subsequent dissolution and replacement with the CPSA has reintroduced doubt that Saudi Arabia's leaders learned their lesson. Because of the distance between the two armed forces, they are liable to take counter-productive actions while also limiting the amount of cross-force cooperation possible due to differing equipment, training methods, and tactics. These factors combine to make the ongoing split between the SANG and the RSLF the single largest inhibitor

to Saudi military effectiveness. It is a flaw which increasingly appears unnecessary and self-inflicted. Despite the monarchy's fear of an uprising in connection to the Arab Spring, it has managed to ride out the worst of the movement with a combination of sheer force and trust in the large sections of the country which are loyal to the monarchy due to religion, reforms, and economic stability made possible by the current government. At this point, the continued use of the SANG as an internal security apparatus is inefficient especially given the efficacy of the police force. There is little reason to maintain the strict separation between the SANG and the RSLF that has characterized Saudi security policy since the 1950s. King Salman's actions suggest that he plans to preserve the divide and that he may even prefer to widen it.

Saudi Arabia's military enjoys access to the physical equipment necessary for an elite military and is fortunate enough to be largely unconstrained by internal organizational issues. These qualities will be crucial to its future military effectiveness, because significant doubts remain over its ability to produce skilled soldiers and smoothly integrate the various branches of the military. Currently, Saudi Arabia's military is not the Middle East's undisputed preeminent force despite vast amounts of foreign and domestic investment. With targeted, sustained, and successful reforms in leadership structure and training, this dominance is an achievable goal. Until these necessary steps are taken, the Saudi military will never be truly effective and will remain reliant on American military might in the event of direct aggression against the Saudi homeland.

NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. *Ibid.*, 13.
7. Burak Kadercan, "Strong Armies, Slow Adaptation: Civil-Military relations and the Diffusion of Military Power," *International Security* 38.3 (2014): 125
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12. *Ibid.*, 6.
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