

## The Saudi Royal Guard

Innocent guardians of holy places and palaces, or the most dedicated butchers and torturers of the Crown prince?

The Council of State saw in its decision 248.129 not enough reason to suspend the export licence of turrets for armoured cars with official destination the Royal Guard in Saudi Arabia:

- Contrary to the National Guard, the Royal Guard could not be linked to military operations in Yemen
- It was not proven that the Royal Guard participated in internal repression or in external operations
- The amount of vehicles ordered was considered in the decision to grant an export licence. It evaluated this as adequate for the official task of the Royal Guard, that is the protection of holy places and of the royal family (which consists of about 15000 persons). The CE considered that the government had therefore answered to the questions raised by the minority opinion of the advice commission.

This evaluation is doubtful. Several elements do indeed raise doubts about the Royal Guard as the final destination of the material. Further the Royal Guard seems to play not just a role as protecting force and guards, but is also involved in internal repression and covert operations outside Saudi Arabia like the Kashoggi murder.

A. Is this material destined for the limited aims of the Royal Guard?

The Royal Guard consists of a regiment of about 2000 soldiers, organised in 3 light battalions. It is integrated in the Saudi Army, but with a separate and direct command line to the King. Its official role is indeed guarding the holy places and the royal family.

[https://www.inss.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/\(FILE\)1302168783.pdf](https://www.inss.org.il/he/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/systemfiles/(FILE)1302168783.pdf)

At other places the al-Saif al-Ajrab brigade is mentioned as Royal Guard brigade. However, it is a new elite unit formed in 2015 and integrated into the Royal Guard command structure, but not by definition having the same tasks. It consists of 5000 military, selected from all branches. Its official tasks are unclear and very little is known, but their military capacities seem broader than what is to be expected from a guarding force.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/blood-rusted-sword-elite-force-saudi-crown-prince-180108094812471.html>

<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/1/7/rustless-sword-mbs-using-elite-force-to-detain-princes>

<https://sabq.org/k3TchR> (arab)

In practice this al-Saif al-Ajrab brigade seems to have an important role in the power struggle by MBS and disciplining the royal family and other dissidents, also outside Saudi Arabia. It not just

protect the royal family, but it also detains or abduct dissident members of the royal family or others:

<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/1/7/rustless-sword-mbs-using-elite-force-to-detain-princes>

<https://www.newsweek.com/saudi-arabia-jails-11-super-wealthy-princes-who-didnt-want-pay-their-own-bills-773035>

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181112-exclusive-family-of-two-detained-saudi-princes-worried-about-their-fate-and-macron-intervenues/>

However, even when the Royal Guard regiment and this al-Saif al-Ajrab brigade are taken together, it totals no more than 7000 military. This force is clearly too small to need the whole order of armored vehicles. The original order to GDLS-C was 928 vehicles, later reduced to 742:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/saudi-arabia-arms-canada-1.4815571>

That is a similar size as earlier orders for the Saudi National Guard, which is a force with 100000 soldiers. In other words, it is not credible that this order is only destined to the Saudi Royal Guard regiment or even the al-Saif al-Ajrab brigade.

When we consider only the regiment, this would be an armoured car for each 2-3 soldiers.

Together with the brigade this rises to 9-10 soldiers, but this would imply that none of these soldiers would have other tasks and that all logistical support and other roles (from intelligence to body guards and other stationary guarding tasks) is done by other military. These are not very realistic hypotheses, which leaves the question for which forces are the supplementary vehicles. The Royal Guard is probably only acting as the official receiver and part of these vehicles will get transferred to other forces. In other words, as a proxy for other more questionable armed services.

B. What is the actual role of the Royal Guard?

B.1 Background: Power struggle for succession

The first ruler of contemporary Saudi Arabia was Ibn Saud, which ruled till 1953. Since then and according to his wish the royal succession happened among his sons, in other words from brother to brother. Not always peaceful, as this succession happened in 1975 with a military coup and murder of king Faisal. King Salman is now one of the last living sons while no clear rules are established for the succession by the next generation of descendants. This left the succession open for struggle among the next generation of possible successors, as the group of people which have a legitimate claim to the throne is quite large.

An important component of this game of thrones are the military forces. The military structures within Saudi Arabia show a typical example of counterbalancing military forces in dictatorships. There are 3 major sources of military power: the regular armed forces (army, air force, navy), the National Guard under a distinct ministry and the forces under the ministry of Interior. The Royal Guard is officially part of the army, but it has a distinct line of command directly to the King (in practice the Crown Prince).

By end 2017 Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) had established himself as crown prince and de facto ruler, breaking with the former system of collegial rule by the sons of the first king. King Salman had ended in 2015 the brother to brother succession, and established the new line of succession with first his nephew Bin Nayef, who had a lot of legitimacy due to his longtime position as minister of Interior and no sons of his own, followed by his own son MBS. This brought MBS in pole

position, but left the collegial rule intact and transferred the succession among the family to the next generation.

MBS seemed to be less patient and was willing to risk legitimacy among the royal family by pushing out Bin Nayef. MBS was minister of defense and therefore in control of the army, while his rival Bin Nayef was the minister of interior and official Crown Prince. MBS was only the deputy Crown prince, in other words he could only become king after Bin Nayef, and was not sure that this would remain the case. Therefore he staged a military coup on 21st June 2017 to force Bin Nayef to 'voluntary' step down from succession, making MBS the Crown Prince.

The change from brother to brother or nephew into father to son succession threatens to exclude a large part of the royal family from power and presents a strong centralization of power. It is therefore strongly contested and the position of MBS is far from stable. He is trying to stabilize it with further internal purges to eliminate other possible rival powers. A strongly armed and augmented Royal Guard can therefore be a tool in this power game, and MBS is clearly willing to use it. The Ritz-Carlton purge in November 2017 included the removal of Prince Miteb bin Abdullah as the head of the National Guard. The National Guard is the strongest military force in Saudi Arabia and could therefore pose a threat as tool for a rival.

For some extra information on the internal struggle for succession on the throne:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>

## B2. Human rights violations linked to the Royal Guard

### A) Direct involvement of the Royal Guard in internal purges and arrests among the royal family.

The Saudi Royal Guard, especially the al-Saif al-Ajrab brigade, has been involved in a range of human rights violations. The official role of the Royal Guard regiment may be protection of the royal family and the holy places, but it, or at least al-Saif al-Ajrab brigade, also plays an important role in the internal power struggles within the royal family and is involved in repression of dissidents.

It was directly involved in this power struggle under control by MBS:

- Bin Nayef purge 21st June 2017 (de facto coup by MBS). These arrests were done by Royal Guards.

Bin Nayef was arrested again on 6 March 2020, with two other royals by Royal Guards:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/top-saudi-royal-family-members-detained-11583531033>

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8089283/Saudi-Arabias-King-Salman-pictured-carrying-royal-duties-foiling-alleged-coup-plot.html>

<https://www.archyde.com/in-saudi-arabia-the-crown-prince-does-the-cleaning-around-him/>

- Ritz-Carlton purge (November 2017). Again this mass detainment was under control of Royal Guards.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/world/middleeast/ritz-carlton-riyadh-saudi-princes.html>

The gates of the luxury hotel, where US President Donald Trump stayed during his state visit last year, had been shuttered and patrolled by black-uniformed royal guard units while dozens of princes, former ministers and business tycoons were interrogated inside.

<https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/ritz-carlton-reopens-in-riyadh-after-stint-as-gilded-prison-of-saudi-princes>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017%E2%80%9319\\_Saudi\\_Arabian\\_purge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017%E2%80%9319_Saudi_Arabian_purge)

- other purging: al-Saif al-Ajrab brigade detains prince:

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181112-exclusive-family-of-two-detained-saudi-princes-worried-about-their-fate-and-macron-intervenues/>

B) Covert operations outside Saudi Arabia by Tiger Squad linked to the Royal Guard.

Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman uses a separate group called the Tiger squad for extrajudicial killings and abductions. The group is composed of military from several services, including Royal Guard soldiers. The mixed composition does reflect that of the al-Saif al-Ajrab brigade and it is probably part of it, but as this concerns covert operations it could also be established outside the official structures. US sources talk about the Saudi Rapid Intervention Group

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/world/middleeast/khashoggi-crown-prince-saudi.html>

Further this group was clearly supported with intelligence services by the Royal Guard, as spy software contracted by the Royal Guard was used to prepare several operations, including the Kashoggi murder. This has been documented in the Kashoggi investigation of the UN Human rights Council.

- Jamal Kashoggi: killed by the Tiger squad

A/HRC/41/CRP.1, Annex to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Investigation into the unlawful death of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi

([https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session41/Documents/A\\_HRC\\_41\\_CRP.1.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session41/Documents/A_HRC_41_CRP.1.docx))

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45906396>

At least 6 of the 15 members of the murder squad were Royal Guards:

Abdulaziz Mohammed M Alhawsawi

Thaar Ghaleb T Alharbi

Mohammed Saad H Alzahrani

Khalid Aedh G Alotaibi

Fahad Shabib A Albalawi

Waleed Abdullah Alshehri

The affiliation of Meshal Saad M Albostani is not clear (air force or Royal Guard), while several others are mentioned as officials working at the Royal Court or as part of the security team of the Crown Prince. While it is not clear if there is a formal connection of this security team to the Royal Guard, the protection of the King and Crown Prince, including on travels abroad, is officially part of the tasks of the Royal Guard. Also, the Royal Guard has in his official structures an intelligence and a special forces unit: p. 8-9 in

[http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/attachments/061109\\_omsg\\_presentation\\_2.pdf](http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/attachments/061109_omsg_presentation_2.pdf)

The contract for the Pegasus spy software used to prepare the killing was made with the Saudi Royal Guard. Bezos, the CEO of Amazon, is also the owner of the Washington Post for which Kashoggi worked. His phone was hacked as part of these spy operations and MBS was personally involved in this hacking.

The contract for Pegasus spy software from the NSO group was made with Saudi Royal Guard: "November 2017 Pegasus-3 spyware is acquired from NSO Group by the Saudi regime, specifically the Saudi Royal Guard."

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25042>, p.12 (Annex 3, Brief Timeline of Key Events)

The coordinator of the murder operation is Saud al-Qahtani, a close advisor of the Crown Prince, who is also alleged to be the coordinator of Saudi spy software operations (see A/HRC/41/CRP.1). He is also mentioned to be involved in interrogations and torture during the Ritz-Carlton purge and of the women activists, ...

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/world/middleeast/khashoggi-crown-prince-saudi.html>  
(this article also mentions other abductions by the Tiger squad)

- Omar Abdulaziz, dissident residing in Canada:

He was also a target of spy operations with the same Pegasus software, which has been thoroughly documented by Citizen Lab. But according to a warning from the Canadian police he was also a potential target for an extrajudicial killing.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/21/exclusive-saudi-dissident-warned-by-canadian-police-he-is-a-target>

<https://citizenlab.ca/2018/10/the-kingdom-came-to-canada-how-saudi-linked-digital-espionage-reached-canadian-soil/>

The spy software operations in connection to Omar Abdulaziz are also mentioned in A/HRC/41/CRP.1 and in the timeline in

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25042>

- Saad al-Jabri, former intelligence official residing in Canada makes allegations concerning a mission of the Tiger Squad in 2018 to kill him. However, they were stopped by Canadian border security.

<https://www.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.dcd.220747/gov.uscourts.dcd.220747.1.0.pdf>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53677869>

<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/06/politics/saudi-assassination-plot-allegations/index.html>

- Detainment of women activists

In witness statements to Human Rights Watch Saud al-Qahtani is mentioned as present at the interrogation and torture of detained women activists. The NY Times also presumes the involvement of the Rapid Intervention Group. Their detainment in an unused royal palace for several months before being transferred to a prison makes it plausible that this concerns the Royal Guard as such.

"These new tactics include cases of holding detainees at unofficial places of detention, such as the detention of so-called corruption detainees at the five-star Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh from late 2017 into early 2018, as well as the detention of prominent women's rights activists at a "hotel" or "guesthouse" during the summer of 2018. While in unofficial detention centers, allegations have emerged that torture and mistreatment of detainees were rampant. For example, in March 12, 2018 the New York Times reported that 17 Ritz-Carlton detainees required hospitalization for physical abuse, including one man who later died in custody. In addition, in late 2018 Human Rights Watch received credible information from informed sources that authorities had tortured four prominent Saudi women activists while in an unofficial detention center, including by

administering electric shocks, whipping the women on their thighs, forcible hugging and kissing, and groping.”

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/04/high-cost-change/repression-under-saudi-crown-prince-tarnishes-reforms>

“The Rapid Intervention Group also appears to have been involved in the detention and abuse of about a dozen women’s rights activists, who were detained last spring and summer. The activists, who had campaigned for lifting the kingdom’s ban on driving by women, included several well-known figures: Loujain al-Hathloul, who had been jailed for trying to drive her car into the kingdom from the United Arab Emirates; Aziza al-Yousef, a retired computer science professor; and Eman al-Nafjan, the linguistics lecturer.

At first, the women were not held in a prison, but were detained informally in what appeared to be an unused palace in the Red Sea port city of Jidda, according to Ms. al-Hathloul’s sister, Alia. Each woman was locked in a small room, and the windows were covered. Some of the women were frequently taken downstairs for interrogation, which included beatings, electric shocks, waterboarding and threats of rape and murder.

In an Op-Ed article for The New York Times, Alia al-Hathloul wrote that Mr. al-Qahtani was “present several times” when her sister was tortured, and that he threatened to kill her and throw her body in the sewer.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/world/middleeast/khashoggi-crown-prince-saudi.html>

<https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/saudi-arabia-independent-investigation-urgently-needed-amid-more-reports-of-torture-and-sexual-abuse-of-activists/>

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=24291> (questions, mentioning the details torture) -

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=34611> (reply)

An overview:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018%E2%80%932019\\_Saudi\\_crackdown\\_on\\_feminists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018%E2%80%932019_Saudi_crackdown_on_feminists)

Conclusion: This series of extrajudicial killing, abductions and detainment both inside and outside Saudi Arabia in which the Royal Guard is directly implicated or where its implication can be presumed from the involvement of its members and its logistical support, shows that the Saudi Royal Guard is not a guardian force with a limited protection role. Instead it shows up as the loyal elite force of the Crown Prince MBS in his efforts to repress and eliminate all threats to his power position.

Sponsored by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung with funds of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany. This publication or parts of it can be used by others for free as long as they provide a proper reference to the original publication.



**ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG**  
BRUSSELS OFFICE