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What's Behind Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Anxiety?

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Introduction

Will Saudi Arabia get the bomb? Overwhelmingly, common wisdom suggests that acquiring a countervailing deterrent will be the Kingdom's surest response if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold. Proponents of this argument marshal an array of evidence: the repeated statements of Saudi officials, the robust Pakistani-Saudi strategic relationship, Saudi Arabia's ceaseless quest for regional prestige, and the apparent uncertainty of U.S. security guarantees. Added to this, they point to a number of highly suspicious technical indicators such as Riyadh's purchase in the mid-1980s of CSS-2 missiles from China and its refusal to allow IAEA inspectors on to its soil.

While these are no doubt compelling points, they disregard the broader question of the Saudi calculus on a nuclear Iran. Specifically, many arguments tend to treat Saudi acquisition as a foregone conclusion, without considering the many disincentives against getting a weapon. Chief among these is the enormous normative and legal damage Saudi Arabia would incur if it were to break its commitments under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), with related backlash

from the United States, among others. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's most likely supplier, Pakistan, may be loath to transfer nuclear weapons technology for fear of antagonizing the U.S. or embroiling itself in an Arab-Iranian cold war at a time when its attention remains squarely focused on the threat from India.¹ In many ways the perception that Saudi Arabia might seek nuclear weapons serves the Kingdom's interests, with less risk, than would the reality of actually acquiring nuclear weapons.

The lessons of the Iraq WMD debacle should caution about inferring intent based on the outward indications of capability. Seemingly deceptive moves by the Kingdom could in fact be about projecting power and safeguarding sovereignty rather than concealing secret plans for weapons program. If the revelations of the Iraq Survey Group tell us anything it is that discerning the calculus behind the decision to pursue the bomb – or more importantly, behind the decision to *appear* to be pursuing a weapon – is a herculean task that is fraught with pitfalls and false leads.

To avoid this trap, it is crucial to analyze Saudi Arabia's nuclear anxieties in the context of its external threat perceptions, its domestic politics, and its sense of place in the region. The Saudi decision to go nuclear has probably not been taken, and the final decision will ultimately hinge on a complex balance sheet accounting of U.S. guarantees, Saudi domestic politics and public opinion, the current balance of power with Iran, and the state of the Kingdom's bilateral relationship with Pakistan.

An Existential Threat?

There is little doubt that the advent of a nuclear-armed Iran would pose the most significant challenge to the Saudi regime since the Iranian Revolution. But what is the specific nature of that challenge and, more importantly, is another nuclear weapon the most effective way to meet it?

In the post-revolutionary era, the Iranian menace to Saudi Arabia has largely been an ideological and asymmetric one. Before regional and domestic audiences, Tehran's brazen challenge of the West and one-upmanship on the Palestine issue have stood in stark contrast to the caution and dependence on the U.S. that have defined the Saudi approach. Across the region, the al-Saud have wrestled with Iran for influence in a number of conflict-torn states: Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain, Yemen and, most recently, Syria.

Riyadh's greatest fear is that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would not necessarily present a direct threat to Saudi territory but would embolden Iran's aggressiveness in these proxy conflicts. In the Gulf, Iran would be in a stronger position to exact tribute from the smaller Gulf states, thus undermining Saudi Arabia's claim to dominance in this strategically important region. And even more

ominously, an Iranian bomb might elicit widespread applause from disgruntled Arabic publics, placing enormous pressure on the al-Saud for some sort of face-saving response.

Hidden behind these fears, there is an additional anxiety about the potential for a U.S.-Iranian deal on the nuclear crisis leading to an eventual “grand bargain.” Paradoxically, such a bargain would be predicated on Iran’s *not* acquiring nuclear weapons. In other words, Saudi Arabia (and other Gulf Arab states) worry both about the potential consequences of an Iranian bomb and a diplomatic resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis that resulted in U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. The Gulf Arab states – especially Saudi Arabia – have benefited tremendously from the twenty-plus years of cold war between the Islamic Republic and America. Showered with arms and security guarantees, Saudi Arabia is only too happy to have replaced the Shah as Washington’s preferred partner in the Gulf. A secret fear never acknowledged formally but nonetheless very real, is that the U.S. and Iran will at some point reach an accommodation that will result in Tehran supplanting Riyadh. Each time the U.S. appeared to be edging toward dialogue with Iran (the so-called 2007 Trilateral Security Talks in Baghdad are a key example) or a downgrading of the Iranian threat (the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate), there were howls of protest in the Gulf that the U.S. was sidelining its Arab partners and secretly conspiring with Iran.

To counter Iran’s nuclear program, Saudi officials have publicly called for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. Privately, they believe that negotiations are a waste of time and simply a tactic by Tehran to stall for time. Despite the sensational revelations of the “Wikileaks” cable disclosures, in which King ‘Abdallah was reported to have told Washington to “cut off the head of the snake,” Riyadh has a high degree of ambivalence about the consequences of a military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.² In subsequent statements, Saudi officials stated that an attack would embolden Iran to retaliate against the Gulf Arab states and would likely accelerate Tehran’s desire for a nuclear weapon.

Saudi suspicions of American fidelity have been fueled by the wave of populist uprisings that shook the region in 2011 particularly after Washington’s seemingly blithe abandonment of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Riyadh and others have worried deeply that Iran would exploit the chaos. Saudi foreign policy since then has followed three broad tracks. On the one hand, it has attempted to contain the creep of the Arab revolts into the Gulf states, while also trying to roll back Iranian influence in the Levant through lethal support to anti-Assad fighters.³ At the same time, Riyadh has demanded renewed pledges of fidelity and assurance from Washington. On this, it has found the Iranian nuclear crisis an expeditious means to re-focus Washington’s attention away from democracy promotion in the region and back toward the more comfortable strategy of containment.

Saudi Smoking Guns?

Those who argue that Saudi Arabia will be the next nuclear domino after Iran gets the bomb have no shortage of warnings from Saudi officials. Most visibly, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former head of Saudi intelligence has stated that Saudi Arabia will be forced to acquire a countervailing deterrent in the face of an Iranian nuclear threat. But rather than being taken at face value, such intimations should be seen as part of a broader Saudi tactic of prodding Washington to take a tougher line toward Iran. Why else would Riyadh telegraph its intentions to acquire a nuclear weapon except to compel the U.S. to redouble its efforts against Iran? Seen in this context, such warnings are akin to the much-hyped statements from Riyadh in 2006 that it would be forced to intervene militarily in Iraq if Washington did not do more to quell the sectarian bloodshed there and counter Iran's malign influence.⁴

The "domino school" has seized on a number of other indicators besides the rhetoric of Saudi officials. Chief among these is Riyadh's refusal to let the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into the Kingdom to inspect Saudi civilian nuclear facilities. Under the Small Quantity Protocol (SPQ) of 1974, Saudi Arabia was initially exempt from inspections – the SPQ was intended to exempt states with little or no nuclear activity. But in 2005, partly in response to the disclosure of the AQ Khan network, the SPQ was amended to provide for inspections as a way to deter non-nuclear states from secretly acquiring material. Yet Riyadh has not signed on to this modified protocol – a reluctance that some have interpreted as evidence of deception. Here again, it is difficult to decipher the real motives at play. A possible reason may be Riyadh's desire to avoid telegraphing weakness to regional and domestic audiences at a time when its strategic rival Iran has been making a virtue out of thwarting international access to its program.

Aside from domestic programs, there are suspicious indicators regarding potential delivery systems. Proponents of a Saudi cascade theory frequently point to Saudi Arabia's clandestine purchase in 1988 of Chinese-made CSS-2 missiles, whose inaccuracy has led many to surmise that the intended payload could only be a nuclear weapon.⁵ On top of this, Saudi Arabia has not signed the Missile Control Technology Regime (MCTR). While these indicators are troubling, a likely motive may once again be a highly symbolic show of force to a neighborhood that has been marked by the proliferation of long-range missiles.

Domestic Drivers: Energy Needs and Royal Politics

When considering the country's nuclear future it is important to note that the Kingdom does have significant economic and political motives to pursue a civilian capacity. While Saudi officials and experts have been interested in nuclear

energy for three decades, it is only recently that the interest has gained political traction. Top leaders are now convinced that the Kingdom faces serious future political and economic liabilities if it does not diversify its economy away from petroleum and natural gas. In the past several years the price of oil has been rising and in parallel the opportunity cost of continuing to burn fossil fuels for domestic power production is going up.⁶ Saudi Arabia currently consumes a quarter of the crude oil it produces. Added to this is Saudi Arabia's growing demand for electrical power, which is estimated to jump from 45 giga watts to 120 giga watts by 2035.

Saudi officials have announced plans to inaugurate their first nuclear reactor in 2020, with an additional 16 power reactors by 2030.⁷ An additional centerpiece of Saudi nuclear ambitions is the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy. Based in Riyadh and established in April 2010, the project is envisioned as an entire city that produces zero CO₂ emissions by using an energy mix of nuclear power and other renewable sources. Yet the Kingdom's ability to realize these grandiose ambitions is plagued by a lack of domestic technical expertise; for many of these plans it is totally dependent on foreign assistance. The International Atomic Energy Agency and other experts generally argue that it would take approximately fifteen years for a country with Saudi Arabia's human and institutional infrastructure to be ready to host an operating nuclear power plant. No international vendor of nuclear power plants is yet close to completing arrangements with Saudi Arabia even to begin the necessary work to prepare for the construction, operation and regulation of a nuclear power plant.

Nevertheless, there are still very real political drivers behind a civilian nuclear program and, potentially, a nuclear weapon. Both options would bring added legitimacy to a ruling family that is trying to transform its image from an anachronistic rentier state into a vanguard of modernity and economic self-sufficiency. Ironically, these prestige drivers are also at work in Iran. Like Iran, domestic factionalism may also play a role in Saudi nuclear motives. As a second generation of princes arrives on the scene, Saudi politics will be defined by increased jockeying for power. Institutions and programs are likely to be captured by competing elites and their factions – and the nascent nuclear program could be seen as a lever in this tug-of-war for power. As in the case of Iran, enrichment and the path to a breakout capability could fall victim to factional rivalries, with little regard for how a nuclear capability might actually serve the security interests of the state.

The Pakistan Option and Its Risks

In addition to these indicators, proponents of a Saudi domino theory point to the robust Pakistani-Saudi strategic relationships and the longstanding whispers that Pakistan is effectively holding a nuclear weapon in escrow for Riyadh.⁸ Bereft of indigenous technical expertise, the argument goes, Riyadh has reportedly paid

\$1 billion in the 1970s to facilitate the Pakistani nuclear weapons program. According to some observers, Saudi Arabia agreed to provide Pakistan with oil subsidies in anticipation of the international blowback that accompanied the open test of a Pakistani bomb in 1998.⁹ In return, Saudi Arabia received the option to get five to six nuclear warheads off the shelf, along with Pakistani technical advisors.¹⁰ A variation of this thesis maintains that, even if there were no Pakistani weapons based on Saudi soil, Riyadh would seek to place itself under a Pakistani nuclear umbrella. Driving all of this is a profound uncertainty in Riyadh about the durability of U.S. guarantees.

Certainly, there are ample grounds for suspecting this. The two Islamic countries have a rich and deep relationship dating back to the joint struggle against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Deepening the relationship further, King Abdullah's appointment in June 2011 of Prince Bandar bin Sultan as the head of Saudi intelligence is seen by many observers as strengthening the evidence for Saudi-Pakistani nuclear cooperation. Bandar, it will be recalled, played a key role in liaising with Pakistani intelligence during the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan. Buttressed by his relationships during this pivotal episode, Bandar would be well positioned to oversee the transfer of Pakistani nuclear weapons.

Yet several unanswered questions remain regarding the disincentives for both countries and the questionable benefits of cooperation. First, the assumption of a Saudi-Pak bomb assumes that Islamic fraternity, economic calculations (in Pakistan's case, free or low cost oil) and personal relationships would carry the day in determining Islamabad's decision to assist Riyadh. But transfer carries several risks for Pakistan. The first of these is putting the U.S. strategic relationship in jeopardy. Obviously, the bilateral relationship is characterized by a high degree of mistrust and bitterness on Afghanistan. But at a broader level there are still robust ties and Washington still has significant leverage over Islamabad. But more importantly, there is the risk to Pakistan of embroiling itself in Saudi-Iranian cold war, when it already has enough on its plate with India. As Pakistan well knows from the Kargil conflict, low-intensity conflict and terrorism can still occur between two nuclear-armed states that are locked in a deterrent relationship.¹¹ And Iran is amply equipped to hit Pakistan with terrorist attacks through its longstanding ties with Pakistani Shi'a proxies.

From Saudi Arabia's perspective there are similar unknowns and disincentives. Aside from the aforementioned risk to the U.S-Saudi relationship, there is the question of what a Pakistani weapon will actually bring Saudi Arabia in terms of real deterrence and, more importantly, the symbolic prestige that is usually associated with joining the nuclear club. After all, as mentioned previously, much of Riyadh's threat perception of Iran is not really linked to the fear of a nuclear strike on Saudi soil but rather Iran's increased militancy and its ideological challenge to Riyadh's claim of Islamic leadership. Receiving a nuclear weapon from Pakistan, instead of developing one indigenously – a truly Saudi bomb – would do little to address these dilemmas of legitimacy. Indeed, transfer from

Pakistan would only throw the Kingdom's domestic shortcomings in technological expertise into sharper relief.

A Distinctly Saudi Response – Confront, But Hedge

Given these caveats, how will Saudi Arabia respond? In many respects, Riyadh's response to a nuclear Iran will follow a pattern of behavior established over the past several decades whenever the Kingdom has faced a major regional threat. If Saudi Arabia can be said to have a distinctive "style" of diplomacy it consists of the following tenets: reliance on an extra-regional patron (namely, the United States), avoiding bold policy decisions, conducting quiet petro-diplomacy behind the scenes, and keeping open multiple and seemingly contradictory policy options as a form of insurance. A decision to go nuclear would break all these tenets.

In place of such a seismic move, Riyadh is likely to quietly seek a security guarantee from the U.S. while at the same time maintaining diplomatic relations with Iran. This should not be viewed as appeasement but rather prudence. It must be remembered that, even at the height of its fiercest competition with Iran, Saudi Arabia has always pursued guarded outreach toward Iran as a neighbor and a fellow Islamic state.¹² With this in mind, much of Riyadh's response to a nuclear Iran will be dictated by how Iran would cross the threshold. An open test would place enormous pressure on Riyadh to make some sort of visible response of its own – an announcement of a U.S.-Gulf mutual security pact, for instance, or, less likely, an announcement or test of its own capability. Were Tehran to pursue an opaque or undeclared capability, Riyadh and the other Gulf states would have more leeway to maintain the status quo and preserve a degree of normalcy in their relationship with the Islamic Republic.

Finally, it should be emphasized that Saudi Arabia is not concerned solely with Iran but also its standing among other regional heavyweights. In this respect, the proliferation paths of Egypt, Turkey and, more remotely, Iraq will also weigh heavily on Saudi Arabia's decision calculus. Given its historical clout and pan-Arab leadership, Egypt poses a particularly thorny problem for Saudi Arabia, one that has been exacerbated by the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power. As remote as it may sound, a "Brotherhood bomb" in Egypt would arguably pose an even greater threat to the al-Saud than an Iranian one.

Partly in response to its warnings on Iran's nuclear program, Riyadh has been rewarded handsomely by the U.S. In late 2010, the Pentagon notified Congress of a 10-year, \$60 billion weapons package and related technical assistance to help fortify the Kingdom against Iranian coercion – the largest bilateral arms transfer in U.S. history. Yet despite this support, American officials and many commentators continue to warn of the Saudi potential for proliferation. Ironically, such warnings may actually become a self-fulfilling prophecy: in the face of

repeated, widespread, and highly vocal expectations from the U.S. that the Kingdom will proliferate, Riyadh may believe that *not* going down this path will make it appear weak in the face of domestic audiences, regional peers like Turkey and Egypt, and most important of all, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

¹ The author is grateful for the comments of George Perkovich in preparing this paper.

² The cable does not attribute the statement directly to King Abdallah but rather to the Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Adel al-Jubeir, who was describing the King's previous exhortations to the U.S: "He told you to cut off the head of the snake." See *The Guardian* (U.K.) "US embassy cables: Saudi king urges US strike on Iran," November 28, 2010.

³ For an analysis of Saudi-Iranian relations after the Arab revolts, see Frederic Wehrey, "Uprisings Jolt the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry," *Current History*, December 2011 and Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic Wehrey, "Arab Spring, Persian Winter," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011.

⁴ Nawaf Obaid, "Stepping into Iraq: Saudi Arabia Will Protect Sunnis If the U.S. Leaves," *Washington Post*, November 26, 2006. The debate over Saudi intervention is covered in Megan Stack, "Hands Off or Not? Saudis Wring Theirs Over Iraq," *New York Times*, May 24, 2006.

⁵ The CSS-2 has a circular error probable (CEP) of 1-4 km. In China, it is used for a nuclear payload.

⁶ Mark Hibbs, "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Ambitions," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2010. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/07/20/saudi-arabia-s-nuclear-ambitions/2fq6>

⁷ Hosam Matar, "Saudi Nuclear Program: A Mirage of Progress," *Al-Akhbar* (English); <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/4064>

⁸ Christopher Clary and Mara E. Karlin, "The Pak-Saudi Nuke and How to Stop It," *American Interest*, July/August 2012.

⁹ Bruce Riedel, "Enduring Allies: Pakistan's Partnership with Saudi Arabia Runs Deeper," Brookings Institution, December 9, 2011.

¹⁰ For an example of this argument, see the story in the Times of UK, quoting an unnamed "senior Saudi" and unnamed Western officials. *MSNBC*, "Report: Saudi Arabia to Buy Nukes if Iran Tests A-Bomb," February 10, 2012.

<http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2012/02/10/10369793-report-saudi-arabia-to-buy-nukes-if-iran-tests-a-bomb?lite>

¹¹ Ashley J. Tellis, Christine Fair, Jamison Jo Medby, *Limited Conflicts Under the Nuclear Umbrella: Indian and Pakistani Lessons from the Kargil Crisis* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

¹² See Frederic Wehrey et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008). This pattern also holds true for the Gulf Arab states. See Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," *Survival*, Vol. 49, No. 2, Summer 2007, pp. 111–128; Neil Partrick, "Dire Straits for US Mid-East Policy: The Gulf Arab States and US-Iran Relations," Royal United Services Institute, *Commentary*, January 9, 2008; Rodger Shanahan, "The Gulf states and Iran: robust competitors or interested bystanders?" Lowy Institute for International Policy, November 2009.