

Chapter 6

Don't Give Saudi Arabia an Easy Path to Nukes¹

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U.S. Secretary of Energy Rick Perry and Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih are about to meet in London to discuss a nuclear agreement that would allow Riyadh to enrich uranium and extract plutonium in return for American companies getting a chance to build nuclear reactors in Saudi Arabia. Inevitably, comparisons will be made with the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, which permitted limited uranium enrichment.

But the current debate over this deal is missing the most important point: The issue isn't whether it's fair to constrain the Saudis more than the Iranians, or whether there is an opportunity to revive U.S. nuclear manufacturing, or to thwart Russian and Chinese influence in the Middle East. It's that giving Riyadh a pass on tight nuclear nonproliferation rules would be playing with fire.

Despite its denials, Saudi Arabia's resistance to restrictions on uranium enrichment and plutonium extraction amounts to a public declaration that the kingdom wants to keep a nuclear weapons option open.

This is certainly the way Iran's program has been viewed. It's also why Riyadh wants this option; it is engaged in a struggle with Iran for regional dominance. But the U.S. government shouldn't condone it. Any nuclear agreement worth striking with Saudi Arabia must be at least as tight as the one Washington has with its neighbor the United Arab Emirates, which prohibits enrichment and reprocessing.

The Saudi regime's past behavior provides ample reason to insist on strict rules for nonproliferation. It was Riyadh, remember, that funded the development of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.² The United States should demand nothing less than what is seen as the nonproliferation gold standard for such agreements: no uranium enrichment and no extraction of plutonium.

The Saudis also possess the missiles needed to deliver nuclear weapons, should they ever acquire them. In the 1980s, they bought long-range DF-3 "East Wind" missiles from China—missiles that are designed to carry nuclear weapons—without informing the United States.³ Then, 10 years ago, they bought newer nuclear-capable Chinese missiles. They designated the Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Force as one of the five branches of the Royal Saudi Arabian Armed Forces, responsible for commissioning long-range mis-

1. This piece originally appeared as Victor Gilinsky and Henry Sokolski, "Don't Give Saudi Arabia An Easy Path to Nukes," *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2018, available from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/01/dont-give-saudi-arabia-an-easy-path-to-nukes/>.

2. Julian Borger, "Pakistan's Bomb and Saudi Arabia," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2010, available from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2010/may/11/pakistan-saudi-arabia>.

3. Jeffrey Lewis, "Why Did Saudi Arabia Buy Chinese Missiles?," *Foreign Policy*, January 30, 2014, available from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/30/why-did-saudi-arabia-buy-chinese-missiles/>.

siles. What is often left unsaid is that these missiles only make sense if armed with nuclear weapons.

Saudi Arabia is neither a stable state nor a benign actor in the Middle East that deserves U.S. coddling.

The U.S. government portrays Saudi Arabia as a partner in the fight against Islamic extremism, but the truth is that the Saudis have been the main purveyors of the fundamentalist religious doctrines that have spread the seeds of terrorism throughout the Arab world. Indeed, the Saudi-supported brand of Islam, Wahhabism, has served as inspiration for many of the world's most violent terrorists.⁴

But the most important reason for caution about any nuclear deal with Saudi Arabia is that it is unlikely to survive for long in its current form, because Saudi Arabia's ruling family is remarkably unstable. An absolutist monarchy that represses minorities, chops off heads of political opponents, and lacks a codified system of law is out of step with 21st-century reality. It rests on a shaky foundation. It is unclear whether a future regime that replaces the current monarchy would be friendly to U.S. interests. What is clear is that any new regime would inherit whatever nuclear technology and materials the current government acquires. It is worth recalling that the Shah of Iran was considered a good friend and a modernizer before being deposed in the 1979 revolution—and that the United States once supported a nascent nuclear program during his rule.

The United States shouldn't get carried away by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reported efforts to modernize the country, in particular the highly advertised decision to let women drive. More significant is his extremely poor judgment in getting involved in a war in Yemen, and his zeal for confronting Iran. His method of shaking money out of Saudi billionaires, meanwhile, should raise concerns about the kingdom's financial situation.

A nuclear cooperation agreement pursuant to the U.S. Atomic Energy Act—which is different from the political understanding reached with Iran—would last for decades, and any enriched uranium and plutonium explosives produced under it would last indefinitely.

If the United States cuts a deal with Riyadh on nuclear power, it must restrict Saudi nuclear activity strictly to generating electricity.

The Saudis don't need uranium enrichment for this. The United States doesn't even have a U.S.-owned uranium enricher, and there is no country today operating nuclear power plants that needs to separate plutonium. Any interest in doing so raises obvious questions about ulterior military motives.

The existing U.S. deal with the United Arab Emirates, which is just completing construction of four nuclear power reactors, should serve as a model for the type of tight restrictions that should be placed on Saudi Arabia's nuclear energy program. It meets the exigencies of international security while imposing no economic penalties.

4. "What is Wahhabism? The reactionary branch of Islam from Saudi Arabia said to be 'the main source of global terrorism,'" *The Telegraph*, May 19, 2017, available from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/29/what-is-wahhabism-the-reactionary-branch-of-islam-said-to-be-the/>.