Adventures of the Reckless: Iran Pushes Mohammad bin Salman Toward a Foolhardy Nuclear Arms Race

By Mutaz Ashraf
Translation by Maya Hardimon
February 25, 2018

The reckless Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman lives by the mantra “we do as the Iranians do.” He’s tyrannizing his country as he wastes more public money in his adventures against arch-rival Iran after the failure of his attempts to shut down every step in the process of Iran signing a memorandum of understanding of its nuclear project with the international community. Under the weight of his frustration and confusion after Saudi losses in battle, Saudi Arabia’s propaganda machines suddenly began praising the Kingdom’s entrance into the nuclear club as well as the legendary role of the reckless Crown Prince in introducing Riyadh to a new race. This race comes in a region where there is no need for rash steps in light of the negative ramifications of a possible confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, where each party attempts to suppress its adversary by any means necessary.

Dimensions of the Project
In a telling sign, the Saudi newspaper “Al Riyadh” reported that Saudi Arabia had achieved a diplomatic victory in its development of nuclear energy, allegedly due to the country’s enthusiasm and global competitive advantage. The article praised the reckless Crown Prince’s wisdom and capabilities as well as the confidence the international community has in him. It then painted a picture of the Saudi nuclear program as if it came out of nowhere. The article claimed to prove international acceptance of the program, saying “Saudi Arabia’s nuclear energy program is going well, with American officials announcing that Trump supports the sale of nuclear reactors to Saudi Arabia.” However, the newspaper confirmed the Kingdom’s refusal of America’s imposition of harsh conditions on its nuclear program because “relying on American companies to build these reactors necessitates the signing of a treaty for peaceful nuclear cooperation known as a 123 agreement, which calls for separation between civil and military nuclear facilities and hinders the development of nuclear bombs.” This raises questions about the original point of the Crown Prince’s reckless ambition.

The Saudi newspaper revealed that Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is building his project with numerous allies; he has talked to ten countries, including China, Russia, and South Korea, about his goal to build “16 nuclear power reactors over the next 20-25 years.” The paper noted that Saudi Arabia has “many broad options, including not signing the [123] agreement and developing nuclear energy with non-Americans. However, there is talk in Washington about exempting the Kingdom from signing this agreement if it wants to obtain nuclear energy, as losing the Saudi deal to a rival country would be considered a defeat for any US president; last year, America rushed to pass a huge weapons deal for Saudi Arabia after Riyadh moved to buy the S-400 missile system from Moscow.”

Continuous Steps
On July 24, 2017, the Saudi Council of Ministers approved the establishment of a national atomic energy project, an issue which bin Salman raised after the signing of an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Russia in the field of peaceful uses of atomic energy in 2016. Throughout 2015, bin Salman also signed a
number of agreements and memoranda of understanding with Russia in the field of nuclear energy, with France in the field of waste management (including cooperation between the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy and the French Institute for Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN) and between King Abdullah City and the French National Radioactive Waste Management Agency), and with Japan in the fields of energy, petrochemicals, industry, and electricity. Saudi Arabia also signed 14 agreements and a memorandum of understanding with China, which included renewable energy cooperation between King Abdullah City and China’s National Energy Commission and cooperation in establishing a high-temperature gas-cooled nuclear reactor. In 2016, after years where the issue wasn’t discussed in Saudi Arabia, Saudi Minister of Energy Khaled Al Falih announced that the location of the first nuclear plant in Saudi Arabia would soon be chosen.

Why Now?

Iran is a thorn in Saudi Arabia’s side, according those observing the Crown Prince feverishly moving toward joining the nuclear club at any price. It is important to consider the statement of the Chairman of the Saudi Geological Survey, Dr. Zohair Nawab that came along with the initiation of a project to survey and assess uranium and thorium resources. According to the Saudi paper “Okaz,” Dr. Nawab confirmed that the project is being carried out according to the orders of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Adding to the intrigue of the story, he added “the Kingdom has no intention to use these two raw materials for military purposes.”

Prince Turki Al Faisal, a member of the Saudi royal family, was clearer than anyone else when he spoke about Saudi Arabia responding to a nuclear Iran when he stressed that reaching an agreement with Iran about its nuclear program could push his country, along with others in the region, to start developing nuclear fuel. In an interview with the BBC on Monday, March 16, 2015, Al Faisal said: “I have always said that whatever comes out of these talks, we will want the same. . . . If Iran has the capacity to enrich uranium at any level, Saudi Arabia won’t be the only one to demand this [capacity] as well.” He continued, “The entire world will become open to following this unrestricted path.”

Earlier, a NATO official said that he had received intelligence that nuclear weapons manufactured in Pakistan on behalf of Saudi Arabia were now ready for delivery. In this context, during a conference in Sweden, Amos Yadlin, the former head of the Israeli Defense Force’s Military Intelligence Directorate, said that if Iran succeeded in making a nuclear bomb, “the Saudis will not wait a single month. They have already paid for the bomb, so they will go to Pakistan and get what they need.”

Abdulrahman al-Rashed, a prominent Saudi writer favored by the Saudi regime, confirmed that theoretically, will have to protect itself politically and militarily from the Iranian nuclear regime either through acquiring a nuclear deterrent weapon or by reaching agreements that restore the balance of power, protecting Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. He pointed out that given Tehran’s history of aggression towards neighboring Saudi Arabia, there is no doubt that Riyadh is one of the potential targets on Iran’s nuclear map. He said that Iran has not stopped targeting Saudi Arabia either directly or by proxy, explaining Saudi Arabia’s justification for turning to nuclear balance with Iran by force.

Plan B

On the other hand, observers on the Iranian side have said that Riyadh is trying to make the international community “regret” resolving the Iranian file through signaling a potential nuclear arms race in the region. According to a report by an Iranian-supported news agency, Saudi Arabia is using a “reaction” model, and after the signing of Iran’s agreement with the international community, Riyadh turned to plan b, which involves continuous engagement with its Iranian opposition and following the rule “What Iran does, we’ll do too.”
The report pointed out that the Saudi nuclear program has never existed in the context of a “national dream” or aspirations for a national renaissance, which has been the case for similar projects for around 31 countries around the world; rather, it came through the idea of doing as the Iranians do. The news agency described Mohammad bin Salman’s visits as one of the Saudi models of “anger” in its confrontations with Iran. Its report stressed the intensification of Riyadh’s determination, its current high level of enthusiasm toward its nuclear project, and the fact that this trend of statements does not exclude the option of resorting to the purchase of a nuclear bomb!