

Chapter 9

A Cautionary Tale for Dealing with Riyadh¹

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As Washington mulls granting Saudi Arabia a permissive civilian nuclear cooperative agreement in the name of peace and prosperity, it should understand we've been here before. Presidents Carter, Clinton, Bush, and Obama also loosened the reins on "atoms for peace" in the name of stability. Their efforts, however, were less than optimal.

Jimmy Carter was willing to finalize a nuclear cooperative agreement with Iran to demonstrate America's support of the Shah's regime. Bill Clinton suspended routine international nuclear inspections of North Korea to secure a unique nuclear Agreed Framework with Pyongyang. George W. Bush went further. He skirted the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to cement a civil nuclear agreement with India, a nonmember. Finally, Barack Obama led the charge to negotiate a special nuclear political understanding with the mullahs.

Each believed they could ensure a more certain peace by allowing these states access to modern, dual-use nuclear technology under some form of inspections. Rather than abate these countries' nuclear weapons ambitions, though, each nuclear deal, to varying degrees, fueled them.

In the case of Iran, President Carter saw the Shah much as we now view Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman—as the guarantor of American interests in the Persian Gulf. Carter championed the Shah's nuclear power aspirations and reopened U.S. negotiations to assist the program. Shortly thereafter, the Shah died and the Mullahs inherited the program. Soon, they began a uranium enrichment program followed by suspicious nuclear weapons-related activities.

Bill Clinton hoped by offering nuclear power assistance to North Korea, he could buy time to wean Pyongyang away from producing weapons plutonium. Pyongyang, however, broke its no enrichment pledge under Clinton's Agreed Framework, built and tested its first bomb in 2006, and soon may use American light water reactor technology America transferred under the Framework to make more nuclear weapons materials.²

After 9/11, George W. Bush was keen to make a friend in India. He hoped that by allowing New Delhi access to otherwise prohibited civilian nuclear know-how and commodities, he could end India's inter-

1. This piece originally appeared as Henry Sokolski, "A cautionary tale for dealing with Riyadh," *The Hill*, March 14, 2018, available from <http://thehill.com/opinion/international/378458-a-cautionary-tale-for-dealing-with-riyadh>.

2. David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Allison Lach, "On-Going Monitoring of Activities at the Yongbyon Nuclear Site," *Institute for Science and International Security*, February 13, 2018, available from http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Monitoring_Yongbyon_13Feb2018_Final.pdf.

national nuclear isolation and “bring India into the nuclear nonproliferation mainstream.”³ Instead, the deal allowed India to import otherwise banned uranium that, in turn, freed up nearly all India’s domestic uranium resources, which could legally be enriched for military purposes.⁴ With this importation in full swing⁵ India currently is engaged in a massive military fissile production build up.⁶

As for the Iran deal, critics fear Tehran is using previously frozen financial assets that the understanding released to help build out a fleet of nuclear-capable missiles, which Iran might arm with nuclear warheads just as soon as restrictions on it enriching uranium are relaxed. Among these critics is President Trump.

None of this history makes for pleasant reading. All of it, though, is directly relevant to any U.S. effort to strike a civil nuclear agreement with Saudi Arabia. The deal most often discussed is one that would allow the Saudis (now or in due course) to enrich uranium and reprocess spent fuel—two activities that can bring the Kingdom to the brink of making nuclear weapons. The premise behind cutting such a permissive deal is that if we want to restrain an aspiring nuclear weapons state, we must first demonstrate our trust that it will not go nuclear by sharing dual-use technology essential for both civil and military use. The hope here is that the economic lure of this technology’s peaceful uses and our influence in making the sale would temper these states’ desires to ever use the technology to build bombs.

As already noted, history has not been kind to this proposition. Nor does it help that in the Saudi case, the economics of nuclear power are now negative compared to cheaper natural gas, wind, and photo voltaic and solar thermal storage systems that can provide electricity 24/7.⁷ These are the technologies and fuels we should be helping the Saudis with, which, in turn, could help to focus the world (and Iran) on what Tehran should be pursuing instead of nuclear power.

Proponents of a cutting a permissive deal with Riyadh, however, insist that none of this matters; that if the United States does not make accommodations and the sale, Russia and China (or France) will; and that if they do, they will undermine the “nonproliferation” influence that America otherwise would enjoy. This narrative, although popular, is specious. First, it ignores how improbable a reactor sale in the Kingdom is unless it is South Korean (a nuclear vendor the Washington has considerable leverage over).⁸

Second, if we buy its basic logic, we are immediately reduced to caving to anything the Saudis might

3. Gregory L. Schulte, “The India Safeguards Agreement: Moving India Towards the Nonproliferation Mainstream,” *U.S. Department of State*, July 24, 2008, available from <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rm/2008/109025.htm>.

4. Zia Mian, Abdul Hameed Nayyar, R. Rajaraman, and M.V. Ramana, “Plutonium Production in India and the U.S.-India Nuclear deal,” available from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265228293_CHAPTER_4_PLUTONIUM_PRODUCTION_IN_INDIA_AND_THE_US-INDIA_NUCLEAR_DEAL.

5. “India continues to import fuel for nuclear power reactors in large quantities,” *Newsroom 24x7*, January 5, 2018, available from <https://newsroom24x7.com/2018/01/05/india-continues-to-import-fuel-for-nuclear-power-reactors-in-large-quantities/>.

6. Adrian Levy, “India is Building a Top-Secret Nuclear City to Produce Thermonuclear Weapons, Experts Say,” *Foreign Policy*, December 16, 2015, available from http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/16/india_nuclear_city_top_secret_china_pakistan_barcl/.

7. Ali Ahmad, “Economic Considerations of Nuclear Power Deployments in Saudi Arabia,” *Nonproliferation Policy Education Center*, November 2017, available from http://npolicy.org/Articles/Ahmad_Saudi_Arabia.pdf and Peter Fairley, “The United Arab Emirates’ Nuclear Power Gambit,” *IEEE Spectrum*, January 4, 2018, available from <https://spectrum.ieee.org/energy/nuclear/the-united-arab-emirates-nuclear-power-gambit>.

8. Henry Sokolski, “5 Myths About Saudi Arabia’s Nuclear Program,” *The National Interest*, March 6, 2018, available from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/5-myths-about-saudi-arabias-nuclear-program-24771>.

demand. It's also at war with itself. On the one hand, we are told we should downplay nonproliferation concerns when dealing with a close friend (e.g., an India, Saudi Arabia, or an Iran under the Shah) because they can and should be trusted. On the other hand, we are warned, if we don't, they will betray our trust and go elsewhere.

Here, it is worth noting that our closest ally in the Middle East, Israel, is wary of a nuclear Saudi Arabia. Prime Minister Netanyahu recently urged Washington to reject cutting any nuclear deal with Riyadh unless the Kingdom legally forswore enrichment and reprocessing.⁹ The Israelis, of course, live in the Middle East; have bombed or threatened to bomb reactors in Iraq, Syria and Iran; and fear being bombed themselves. Their history also is instructive.

9. Herb Keinon, "Elections Take Back Seat to Nuclearized Middle East at Cabinet Meeting," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 11, 2018, available from <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Elections-take-back-seat-to-nuclearized-Middle-East-at-cabinet-meeting-544774>.