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Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Temptations
Lessons Learned from Regional Instability

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Key Takeaways

- If Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions are framed by energy diversification, security concerns are also to consider, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman repeatedly signaling that Riyadh would match an Iranian bomb.
- The June 2025 war between Israel and Iran exposed the limits of nuclear latency and the fragility of Gulf deterrence, heightening Saudi fears of being sidelined in a new regional order.
- Riyadh has consistently insisted on retaining the right to domestic enrichment and reprocessing (E&R), resisting U.S. "gold standard" restrictions and showing limited willingness to accept additional IAEA safeguards.
- While Saudi technical capacity remains insufficient for rapid proliferation, regional insecurity, doubts about U.S. guarantees, and fragile détente with Iran increase the temptation to hedge.

Introduction

Saudi Arabia's integration in the international arena and regional stability, notably through reducing its dependence on fossil energies, are crucial elements for the success of the Kingdom's Vision 2030, the Crown Prince's top priority. However, Mohammed bin Salman's declarations in 2018 and 2021, indicating that "if Iran develops a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible",[1] combined with the recent strikes on key Iranian nuclear facilities, do not bode well for the future of the Kingdom, the region and the non-proliferation regime at large.

The Kingdom's nuclear history remains limited. Riyadh acceded to the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1988 and concluded a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) only in 2009. Its nuclear infrastructure is embryonic: a low-power research reactor, exploration of domestic uranium reserves, and training programs through KA-CARE. Unlike the United Arab Emirates, which has already commissioned the Barakah power reactors under a "gold standard" 123 Agreement (a key component of the US framework for nuclear cooperation, established under the Atomic Energy Act of 1954),[2] Riyadh has insisted on retaining the option of domestic enrichment and reprocessing (E&R), technologies central to the nuclear fuel cycle and directly relevant to weapons production. This stance has long stalled negotiations with Washington and raised proliferation concerns among observers.[3]

The regional context has shifted dramatically since June 2025, when Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear sites left the Iranian threat weakened but not eliminated.[4] For Saudi Arabia, the 12-day war crystallized three lessons. First, nuclear latency—long seen as Iran's strategic hedge—offers no guarantee against preventive strikes. Second, US security guarantees remain uncertain, as Gulf monarchies watched Washington's reluctance to contain Israel's maximalist war aims, and even its participation in the war despite the risks of escalation.[5] Third, despite the 2023 China-brokered détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia,[6] Tehran's symbolic retaliation on a US base in Qatar proved that Iran would not hesitate to put the Gulf monarchies on the front line, even the one with which it enjoys good relations, creating a dent in the ongoing confidence-building process.[7] These developments heightened Riyadh's anxiety of being sidelined in a new regional order shaped by Israeli power and Iranian resilience. Moreover, as Riyadh doubts Washington's reliability, it is exploring hedging strategies with Beijing, which replaced the US as the Saudis' first commercial

1. "Saudi Crown Prince: If Iran Develops Nuclear Bomb, So Will We", CBS News, March 15, 2018.
2. D. Kimball, K. Reif, "The U.S. Atomic Energy Act Section 123 At a Glance", Arms Control Association, September 2023.
3. K. Davenport, "Saudi Push for Enrichment Raises Concerns", Arms Control Association, November 2023.
4. S. Malloney, "Iran's Dangerous Desperation", *Foreign Affairs*, August 6, 2025.
5. B. Ravid, "Scoop: Gulf Leaders Told Trump They Oppose Strikes on Iran's Nuclear Program", Axios, May 29, 2025.
6. "Iran and Saudi Arabia Agree to Restore Relations", Al Jazeera, March 10, 2023.
7. G. Gause III, "The Gulf States in a Fluid Post-war Middle East", Middle East Institute, August 6, 2025.

partner.[8] That said, the Kingdom remains aware of China's limitations in the geopolitical realm,[9] as demonstrated by its aloofness during the 12-day war.

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia's nuclear calculus is evolving. This paper examines three dimensions. First, it assesses the Kingdom's nuclear aspirations and technical limitations, focusing on uranium enrichment and the indigenous workforce gap. Second, it analyzes Riyadh's ambiguous approach to the non-proliferation regime, marked by reluctance to adopt additional safeguards and a determination to preserve strategic flexibility. Finally, it draws lessons from the June 2025 war for nuclear thinking in the Middle East, highlighting how Iran's trajectory and regional instability shape Riyadh's and its neighbors' options.[10] The central argument is that while Saudi Arabia lacks the technical base for rapid proliferation, political will and regional insecurity could accelerate its nuclear temptations, testing the resilience of the global non-proliferation regime.

Saudi Arabia's nuclear considerations: Aspirations exceeding the technical capabilities

Saudi Arabia and the United States were reportedly very close to signing a deal under the Biden administration, allowing for nuclear cooperation, the transfer of sensitive technology and know-how, as well as US security guarantees to the kingdom, in exchange for normalization with Israel.[11] The main sticking point was Saudi uranium E&R capabilities, a potential pathway to a nuclear weapon. The October 7th attacks, the devastating war in Gaza, and Israel's refusal to recognize Palestinian statehood have since then halted the talks. In April 2025, Energy Secretary Wright indicated that the Trump administration had revived them, delinking his deal from normalization with Israel[12] and is considering uranium enrichment on Saudi soil.[13] While the exact details remain unknown, Trump agreeing to domestic enrichment would not come as a surprise, since he was already willing to transfer nuclear technology without concluding a nuclear cooperation agreement during his first term.[14]

8. The Observatory of Economic Complexity, May 2025, available at: https://oec.world/en/profile/country/sau.
9. J.-L. Samaan, "L'Arabie saoudite face à la compétition sino-américaine. La tentation du pivot de Mohammed bin Salman", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, Ifri, March 8, 2023.
10. K. Sharifi, "Iran Threatens Nuclear Exit and Oil Choke Point as War with Israel Escalates", Radio Free Europe, June 16, 2025.
11. A. Mitchell, Y. Talmazan, "U.S. Talks for a Landmark Deal with Saudi Arabia and Israel Are Gaining Steam", NBC News, September 22, 2023.
12. P. Magid, "Exclusive: Under Trump, Saudi Civil Nuclear Talks Delinked from Israel Recognition, Sources Say", Reuters, May 8, 2025.
13. V. Nereim, "U.S. Revives Talks with Saudi Arabia on Transfer of Nuclear Technology", *The New York Times*, April 13, 2025.
14. C. Kane, "Why Proposals to Sell Nuclear Reactors to Saudi Arabia Raises Red Flags", *The Conversation*, February 23, 2019, available at: www.theconversation.com.

There are several concerns regarding the Saudis' ambition to develop in-house enrichment capabilities. Before delving into them, it is worth noting that Saudi Arabia's intention to include nuclear energy in its energy mix is not alarming. The collapse of oil prices in 2014-2016, mainly driven by a supply glut from US shale and OPEC's decision to keep production high to protect market share,[15] convinced the Crown Prince of the need to diversify the kingdom's economy and reduce its dependence on oil.[16] It was in that context that Vision 2030 emerged, emphasizing the development of domestic industries, an energy-intensive endeavor. Adding nuclear power to their energy mix would therefore enable them to reduce domestic oil consumption, preserving it for export, while providing a stable, non-fossil baseline energy source, as opposed to intermittent sources like solar or wind.[17] Note that the kingdom aims to generate electricity from a 50-50 mix of renewables and natural gas by 2030.[18] The recent departure of NEOM's CEO, the dismissal of various senior officials[19] and the financial challenges they are facing cast doubt over the feasibility of achieving Vision 2030, especially as past Saudi long-term strategic plans did not pan out as planned.[20]

There are several concerns regarding the Saudis' ambition to develop in-house enrichment capabilities

While it is important to avoid conflating nuclear energy with national security and balance of power, the Crown Prince's assertion that the kingdom will mirror Iran's nuclear capabilities strengthens the proliferation lens through which the Saudi nuclear program is perceived, despite its compelling case for energy diversification. Saudi Arabia currently seems caught between nuclear ambiguity - opaque intentions - and nuclear ambivalence, with its leadership divided over the program's direction,[21] though only MBS's close circle can attest to that. This uncertainty is closely tied to Iran's trajectory, which has thus far remained a latent nuclear power through its mastery of uranium enrichment, an expertise Saudi Arabia is determined to acquire. Nuclear latency refers to the acquisition of technical capacity to produce nuclear weapons within a short timeframe, without necessarily intending to do so.[22] While latency is often linked to civilian programs, it does

15. "What's Behind the Drop in Oil Price?", World Economic Forum, March 2, 2016.
16. G. Gause III, "Fresh Prince: the Schemes and Dreams of Saudi Arabia's Next King", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 3, 2018, pp. 75-86.
17. A. Baschwitz, C. Cany et al., "Nuclear and Intermittent Renewables: Two Compatible Supply Options? The Case of the French Power Mix", *Energy Policy*, Vol. 95, 2016, pp. 135-146.
18. R. Khasawneh, "When Will Saudi Arabia's Utilities Ditch Oil?", Kepler, June 6, 2025.
19. F. Schiavi, "How Saudi Defense Shake-up Exposes Frustration with Localization Goals", *Al-Monitor*, August 24, 2025.
20. A. Sheline, K. C. Ulrichsen, "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and a Nation in Transition", Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2025.
21. G. Mukhatzhanova, W. Potter, S. Sagan (eds.), *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010.
22. S. Sagan, "The Causes of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2011, pp. 240.

not in itself signal intent to proliferate; however, patterns and timing of investment in nuclear resources can offer insights into strategic motivations.[23]

States facing enduring rivalry, especially those militarily inferior, may be more prone to pursue nuclear weapons. Yet rather than enhancing security through nuclear deterrence, the acquisition of nuclear weapons can provoke greater instability, triggering a regional arms race, or even preventive strikes, as demonstrated by the attacks on Iranian facilities. Security considerations are seldom enough to motivate a state to proliferate. Several factors often come into play; the most common combination is 1) deterring existential threats and preserving regime survival; 2) fostering national pride,[24] as demonstrated by the atom symbol on the Iranian rial note. Should Iran conduct a nuclear test, both factors might come into play in the Saudi decision-making process, particularly in the absence of US security guarantees ratified by Congress.

Saudi insistence on developing domestic nuclear expertise, unlike the UAE, which depends on foreign personnel under its 123 Agreement,[25] is also fuelled by a sense of pride and sovereignty, since such capabilities remain within the sovereign rights of NPT signatories. The US-UAE 'Gold standard' is one of the most comprehensive bilateral nuclear agreements there is, as the Emirates agreed to forgo E&R capabilities. Riyadh, however, categorically refuses to do the same, especially since it could obtain an entirely indigenous nuclear fuel cycle, as it holds 90,000 metric tons of uranium ore on its soil, sufficient for domestic use.[26]

The lack of Saudi nuclear engineers, plant operators, and waste-disposal experts remains an obstacle to the concrete implementation of a Saudi nuclear power program. While its aim for an indigenous program enables it to maintain a certain level of autonomy, this long-term investment cannot be developed overnight: Riyadh has historically been sending scientists to France and other experienced countries for training, but has in the past few years developed through KA-CARE (King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy) specific programs in local universities, mostly for undergraduate students as graduate programs already existed.[27] Capacity building within the Saudi nuclear workforce is essential for the successful development of a domestic nuclear program and aligns more broadly with the kingdom's strategy to expand domestic industries and ease employment pressure on the overly saturated public sector.[28]

23. J. Pilat, "Nuclear Latency and Hedging: Concepts, History and Issues", Wilson Center, September 2019.
24. J. E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
25. M. Haghirian, M. Al-Saidi, "A Quest for the Arabian Atom? Geopolitics, Security, and National Identity and the Nuclear Energy Programs in the Middle East", *Energy Research and Social Science*, Vol. 69, 2020.
26. D. Albright, S. Burkhard, A. Stricker, E. Wenig, "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Ambitions and Proliferation Risks", Institute for Science and International Security, March 2017.
27. NRRC, "Convention on Nuclear Safety, 8th Review Meeting – National Report of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia", 2018, available at: www.iaea.org.
28. "Saudi Arabia's Transformation from a Public Sector-dominated Economy into a Private Sector-driven System", Oxford Business Group.

That said, Saudi blogs have in the past highlighted disillusioned nuclear students struggling with job prospects, alongside an established engineer who complained about the limited funding and general neglect of nuclear studies.[29] Analysts now claim that the situation is improving, though it will take years to actually witness a competent workforce in the kingdom,[30] especially as the first Saudi research reactor, with which the appropriate trainings will be conducted, has yet to receive its fuel.[31]

Another constraint is Saudi Arabia's limited missile capabilities, the delivery system most likely to carry nuclear warheads. While Washington is Saudi Arabia's traditional defense partner, when it comes to missiles, China is the historic preferred option as it enjoys more leeway, unlike the US, subject to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).[32] At the end of the 1980s, Riyadh acquired more than 30 Chinese DF-3 intermediate-range ballistic missiles and nine launchers,[33] then would have reportedly purchased the more advanced DF-21 missile system in 2007, with the express condition from the US that it would be modified to remove its nuclear-capable components.[34] In 2021, satellite imagery revealed Saudi Arabia was building a ballistic missile facility with China,[35] raising concerns in Washington over its deepening ties with Beijing, though the extent of know-how transferred to the Saudis remains unclear. Note that Riyadh seems to showcase an interest in Ukrainian missiles, reportedly funding the development of Grom-2,[36] which it would have acquired at a later point, since it is believed to have returned this operational-tactical missile system in 2022 as part of a US-mediated aid package.[37]

Saudi Arabia's understanding of the nonproliferation regime

The kingdom sent out a request for information (RFI) to build 2 nuclear power plants of 2.8 GW in October 2017.[38] While it has yet to settle on a nuclear supplier between France, Korea, China and Russia, it is worth noting that it excluded the US from the bidding process in 2021, preferring to negotiate with Washington separately.[39] The Korean

29. "A Professor of Engineering Expresses A Desire: We Must Not Try to Please Any World Powers When It Is a Question of our National Interest and Development of our Power and Technology", *Al Hayat*, January 12, 2010.
30. NRRC, "Convention on Nuclear Safety, 8th Review Meeting – National Report of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia", *op. cit.*
31. P. Magid, "IAEA Chief Says Saudi *Research Reactor Almost Com*plete", Reuters, December 13, 2023.
32. M. Chaziza, "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Program and China", Middle East Institute, August 2020.
33. N. Cigar, *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons: How Do Countries Think About the Bomb?*, New York, Routledge, 2016.
34. M. Fitzpatrick, "Saudi Arabia's Ballistic-missile Programme: An Overview", IISS, August 27, 2021.
35. Z. Cohen, "CNN Exclusive: US Intel and Satellite Images Show Saudi Arabia Is Now Building Its Own Ballistic Missiles with Help of China", CNN, December 23, 2021.
36. "Ukraine Unveils Grom-2 SRBM", CSIS, January 4, 2018.
37. K. Griding, "Ukraine – Saudi Arabia: Partners in the Present and Future", Ukrainian Prism Foreign Policy Council, July 24, 2024.
38. S. Westall, R. Shamseddine, "Saudi Arabia Takes First Step Towards Nuclear Plant Tender", Reuters, October 31, 2017.
39. P. Chaffe, S. Cooke, "Newbuild: Behind Riyadh's Exclusion of Westinghouse and EDF", *Energy Intelligence*, June 10, 2022.

technology is reportedly Riyadh's favored option, having made its proof in a desert-like environment (the UAE),[40] but domestic E&R remains an issue, as KEPCO's technology is bound by US patents, requiring the signing of a 123 agreement. China could be a serious alternative, as it is already cooperating with Saudi Arabia on the mining of uranium ore on its soil and will also cover the milling portion of the fuel cycle. In addition, China is historically more flexible than the US and is more likely to accompany the Saudis in the development of in-house enrichment capabilities. China has economic and diplomatic incentives to collaborate in a flexible manner with Saudi Arabia, as it would strengthen its ties with a key US ally and gain a new buyer for its nuclear plants. Note that the context in which Pakistan's nuclear program benefited from extensive Chinese knowledge and technology sharing[41] has since then evolved, rendering Beijing's likelihood of collaborating with Riyadh in such a blatant manner.

While China is unlikely to impose the application of the IAEA's Additional Protocol (AP), an optional safeguards agreement that provides the agency with expanded rights of access to information and sites to enhance verification processes,[42] the US, through its 123 Agreement, would not only prohibit the Saudis from developing E&R capabilities, but also require it to sign and ratify the AP. Saudi Arabia has thus far adamantly refused to subject itself to what it believes are double standards applied to the region. It points to the 'blanket consents' granted to India and Japan in 2008 and 1987, respectively, which allow both New Delhi and Tokyo to develop E&R capabilities.[43] On the AP, Saudi Arabia has long echoed Egypt's rhetoric: given its voluntary nature under the NPT, there is little justification for adopting it since it is not mandatory under the NPT, especially when Israel, a nuclear-armed state, has neither signed the NPT nor subjected itself to comparable scrutiny.[44] They also deemed it unfair that Iran was allowed to enrich up to 3.67%, despite having operated in bad faith in the past.[45]

Saudi Arabia has a history of resisting safeguards agreements

Saudi Arabia has a history of resisting safeguards agreements, perceiving its relations with the IAEA through the lens of a power struggle. It became a party to the NPT in 1988 under American pressure, after discovering Saudi Arabia's acquisition of Chinese CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles.[46] Although it was expected to conclude a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) shortly thereafter, the CSA only entered into

40. J. B., IAEA liaison with KA-CARE, interview with the author (August 18, 2022).
41. "Declassified Documents Show That, for Over Fifteen Years, Beijing Rebuffed U.S. Queries on Chinese Aid to Pakistani Nuclear Program", The National Security Archive, March 5, 2004.
42. IAEA official website, available at: www.iaea.org.
43. D. Kimball, K. Reif, "The U.S. Atomic Energy Act Section 123 at a Glance", Arms Control Association, September 2023.
44. "Status List: Conclusion of Safeguards Agreements, Additional Protocols and Small Quantities Protocol", IAEA, December 31, 2022.
45. R. S., Section Head in the Safeguards Department at the IAEA, interview with the author (August 22, 2022).
46. T. W. Lippman, "Nuclear Weapons and Saudi Strategy", Middle East Institute, January 4, 2008.

force in 2009.[47] Similarly, Saudi Arabia was among the last countries to adopt the Small Quantities Protocol in 2005, and announced its intention to rescind it only in September 2024.[48] Prior to that, it was under no obligation to declare facilities and allow IAEA inspectors within its premises[49]: nuclear enrichment facilities could have been constructed with no legal obligation to declare them. As for the AP, Riyadh understands its inspections as "anytime anywhere", remembering the invasive monitoring system of 1991 Iraq, though its usual implementation is less invasive[50] and thus perceives it as a limitation on its activities in the nuclear field.[51] While nothing suggests at present that Saudi Arabia is in violation of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, its limited cooperation with the IAEA may stem from a combination of institutional opacity, poor understanding of the agency's scope and a reluctance to share its 'shortcomings' to regional and domestic audiences.[52]

Saudi Arabia, together with Egypt, was an early and consistent supporter of a Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (MENWFZ), viewing it as a way to address regional security and ensure equal commitments from all states, including Israel. For years, Riyadh linked its calls for the MENWFZ directly to Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal, criticizing what it perceived as double standards and the lack of international pressure on Tel Aviv. However, as concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions grew in the early 2000s, Saudi Arabia's emphasis on the MENWFZ decreased, shifting toward preventing Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons. While the MENWFZ remained a concept Riyadh supported, its practical priority was overshadowed by the immediate security challenge posed by Iran.

Saudi Arabia is likely to choose a nuclear supplier according to the constraints imposed and the degree of transparency it is prepared to accept. Clearly, the Kingdom wishes to keep its options open through the development of an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle and the spread of know-how. If it were to proliferate, Riyadh would do so using domestic capabilities rather than relying on a 'Sunni nuclear umbrella' as many have suggested in the past:[53] The idea of a 'Sunni bomb' stems from reports suggesting Saudi financial assistance to Pakistan's nuclear program. Speculation grew after a 1999 visit by Prince Sultan ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz to Pakistani nuclear facilities. However, Islamabad relies heavily on U.S. economic and military aid, which it would jeopardize by sharing its nuclear arsenal with the Kingdom,[54] especially given the hardship it went through to develop its

47. INFCIRC/746, "Agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards in Connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons", IAEA, February 16, 2009.
48. R. Al Awwal, "Saudi Arabia to Switch from SQP to Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with IAEA", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 16, 2024.
49. J. B., IAEA liaison with KA-CARE, interview with the author (August 18, 2022).
50. J. B., Section Head in the Safeguards Department at the IAEA, interview with the author (August 24, 2022).
51. R. Grossi, Director General of the IAEA, interview with the author (August 26, 2022).
52. F. Wehrey, "What's Behind Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Anxiety?", *CERI Strategy*, Paper, No. 15a, December 17, 2012.
53. G. Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 2006, pp. 421-443.
54. J. J. Macho Guerrero, "Nuclear Perspectives in Saudi Arabia", Security Distillery, June 25, 2021.

nuclear weapons.[55] Lastly, dependence on Pakistani nuclear assurances would undermine Riyadh's ambition to assert regional leadership, particularly as Iran managed to advance its program independently despite sustained economic pressure.

The Kingdom seems to think that its importance in the economic world order would shield it from severe repercussions: its control over oil prices has led the Saudis to expect lenient treatment, similar to India and Israel, though Riyadh does not seem to consider its commitment to the NPT, which neither of the aforementioned nuclear-weapon countries signed. A proliferating Saudi Arabia might therefore face a more aggressive international community, especially given the economic and financial constraints it is under due to Vision 2030, going from lender to borrower, but also as the oil market increasingly becomes immune to regional spats: After the attacks on Iran in June, the oil prices did not rise as much as expected, weakening Saudi Arabia's role as swing state. However, the actual imposition of sanctions on the Kingdom is not as relevant as the Saudis' perception and understanding of the potential repercussions, as it is this anticipation of events that will drive the kingdom's strategy towards or away from proliferation. Misrepresentation of the situation is a possibility, further exacerbated in an autocratic regime, as the ruler surrounds himself with 'yes-men'.[56] MBS may thus be led to believe that he can avoid serious consequences if he were to cross the nuclear threshold. In sum, intentions matter most: Riyadh is aware of its technical deficit, both on the infrastructure and human capacity fronts, and is looking to overcome it to achieve its policy goals.

Regional implications of Saudi proliferation ambitions

Saudi Arabia and its neighboring countries should consider a strategy of balance of power to mitigate Israeli hegemony, given their differing perceptions of regional order. The 12-day war further cemented Saudi Arabia's belief that it must increasingly count on itself for protection. The US has faltered too many times to be deemed reliable, and neither Russia nor China looks like a credible alternative, especially after their lack of support for their Iranian partner. That said, as Israeli hegemony grows, one might expect Tel Aviv to exert pressure on Washington, further complicating the kingdom's nuclear developments. Though this raises the question of Trump's calculus: in the context of the US growing irritation over Israeli actions in the region,[57] will he consider a nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia a better "deal" for the US? In either case, an Israeli strike on Saudi facilities

55. D. Esfandiary, A. Tabatabai, "Why Nuclear Dominoes Won't Fall in the Middle East", *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 22, 2015.
56. S. Sagan, "Armed and Dangerous: When Dictators Get the Bomb", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 6, 2018.
57. T. Bateman, G. Edwards, L. Mintz, "Americans Used to Be Steadfast in Their Support for Israel. Those Days Are Gone", BBC, May 6, 2025.

could be anticipated if clear signs of proliferation emerge, an element that is certainly present in the Saudi mindset and strategic calculus.

Nuclear latency, the way the Iranians intended to use it, proved insufficient to deter external attacks. Achieving latent capabilities, especially when in violation of IAEA safeguard agreements, might, on the contrary, enhance the risks of a military strike, with no credible deterrent to offer. Iran's use of its program as a bargaining chip for sanction relief, while initially successful, eventually went south as Teheran failed to account for the evolving context and the various players' threshold for an attack. Therefore, overreliance on nuclear latency should not be a strategy in and of itself: its limitations were brought forward by the 12-day war and observing countries might be inclined to rush for the bomb once their latent capabilities are achieved, further undermining the deterrent factor of such capacities.

Saudi Arabia is likely to remain discreet on its nuclear intentions

In that optic, Saudi Arabia is likely to remain discreet on its nuclear intentions, refrain from statements akin to those made by MBS in 2018 and 2021, and focus on the development of its in-house capabilities for energy purposes, maintaining the door open for proliferation if deemed necessary. Time, however, is against the kingdom: it has yet to decide on a supplier for its nuclear facilities, which are likely to take TEN years for construction in the best-case scenario. In the meantime, Iran is at a crossroads: either it agrees to enter negotiations on its nuclear program, or it rushes for the bomb. In both cases, it is in Riyadh's interest to remain on good terms with its Shia rival.

While nuclear alarmism is counterproductive, it is difficult to overlook the potential for a domino effect in the region, in the wake of an Iranian breakout, which could put an end to the already fragile nonproliferation regime. Saudi efforts towards the acquisition of a nuclear arsenal could lead to an Egyptian and Turkish attempt to follow suit, especially if the international community reacts complacently to the kingdom. Both Ankara and Cairo currently have nuclear power programs underway, and both aspire for a more prominent role in the region. That said, Egypt's financial struggles and its non-existent hold over its nuclear power program render the risk of proliferation, whereas Turkey's NATO membership could provoke US backlash in an already fragile economic situation.

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