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Saudi Nuclear Power Plants and the Danger of Proliferation

by [Simon Henderson](#)

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Brief Analysis

Riyadh's continuing closeness to Pakistan could prevent Washington from allowing the export of nuclear technology to the kingdom.

Sometime in March, Saudi Arabia is expected to announce favored bidders for multibillion-dollar contracts for two nuclear power projects. The need for nuclear power in the kingdom, which has the world's largest easily recoverable oil reserves, is justifiable in terms of freeing more oil for export and providing a baseload of electricity generation not achievable by solar power. A U.S. consortium led by Westinghouse is competing with bids from Russian, Chinese, French, and South Korean companies for orders eventually projected to total sixteen reactors over the next twenty-five years. In order to improve American chances of winning, the Trump administration is reported to be considering weakening or not applying proliferation controls.

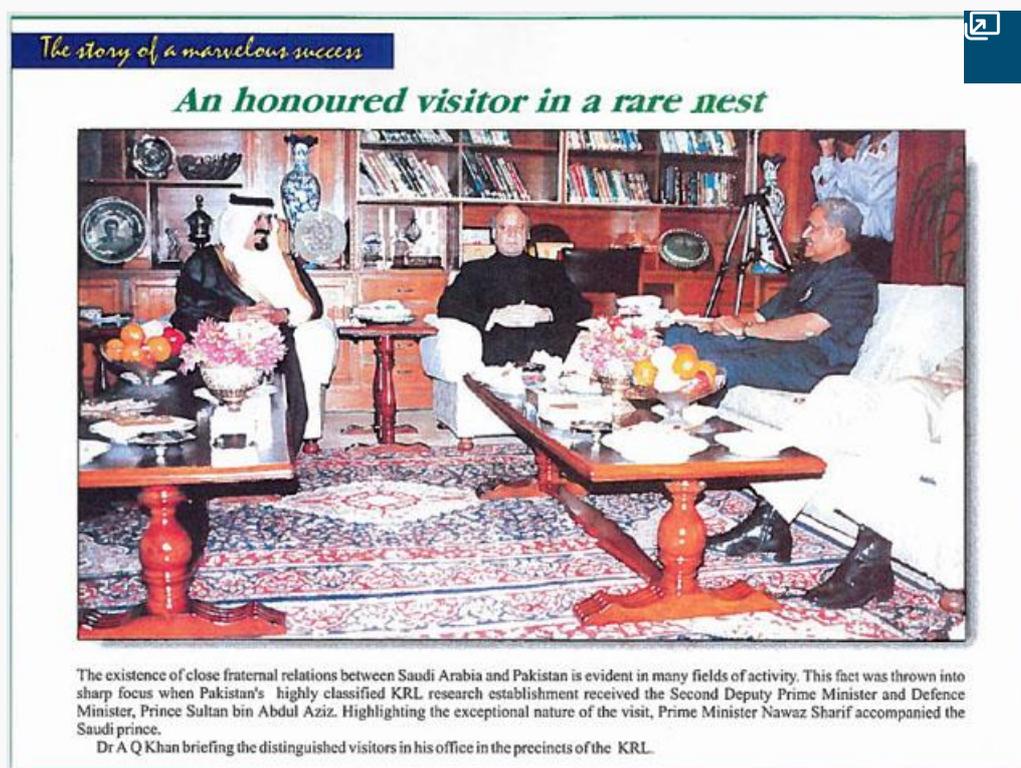
If Saudi Arabia were, say, Denmark, this would merely be a matter of ensuring conformance with U.S. law, but in the Middle East, fears prevail that any concession of such controls would open the floodgates of proliferation. Apart from Israel's longstanding, implicitly acknowledged nuclear arsenal, the only other regional power with nuclear weapons is Pakistan, whose strategic focus tends to be in the other geographic direction, on India. But Pakistani uranium-enrichment centrifuge technology was sold to Libya and Iran, and similar equipment was delivered from Europe to Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. In the cases of Iraq and Libya, the technology was destroyed, respectively, in 1991 and 2003. Iran's program, which Tehran claims was and remains nonmilitary only, is now constrained by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the nuclear deal with the United States and its partners is known. But crucially, the JCPOA allows Iran to continue to enrich—although it is neither allowed nor technically able to use this

process to produce weapons-grade uranium. Under the agreement, Iran cannot reprocess plutonium either, an alternative path to a nuclear explosive.

Riyadh is believed to want, at least in theory, the right to either enrich or reprocess. In 2009, Washington persuaded the United Arab Emirates to forsake both technologies before the Gulf state signed an agreement with South Korea for four nuclear power reactors. But, if another country in the region avoids such a restriction, the UAE retains the right to revisit its "123 Agreement"—a reference to Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act, which requires the conclusion of a peaceful nuclear cooperation deal for significant transfers of nuclear material, equipment, or components from the United States.

The UAE-U.S. agreement is held up as a gold standard and a reflection of the Emirates' maturity and responsibility. U.S. achievement of the restrictions was particularly striking given the UAE's checkered history with A. Q. Khan, the Pakistani nuclear scientist and proliferator. For many years, Abu Dhabi allowed Khan to operate his front companies out of nearby Dubai. Aided by Emirati officials who smoothed his entry and exit, Khan—until his arrest in 2003—used Dubai as both a cutout for technology destined for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program and a transshipment point for technology being smuggled to Libya and Iran. Khan had close relations with the UAE leadership and also hosted them in Pakistan.

Of equivalent concern with respect to Saudi Arabia is a visit then defense minister Prince Sultan made to the Pakistani enrichment plant at Kahuta, outside Islamabad, in 1999, a year after Pakistan conducted nuclear tests with bombs containing high-enriched uranium. A published photograph commemorates Prince Sultan's visit, showing him sitting alongside then Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif and Dr. Khan. The head of the Pakistan Army, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who later overthrew Prime Minister Sharif and later still arrested Khan, is also pictured. The visit, in which the Saudi delegation was reportedly shown and allowed to handle parts of a Pakistani nuclear weapon, led to a formal U.S. diplomatic protest and boosted the still-prevailing rumor that the kingdom has an understanding with Pakistan for the transfer of nuclear-tipped missiles during a period of crisis. (Since 1988, Saudi Arabia has had Chinese nuclear-capable but conventionally armed missiles that could reach Tehran.)



That was then. The question is what, since the JCPOA conceded Iran's right to enrich, is the operating premise now.

Such a judgment is rendered more challenging by the two visits to Pakistan, in [January](#) and [August 2016](#) made by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, aka MbS, who is also the Saudi defense minister, since his father became king in 2015. In turn, Pakistani leaders have made a series of top-level visits to the kingdom. Earlier this month, the Pakistan Army's chief of staff, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, visited Riyadh to meet MbS "to discuss matters of mutual interest and military ties." It was Bajwa's second sojourn in the kingdom within two months. In the current politics of Pakistan, Bajwa is not only the lead on foreign and security policy but a more dominant figure overall than either the president or prime minister. On February 10, the Pakistan military announced an agreement wherein a thousand Pakistani military personnel will be sent on an unspecified training mission to the kingdom. This news prompted an outcry in the Pakistani National Assembly, which three years ago blocked a Saudi request for Pakistani troops to fight in Yemen. During the debate, it also emerged that an additional 1,600 Pakistani troops are already in the kingdom and 10,000 Saudi personnel have been trained at unspecified Pakistani military academies and institutions. Just last week, a further indication arose regarding the closeness of the ties, and the extent to which Riyadh acts independently of Washington's wishes, when Saudi Arabia was briefly involved in blocking a U.S.-led attempt to put Pakistan on an international terrorism-financing watch list.

The question of whether the United States will make any nuclear concession to win a lucrative deal comes just before a lengthy U.S. visit by MbS, aimed at showcasing the strength of the bilateral relationship and encouraging American businesses to partner with Saudi Arabia in the crown prince's Vision 2030 plans for economic and social transformation. Despite the uncertain status of the JCPOA, given repeated doubts expressed by the Trump administration, the dilemma is simple: can Saudi Arabia be persuaded to forsake, perhaps even temporarily, enrichment and reprocessing in return for choosing U.S. technology for its ambitious nuclear power plans? The wrong business deal could undermine the current fragile status quo and elevate regional antagonisms to a new level.

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