

Toward a Saudi Nuclear Option: The Saudi-Pakistani Summit

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On October 18, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia will begin two days of talks in Pakistan. One of the subjects that may be discussed is the potential transfer of Pakistani nuclear missiles to Saudi Arabia. The kingdom has long been suspected of funding Pakistan's nuclear program; given recent revelations about the progress of Iran's nuclear program, Crown Prince Abdullah may well believe that now is the time for Islamabad to repay Riyadh for its support.

A direct Pakistani sale of nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia is a possibility, but the two countries might also consider the precedent set by the United States in West Germany during the Cold War. Although American nuclear arms were distributed to German army units at the time, U.S. personnel maintained control over all such munitions, thereby allowing West Germany to adhere to the letter of its obligation under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons. Such an arrangement between Riyadh and Islamabad could counter any future Iranian deployment of nuclear weapons. By this logic, a nuclear option in Saudi Arabia would fill the gap in the kingdom's security policy left by the departure of U.S. forces and the cooling of ties between Riyadh and Washington.

Saudi Intentions

Officially, Saudi Arabia has called for the elimination of all nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons from the Middle East. The kingdom is a signatory to the NPT and other conventions on nonproliferation and weapons of mass destruction. This official line was repeated as recently as last month in an angry response to a September 18 report in the Guardian headlined Saudis Consider Nuclear Bomb. Reinforcing Riyadh's claim that there is no reason to change the kingdom's current policies, the website of the Saudi embassy in Washington stated, Reports that the Kingdom is seeking nuclear, biological or chemical weapons are motivated by malice and have no grounding in the truth. According to the Guardian report, however, A strategy paper being considered at the highest levels in Riyadh sets out three options: [t]o acquire a nuclear capability as a deterrent; [t]o maintain or enter into an alliance with an existing nuclear power that would offer protection; [t]o try to reach a regional agreement on having a nuclear-free Middle East.

Although not stated, the basis for the Guardian report was a meeting held the previous weekend outside Oxford during a three-day international symposium on Saudi Arabia, Britain, and the Wider World. The symposium was organized by the Oxford Center for Islamic Studies (an associated institution of Oxford University), whose chairman of the trustees is also the deputy leader of the Saudi consultative council. Among the twenty-nine invited participants were the author of the Guardian report, three princes of the Saudi royal family (including Prince Turki, the ambassador to Britain), a Saudi government minister, and two members of the Saudi consultative council. Another participant confirmed that the Guardian story was an accurate account of what had emerged from the Saudi side during one of the discussions.

Even without such insight into Saudi thinking, Riyadh's actions over the years have prompted increasing U.S. anxiety about Saudi proliferation. In 1988, Riyadh's clandestine purchase of (now obsolete) Chinese nuclear-capable missiles with the range to threaten both Israel and Iran caused a major diplomatic row that led to the replacement of the U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia. In 1999, Saudi defense minister Prince Sultan's visit to Pakistan's Kahuta uranium enrichment and missile assembly facility prompted a formal diplomatic complaint from Washington. And in 2002, a son of Crown Prince Abdullah (along with several Libyan and North Korean officials) was an honored guest at Pakistan's test-firing of the 950-mile range Ghauri nuclear-capable missile.

The Role of Pakistan

Despite public statements claiming no intent of proliferation, Pakistan's actions have also caused Washington considerable concern.

- In the late 1980s, China reportedly gave Pakistan a nuclear weapon design and enough highly enriched (i.e., weapons-grade) uranium for two bombs in return for Pakistan's own enrichment secrets, which were derived from European designs.
- In the mid-1990s, UN weapons inspectors in Iraq unearthed evidence that a Pakistani had offered to sell nuclear technology to Saddam Husayn.
- In the late 1990s, Pakistan reportedly traded uranium enrichment technology to North Korea in exchange for Nodong missile technology.
- In 2001, Washington insisted that Pakistan detain two retired nuclear scientists who had been in contact with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.
- In summer 2003, when the International Atomic Energy Agency found traces of weapons-grade uranium in Iran, Tehran told the agency that the substance must have come from Pakistani enrichment equipment (equipment obtained from private dealers, not from the Pakistani government). That claim is disturbing whether true (which would suggest that Pakistan is not carefully controlling such dangerous technology) or false (which would indicate that Iran may have produced highly enriched uranium on its own).

Despite the irony that Saudi Arabia appears to be looking to Pakistan for help in countering an Iranian threat that was itself given impetus by Pakistan, Riyadh and Islamabad appear to have very close relations. Pakistani prime minister Mir Zafrullah Khan Jamali has paid two official visits to Saudi Arabia so far this year, and President Pervez Musharraf visited the kingdom in June (his predecessor, the elected politician Nawaf Sharif, now lives in exile in Saudi Arabia in a deal brokered by Riyadh after Musharraf's 1999 coup).

On October 8, an editorial entitled "Yes, We Fear Iran's Uranium" appeared in the London-based daily al-Sharq al-Awsat stating that the Iranians are enriching uranium to produce nuclear weapons aimed, essentially, at its neighbors, mainly Pakistan. (The newspaper is owned by Saudi prince Faisal bin Salman, one of those invited to the three-day symposium in Oxford.) The editorial concluded, "The Iranian nuclear danger threatens us, first and

foremost, more than it threatens the Israelis and the Americans."

U.S. officials say that Pakistan has been warned not to provide nuclear help to Saudi Arabia. President George W. Bush himself is believed to have expressed this concern upon giving President Musharraf a rare invitation to Camp David during the latter's official visit to Washington in June. Earlier this month, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage visited Pakistan to reinforce the message. Apart from proliferation concerns, Washington likely harbors more general fears about what would happen if either of the regimes in Riyadh or Islamabad became radically Islamic. Although the international community is putting pressure on Iran to halt any nuclear weapons program, the Islamic government in Tehran will be watching this weekend's summit in Pakistan closely and reassessing its policy in light of the results.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute. His latest Policy Paper for the Institute, *The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Policy*, has just been published.



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