

Considering a Nuclear Gulf: Thinking About Nuclear Weapons in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Why countries seek to acquire nuclear weapons has posed a long-standing dilemma for scholars and policymakers. This study analyzes Saudi thinking about nuclear weapons in light of the pattern of recent suggestions by official circles that Riyadh could also seek nuclear weapons if Iran does so. The approach of the study is “inside out,” with a focus on the Saudis’ own perspective, and relies heavily on local sources, grounded in the framework of Saudi strategic culture. The regime’s need to retain its legitimacy, embodied in a requirement to defend the country and the region from an Iranian threat, has provided a key impulse to addressing the nuclear issue, and Riyadh has been building a number of blocks with a view toward preparing the domestic and regional publics if and when the time comes to exercise its nuclear option. Riyadh’s nuclear threat perceptions have shifted from Israel to a focus on a more imminent Iranian Shia threat. The principal concern in Riyadh has been that a nuclear-armed Iran would use the new capability as a deterrent screen behind which it could engage in aggressive behavior toward its neighbors, secure from retaliation, and that the only effective counter is a Saudi nuclear deterrent.

The domestic Saudi civilian and military media have been mobilized to provide analysis and support for a nuclear option, and have expanded on and clarified the often ambiguous official policy statements on the nuclear issue. The small neighboring states have been encouraged to support a potential nuclear-armed Saudi Arabia, the religious establishment has been elicited to provide legitimacy for nuclear weapons, and the strategic rocket force has seen a development of its infrastructure in order to enhance credibility of a deterrent. Saudi Arabia is skeptical of any “nuclear umbrella” extended by the United States. The study concludes that there is a strong likelihood that Saudi Arabia will seek to acquire nuclear weapons when and if Iran does so; that the case of Saudi Arabia suggests that in some instances the international community’s leverage to prevent nuclear proliferation may be limited; and that if Saudi Arabia does acquire nuclear weapons this may be the prelude to an additional spate of proliferation in the region. And, while at first glance,

Saudi Arabia would appear to constitute a classic example of the realist security model – where state security interests determine a recourse to nuclear proliferation – local characteristics necessitate an adaptation of such a model to reflect the country’s social and political uniqueness and reaffirm the multicausality approach in understanding the motivation for countries to select a nuclear option.

About the Author

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Bounding the Problem

The proliferation of nuclear weapons is likely to pose a continuing challenge to U.S. interests and to regional and international security and stability, and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the Middle East. Efforts to halt or manage this process must address how regional powers decide whether or not to acquire nuclear weapons and how they might plan to use them, although this may not always be an easy process, given the often closed nature of decision-making in that region. Saudi Arabia is certainly interested in the issue of nuclear weapons and may be one of those countries at least contemplating the possibility of joining the nuclear club at some time in the future. The intent of this study is to determine the dynamics of the nuclear issue specifically in Saudi Arabia but, at the same time, more broadly, to also gauge to what extent Saudi Arabia's experience conforms to or differs from prevailing theories about nuclear proliferation.

Over the past few years, Saudi Arabia has been developing the various components of the policy, institutional, and military environment that could lay the groundwork for the option to acquire nuclear weapons at the appropriate moment in the future – if and when that decision is taken in response, in particular, to any acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran, whether in the near or more distant future. For example, one can identify a focus on mobilizing support in both the civilian sector of the population and in the military, as one can see from the media intended for each audience. Moreover, in more tangible terms, there has been an effort ranging from securing religious approval for nuclear weapons to visibly developing the country's Strategic Rocket Force and the nascent space program. Even the promotion of nuclear power in the civilian sector can

be seen, at least tangentially, as part of this process, if only by reinforcing the legitimacy of nuclear power. In addition, this book will address other parameters of Saudi thinking about nuclear threats and nuclear weapons, including Saudi thinking on deterrence and the impact a nuclear threat could have on reshaping relations within the Gulf.

At this juncture, with the on-going diplomatic developments in the fall of 2013, there is a possibility of a negotiated agreement between Tehran and the international community addressing the issue of Iran's nuclear program, and that could have a significant impact on Saudi policy. Nevertheless, this book will remain relevant, as the focus here is on the deliberations in Saudi Arabia about nuclear-related policy options that are enduring and that illustrate what is perhaps representative of assessments and discussions within most countries facing the prospect of a nuclear-armed neighbor and the need to address the resulting change in the threat environment. Moreover, in tangible terms, the development by Riyadh of the basic institutional components and political conditions for a potential nuclear capability, as analyzed in this book, will remain in place (and probably be developed further), ready for activation if there should be a reversal at any time in the future in what appears to be Iran's present evolving accommodating policy orientation.

The Terms of Reference and Methodology

Analytical Tools

Scholars have long sought to understand why some countries decide to embark on a nuclear path while others do not, and elements of the resulting approaches or models may be helpful in analyzing Saudi Arabia. Conversely, conclusions drawn in this book may qualify or call into question at least certain facets of such models. Moreover, this book will seek to separate the commonalities which the Saudi case may share with general concepts of proliferation applicable to other similar situations from what may be specific to Saudi Arabia.

Efforts to develop a universal model to explain nuclear proliferation have deepened our understanding of the phenomenon but have not generated a consensus, despite a substantial scholarly literature on the subject.¹ Analytical approaches, however, have coalesced into overarching

models relying, in very broad terms, on “realism” or on “idealism.” Both models are in a sense deterministic, each in its way, and, while contributing insights into the phenomenon of proliferation, have difficulty in accounting for decision-making that does not conform to constraints suggested by these models.

The realist perspective of nuclear proliferation, in its essence, has focused on international security threats (especially nuclear ones), coupled with the absence of adequate alternative options such as reliable alliances, as the stimulus for states to pursue nuclear weapons.² An alternative idealist approach views the preceding model as weakened by the many exceptions of countries that do not follow that path as the realist model would posit they would, and focuses instead on a country’s national, cultural, or individual-actor aspects as an analytical and explanatory tool. The idealist model sees as key, in particular, the psychology of individual decision-makers, who respond to national security threats based on a psychological national identity, for “the decision to acquire nuclear weapons is not only a means to the end of getting them; it is also an end in itself, a matter of self-expression...The oppositional nationalist’s emotional impulses in this direction are so strong that the mere arrival in power of such a leader is practically a sufficient condition to spark a decision to build the bomb.”³

Peter Lavoy, in an insightful overview of such models, identifies empirical shortcomings in the prevailing approaches –often arising in the form of countries which do not conform to specific theories.⁴ He finds the realist model too abstract, and unable to explain the timing or the specific political, technical, or psychological variables which may determine decision-making on proliferation.⁵ Likewise, while seeing the idealist model as better at accounting for cultural and national specificities, motives, and decision-making styles of individual countries, he believes that model, too, has limitations insofar as it cannot explain why policymakers ignore constraints.⁶

The “why” of acquisition is often intertwined with sets of macro-indicators that have been developed to help recognize decision points or stages of a process leading toward or away from proliferation. In this respect, Lavoy proposes a helpful analytical tool, what he calls “nuclear mythmaking.” This perspective makes possible a more inclusive analytical approach by allowing for due appreciation of genuine security threats

while offering a framework by which to recognize and assess the process as a continuum toward or away from the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Specifically, Lavoy draws attention to national elites engaging in what he calls “nuclear mythmaking.” Nuclear mythmaking:

- Emphasizes a country’s insecurity or its poor international standing.
- Portrays this strategy as the best corrective for these problems.
- Articulates the political, economic, and technical feasibility of acquiring nuclear weapons.
- Successfully associates these beliefs and arguments (nuclear myths) with existing cultural norms and political priorities.
- Convinces senior decision-makers to accept and act on these views.⁷

Scott Sagan also offers a useful critique to the conventional understanding of why countries decide to go or not to go nuclear.⁸ He identifies three alternative motivations or models – the “security model,” that is recourse to nuclear weapons in order to increase security in response to foreign threats; a “domestic politics model,” that is the use of nuclear weapons as a tool to advance domestic and bureaucratic interests; and a “norms model,” where nuclear weapons serve as a symbol of a state’s modernity and identity – and demonstrates the applicability and limitations of each of these. While some cases support one or another of the models as an explanatory framework, he points out that others may not. Instead, he makes a convincing case for a more complex analysis requiring a range of variables. As he puts it, “multicausality...lies at the heart of nuclear proliferation. Nuclear proliferation and nuclear restraint have occurred in the past, and can occur in the future, for more than one reason: different historical cases are best explained by different causal methods.”⁹

Insights and limitations drawn from both general taxonomies can be adapted to analyze the Saudi case and will be used here, even if at times their tenets may be embedded only implicitly in directing the analysis.

Constructing an Assessment –The Available Data

One cannot consider the issue of Saudi Arabia and nuclear weapons in terms of assessing from the outside what the country ought to do or what would be in its best interest. Rather, a more productive and realistic approach is to turn the problem “inside-out,” that is, to evaluate the situation from a country’s perspective, in this case proceeding based on Saudi Arabia’s own security calculus. How accurate Saudi assessments are is less important than the fact that Saudis view the situation as they do. Key to appreciating Saudi Arabia’s thinking is an analysis of what Saudis at various levels say and an assessment of Saudi discussions within a framework of that country’s strategic, or security, culture. At the same time, in parallel to verbal evidence, one should also take into consideration tangible actions related to the issue of nuclear weapons, such as developments in Saudi Arabia’s Strategic Rocket Force, the civilian nuclear sector, and the mobilization of legitimacy in the religious establishment, which complement policy statements and discussions in the civilian and military media. In a way, all these components can be viewed as building blocks of a cohesive, if imperfectly visible and incomplete, policy initiative.

Access to information on Saudi Arabia is not easy, given the country’s closed political system, and this study relies on information in the public domain and, in particular, on official declarations and on the Saudi media. Saudi sources vary in their significance and function. Declaratory statements by officials in the government, and especially by senior members of the royal family, of course, carry the greatest weight. Political and strategic decisions are the purview of a narrow leadership elite consisting of the senior levels of the royal family and opinions the royals express in public seldom stray from the consensus developed within the royal family.

However, the resulting official positions expressed are often scanty, opaque, and undeveloped, and information is routinely held tightly and stove-piped for security reasons or for internal political leverage, so that one must look elsewhere for more complete expositions of Saudi thinking. Even well-placed Saudis may find official thinking unclear, as was the case with one frustrated senior Air Defense Forces officer who criticized, even if obliquely, the lack of clear guidance for defense planning, noting

that, “What is needed is transparency and clarity by other parts of the government with respect to any information needed to draft strategy; there is a need to overcome the resistance by some authorities about stating clearly what the assumed security threats are.”¹⁰

Although the Saudi decision-making process is obscure, important decisions normally cannot be formulated and implemented in a vacuum, but must be integrated into a broader context of national consensus, or at least of acquiescence, and major policy decisions normally are accompanied by extensive efforts to prepare, explain, and convince not only the domestic public but often also regional and international opinion. In some instances, the media can be used to lay the groundwork for policy as appears to have been the case here, where support for such issues as the concept of nuclear deterrence and nuclear weapons acquisition was visible in the media even before Saudi officials began to speak on the subject.

In that respect, discussions, editorials, and opinion pieces in the Saudi media can facilitate an understanding of official policy, especially given the tight functional control which the government exercises over the mainstream media on significant issues. It is in such public, though controlled, fora that major decisions and their rationale frequently are elaborated subsequently by civilian and military analysts and the government’s unofficial spokesmen. Even then, the supporting analytical structure can still be incomplete and emerge piecemeal through such discussions over time, but such writing is normally consistent and supportive of policy decisions, reflecting a general media consensus which it is assumed official circles can accept.

The Saudi media is notable for its avoidance of what the regime would consider embarrassing or sensitive issues, especially if they relate directly to the royal family, and editors, conscious of the potential consequences, routinely operate on the basis of self-censorship.¹¹ The mainstream electronic media is state-owned and the state exercises firm control over the rest of media using multiple mechanisms. For example, the government may communicate official policy directly to editors. The previous monarch, King Fahd, would contact journalists directly to follow up on news items and was even known to request to see individual media items in order to act as arbiter on their suitability.¹² More generally, the government appoints or at least must approve all editors of the print and electronic media. While some media outlets are more liberal or more

conservative than others, the range remains within accepted limits. Boundaries of expression can be tested on such issues as poor housing, unemployment, high prices, or women's rights, but major national security or foreign policy issues remain a sensitive topic where public discussions are likely only with official permission.

Censorship is practiced on a daily basis on individual articles. Although cartoons are often allowed to express opinions considerably more openly than is the written text, and visual images carry a powerful message, they, too, are subject to limits. While one may find an occasional item in the media that is an outlier from the norm, patterns of such an orientation are highly unlikely. A persistent pattern of testing those limits can result in a corrective, with an editor dismissed or a newspaper or electronic outlet shut down temporarily or permanently, or offending journalists blacklisted. The media and the pundits it features at times must intuit official policy based on limited guidance, although in some cases those in positions of responsibility in the media may already share the same views on an issue as the policymakers. The thousands of electronic blogs, tribal websites and satellite channels, and the social media in Saudi Arabia, while monitored, seem to be controlled considerably less tightly than is the mainstream media. However, any dissident group's media is invariably based abroad. Most Saudis also have access to Arab-language satellite television programs from other countries, at least those based in neighboring countries, such as Al-Jazira (Qatar) and Al-Arabiya (United Arab Emirates), but these are usually also careful to avoid direct criticism of the Saudi ruling family.

The Saudi media, in many ways, can be likened to a lopsided transmission belt, serving as an informal, though semi-official, vehicle presenting and promoting government policy to the public. Also, to a lesser degree, it can serve as a rudimentary barometer of public opinion through reader comments on the internet versions of the media (though not all such feedback is necessarily published). At the same time, in the absence of political parties, labor unions, or an independent media to reflect public views, the government uses the media not only as a vehicle to communicate policy, but also as a way to foster some controlled discussions by permitting the airing of different views if there has been no decision taken, if the government seeks to generate ideas or, rarely, if different stands reflect divided views within government circles. Of

course, such discussions are kept within accepted parameters and are not allowed to stray into criticism of the royal family or of its decisions. Likewise, the media provides information and guidance for the informal discussions among family and friends – the *majlis* – that take place in the homes of the informed public.

Sustained coverage in the Saudi media of a topic is a good indicator of official interest in an issue. In recent years, the amount of attention in the media devoted to nuclear weapons would spike whenever there was an increase in threat perceptions, such as in the tense 2002-2003 period preceding the Iraq invasion, in 2006 when Iran announced a breakthrough in enriching uranium, and, again, since 2010, when the assumption that Iran was moving inexorably towards success with its nuclear program gained currency in Saudi circles.

Saudi Arabia's military media, like its civilian counterpart, is also controlled from above and is used to inform military personnel of official policy. However, the military media also serves as an important professional forum to discuss and develop ideas from an expert vantage point, especially concepts of a theoretical or technical nature, including the general outline of military doctrine, and to provide military assessments of other countries' capabilities. As such, the military media complements the civilian media and provides insights on military and security issues from an additional perspective.

The Saudi media can be used to send messages on sensitive issues to the informed public or to governments in friendly or hostile countries that might otherwise be embarrassing if done officially, while benefiting from a degree of plausible denial. The media can also serve as a test-bed for trial balloons, introducing ideas to gauge the reaction they might generate at home or abroad. In this case, the possibility of a Saudi nuclear option was floated in the local media before it was broached openly by officials. The Saudi-owned international media, at times more adventurous than that at home, most often also reflects official thinking on sensitive issues and can also be used to inform and send indirect messages to, in particular, other Arab audiences.¹³ When foreigners write in the Saudi press, they are subject to the same restrictions as domestic writers, although their foreign status may lend a veneer of plausible denial to their views. The reprinting of items from other countries in the Saudi media can lend yet additional layer of plausible denial.

While the details or focus of individual media items in Saudi Arabia may differ, the principal thrust of the approach to any topic is likely to be consistent. Although one may find an occasional article that is an outlier from the norm, patterns of such an orientation are highly unlikely. As such, an analysis of the controlled civilian and professional military media can provide insights into official thinking on any given issue.

Notes

1. Tanya Ogilvie-White carried out a particularly comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of various theoretical approaches in “Is There a Theory of Nuclear Proliferation? An Analysis of the Contemporary Debate,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, iv, 1, Fall 1996, 43-60.

2. For an elaborated version of this model by its originator see, Kenneth N. Waltz, “Toward Nuclear Peace,” in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, eds., 4th edition, *The Use of Force*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 527-55.

3. Jacques E.C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 35-36.

4. Peter R. Lavoy, “Nuclear Proliferation over the Next Decade: Causes, Warning Signs, and Policy Responses,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, xiii, 3, November 2006, 434-54.

5. Ibid., 434.

6. Ibid., 435.

7. Ibid.

8. Scott D. Sagan, “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security*, xxi, Winter 1996-97, 54-86.

9. Ibid. 85.

10. Staff Brigadier General Muhammad bin Yahya Al-Jadii, “Idad al-istiratijiya al-askariya: al-tahaddiyat wa'l-suubat” [Preparing Military Strategy: The Challenges and the Difficulties], *Quwwat Al-Difa Al-Jawwi Al-Malaki Al-Saudi* (Riyadh), On-line, Internet, 13 December 2011, available from www.rsadf.gov.sa/Pub_mq1T.asp?ID=6. *Quwwat Al-Difa Al-Jawwi Al-Malaki Al-Saudi* is the Saudi Air Defense Forces' official journal.

11. On censorship in the Saudi media, see John R. Bradley, *Saudi Arabia Exposed; Inside a Kingdom in Crisis*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 181-204.

12. Interview with journalist Badr Ahmad Karim, “Dardasha an al-idhaa wa-wikalat al-anba” [Chatting About Radio Broadcasting and the News Agency], *Al-Bilad* (Jeddah), On-line, Internet, 23 December 2010, available from www.albiladdaily.com/print.php?action=print&m=newsm&id=67550, and Mishal Al-Anazi, “Thana’ al-malik Fahd bin Abd al-Aziz ala dawrih al-idhai bi-musalsal *Sawalif Al-Nas*” [Praise for King Fahd bin Abd Al-Aziz for His Media Role in the *Sawalif Al-Nas* TV Serial], *Al-Riyadh* (Riyadh), On-line, Internet, 3 December 2010, available from www.al-riyadh.com/2010/12/03/article581797.html.

13. In the case of the two most influential Arabic-language international newspapers, the late Defense Minister, Prince Sultan, owned *Al-Hayat* (which presumably remains in his family), while other well-placed royals, Prince Al-Walid bin Talal and Prince Faysal bin Salman (son of the current Minister of Defense) own *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*.

CHAPTER 2

Official Saudi Policy Perspectives on Nuclear Weapons

Overall, the trend emanating from Saudi Arabia has been that of an integrated message at all levels indicating a perception of an increasing threat and, in particular, of a nuclear threat. Furthermore, the threat that has often been projected is one that Saudis deem as unacceptable, as it would imperil vital national interests, and one that one could not be ignored.

Saudi Arabia's Traditional Stand

Traditionally, Saudi spokesmen were always eager to disavow any interest in nuclear weapons. As far back as at least 1990, the then-Minister of Defense and eventually Crown Prince, Prince Sultan (d. 2011), himself insisted that “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the capability of acquiring and developing nuclear weapons but, as is well known, the Kingdom is at the forefront of the states that are calling to make the Middle East a nuclear-free zone.”¹ Even in the more recent past, Saudi Arabia routinely would deny any intention to acquire nuclear weapons. For example, the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al-Faysal, when asked in 2006 whether his country would consider seeking nuclear weapons if Iran did so, replied categorically “No, we will not. We do not believe that it gives any country security to build nuclear weapons.”² In fact, in 2006, Prince Sultan dismissed nuclear weapons as of no importance, contending that “We in the Kingdom do not need them.”³ To be sure, even then, some Saudi messages at times were somewhat cryptic. In December 2005, Prince Turki Al-Faysal – former Director General of Saudi Arabia's Intelligence Agency and former ambassador to Great Britain and, at the

time, Saudi ambassador to the United States – rejected speculation that Saudi Arabia would follow suit if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, stating that the Saudis “will not follow the nuclear path under any circumstance because that would contribute to an arms race in the region.” However, at the same time, he had also alerted the Saudi public that if Iran developed nuclear weapons “many neighboring states will also follow its example.”⁴

Elsewhere, Prince Sultan sought to dispel persistent reports of Pakistani-Saudi cooperation in the nuclear field. As he put it, “Saudi Arabia categorically does not believe in nuclear means and nuclear weapons because they would annihilate human life and what was said about there being Pakistani-Saudi cooperation is completely unfounded.”⁵ With an Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons then not foreseen in the immediate future, such denials would have made sense if they were intended not to arouse international concern.

More Recent Official Saudi Declaratory Indications

However, a shift in statements by members of the royal family about the possibility of Saudi Arabia’s reacting to Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons by also following that route began to be noticeable over the past few years. In general, normally reticent Saudi government officials and other public figures became increasingly willing to address that issue, albeit sometimes indirectly. To be sure, nuclear weapons are a delicate topic in the international community and official references to Saudi Arabia’s nuclear option remained largely in the realm of hints and allusions, often in terms of references to “the Gulf countries” or “the Arabs” as those likely to adopt a nuclear response to an Iranian nuclear threat.

Prince Turki Al-Faysal became perhaps the most visible Saudi spokesman on the regional and international scene for such an option, although he has had to be especially careful in his choice of words when dealing with the nuclear issue, given its sensitivity. In March 2011, at a conference that a high-profile research center in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) organized, Prince Turki Al-Faysal asked openly: “What would be wrong with acquiring a nuclear force to confront the Iranian [nuclear] force if international efforts to prevent Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons fail?”⁶ A short time later, Prince Turki Al-Faysal, speaking to

senior NATO military officials, hinted cryptically that if Iran developed nuclear weapons then that “would compel Saudi Arabia...to pursue policies which could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences.”⁷

Shortly thereafter, in an interview with the BBC, Prince Turki Al-Faysal specifically sought to clarify his speech in the UAE – in which he had perhaps been too open – and now insisted that Saudi Arabia “is not seeking to acquire nuclear weapons,” but he also warned pointedly that if Iran did acquire nuclear weapons Saudi Arabia’s response would be “severe and resolute in order that this situation does not become a threat to its interests.”⁸ When pressed about his earlier speech by the interviewer, a discomfited Prince Turki Al-Faysal, perhaps sensing that earlier he had been too transparent in making the point, cut him off, cautioning “Don’t attribute words to me that I didn’t say.”⁹ Yet at a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) meeting in December 2011, when speaking of Iran’s expected acquisition of nuclear weapons, Prince Turki again noted that “It is necessary and indeed it is our duty on behalf of our [GCC] nations and peoples for us to examine all possible options, including our own acquisition of the same weapons.”¹⁰ More recently, Prince Turki Al-Faysal appeared to soften his message when speaking publicly to Western audiences, placing greater emphasis on the desirability of a regional weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-free zone and a United Nations nuclear umbrella, although his precondition that both Iran and Israel forego their nuclear programs indicated he did not see this to be a realistic option in the foreseeable future.¹¹ In fact, in the same speech, he suggested that if Iran did acquire nuclear weapons this “would compel other nations to pursue policies that could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences.”

While the articulate and cosmopolitan Prince Turki Al-Faysal may have garnered the most headlines in the West, he was no black swan. Rather, his statements could be seen as part of a larger pattern. In fact, other members of the royal family had also expressed at least implicit support for a nuclear option even years earlier. For example, Prince Naef bin Ahmed Al Saud, who eventually was to become Defense Minister Prince Sultan’s adviser on national strategy, as early as 2002 had hinted that “turmoil in the Middle East could engender the sort of instability that may result in attempts to acquire WMD,” citing efforts by Israel, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq in that arena, and adding that “despite the lack of

evidence that Riyadh may be pursuing a nuclear option, some speculate on the possibility.”¹² To be sure, statements by high-ranking officials and influential members of the royal family were often vague, veiled, or ambiguous. For example, Prince Muqrin, Saudi Arabia’s then-Director General of Saudi Arabia’s Intelligence Agency, already in 2006 had assessed at a conference in Bahrain that the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, would “also spur *moderate states in the region* to establish nuclear programs, whether covertly or openly, aimed at creating a military balance in the region.”¹³ (Emphasis added.)

Likewise, in April 2010, Prince Muqrin, speaking at the Nuclear Security Summit, in Washington, D.C., presented his prognosis of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, alluding that the quest by an unnamed country for nuclear weapons “may lead once again to a return to the environment of the Cold War.”¹⁴ In December 2010, Prince Turki Bin Muhammad, Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Foreign Minister for Multilateral Relations, for his part, was also circumspect when he repeated his country’s calls for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East, but hinting at the same time that Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons “will lead to a slide toward a nuclear arms race in the region.”¹⁵ Again, at a Gulf conference in December 2011, Prince Muqrin told his audience that he feared that Iran’s nuclear policies would lead to a “return to the doctrine of balance of terror,” a term commonly used in Arab discourse to refer to the nuclear deterrence characteristic of the superpower relationship during the Cold War, and cautioned enigmatically that “the Gulf states cannot only stand by as observers” to Iran’s nuclear program.¹⁶ For his part, Prince Khalid, the then-Deputy Minister of Defense (and son of the then-Defense Minister Prince Sultan), during a visit to Kuwait in 2010, when asked what the position of the Gulf countries would be if the nuclear issue with Iran was not resolved, answered ambiguously that “every state will then do what is in its interest.”¹⁷ Elsewhere, Prince Khalid cautioned that “a change in the balance of power” in the region “requires us to acquire power in all its forms.”¹⁸

Such hints from official quarters have continued to the present. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faysal warned, as another round of talks between Iran and the international community was set to start in February 2013, that, although Saudi Arabia favored the elimination of all WMD in the region, “If the [Iranians] continue on the path they are now on, many

other countries which will also follow the same path. This is not speculation. The fact is that proliferation of nuclear weapons to any one country means the proliferation of nuclear weapons also to other countries.”¹⁹

Admittedly, most official statements have been ambiguous and suggestive more than concrete. Nevertheless, they were unmistakable in their intent. In case any local or international audience did not understand the meaning of such veiled statements, accompanying Saudi press commentary or back-channel communications often spelled out the intent of such statements in no uncertain terms. For example, a Saudi editorialist noted that Prince Turki Al-Faysal’s comments “at present do not go beyond oblique messages; however, these are messages that must be taken seriously, since they express the Gulf’s concerns about falling behind in the nuclear arms race in the region in case the international community fails to deal with the issue.”²⁰

Significantly, after one such statement by Prince Turki Al-Faysal, a Saudi pundit who often writes on defense matters penned an article in the mainstream press entitled *A Reading of [Prince Turki] Al-Faysal’s Statements*, in which he highlighted the “extreme importance” of the prince’s “official or semi-official” statement because this affirmed “absolutely clearly and plainly” Saudi Arabia’s “intent to acquire nuclear weapons as a corrective to the upsetting of the uneven strategic nuclear deterrence equation in the region.”²¹ He added that “personally, I understand His Highness Prince Turki’s statements as the firm Saudi decision to have nuclear weapons.”²² And, the same writer stressed that Prince Turki Al-Faysal’s statements were “a ray of hope” and “long-awaited” and that they had met with “broad approval within the popular strata and among the intellectual elite.”²³

Again, reacting to Prince Turki Al-Faysal’s speech noted above, at the conference on Gulf security in December 2011, another Saudi commentator reinforced the point by explaining that what was meant was that “the Kingdom [of Saudi Arabia] may be compelled to follow the same path” as Iran and Israel.”²⁴ Likewise, after Prince Turki Al-Faysal’s cryptic speech to NATO officials in June 2011, according to British press reports, “a senior official in Riyadh who is close to the prince” interpreted his message as “We cannot live in a situation where Iran has nuclear weapons and we don’t. It’s as simple as that...If Iran develops a nuclear

weapon, that will be unacceptable to us and we will have to follow suit.”²⁵

Notes

1. Interview with Prince Sultan, “Al-Alam al-arabi yamurr bi-marhala harija” [The Arab World Is Passing through a Delicate Phase], *Al-Hawadith* (Beirut), 18-27 April 1990, 19.

2. Interview with Prince Saud Al-Faysal, “Changes in the Kingdom – on ‘Our Timetable’” *Washington Post*, 27 February 2005, B5.

3. Prince Sultan quoted in “Al-Amir Sultan: Al-Saudiya laysat bi-haja li-asliha nawawiya” [Prince Sultan: Saudi Arabia Does Not Need Nuclear Weapons], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* (London), On-line, Internet, 19 April 2006, available from www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=359013&issueno=10004.

4. “Al-Safir al-saudi lada Amirika: Al-Qaida la tazal qadira ala shann hajamat” [The Saudi Ambassador in America: Al-Qaida Is Still Capable of Launching Attacks], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, On-line, Internet, 9 December 2005, available from www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=337373&issueno=9873.

5. Reported in Muhammad Al-Ghunayyim, “Al-Amir Sultan: Al-Mansha’at al-naftiya al-saudiya amina” [Prince Sultan: The Saudi Oil Facilities Are Secure], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 4 April 2006, available from www.alriyadh.com/2006/04/04/article143736.html.

6. Ali Al-Qahis, “Al-Amir Turki Al-Faysal yutalib bi-tahwil majlis al-taawun ila ittihad ashbah bi’l-urubbi wa-insha’ jaysh khaliiji muwahhad” [Prince Turki Al-Faysal Calls for a Transformation of the [Gulf] Cooperation Council into a Union Resembling the European Union and for the Establishment of a Unified Gulf Army], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 22 March 2011, available from www.alriyadh.com/2011/03/22/article615880.html.

7. Jason Burke, “Riyadh Will Build Nuclear Weapons if Iran Gets Them, Saudi Prince Warns,” *The Guardian* (London), On-line, Internet, 29 June 2011, available from www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/29/saudi-build-nuclear-weapons-iran/print.

8. Interview with Prince Turki Al-Faysal, BBC Arabic News (London), On-line, Internet, 8 July 2011, available from www.youtube.com/watch?=Kfw.R7j4-HwZO.

9. Ibid.

10. Salim Al-Sharif, “Turki Al-Faysal: Al-Alam fashal fi iqna Isra’il wa-Iran min

‘al-nawawi’ wa-khiyaratna maftuha” [Turki Al-Faysal: The World Failed to Convince Israel and Iran on the Nuclear [Issue] and Our Options Are Open], *Al-Madina* (Jeddah), On-line, Internet, 6 December 2011, available from www.al-madina.com/print/343006.

11. Prince Turki Al-Faysal, “Saudi Arabia’s New Foreign Policy Doctrine in the Aftermath of the Arab Awakening,” lecture at the Belfer Center for Science & International Affairs, Harvard University, On-line, Internet, 25 April 2013, available from http://live.belfercenter.org/publication/23013/prince_turki_on_saudi_arabias_role_after_arab_awakening.html?breadcrumb=%2F.

12. Prince Naef bin Ahmed Al Saud, “Underpinning Saudi National Security Strategy,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Washington, D.C.), autumn 2002, 130.

13. “Ra’is al-mukhabarat al-saudiya akkad ann al-nawawi al-isra’ili yuthir sibaq tasalluh” [The Head of Saudi Intelligence Asserted that Israel’s Nuclear Weapons Would Spur an Arms Race], *Al-Arabiya TV* (Abu Dhabi, UAE), On-line, Internet, 9 December 2006, transcript available from www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006/12/09/29744.html.

14. “Ra’is al-istikhabarat al-saudiya: Imtilak Isra’il li’l-asliha al-nawawiya yushakkil aqaba asasiya amam al-istiqrar fi al-mintaqa” [The Head of Saudi Intelligence: Israel’s Possession of Nuclear Weapons Presents a Fundamental Obstacle to Stability in the Region], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, On-line, Internet, 15 April 2010, available from www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=565347&issueno=11461.

15. Turki Al-Suhayl, “Al-Saudiya: Lan nadkhul sibaq tasalluh nawawi wa-ala Tihnan taqdim damanat” [Saudi Arabia: We Will Not Enter a Nuclear Arms Race But Tehran Must Provide Assurances], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, On-line, Internet, 12 December 2010, available from www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=599111&issueno=11702.

16. Umar Al-Zubaydi and Mashari Al-Wahbi, “Muqrin bin Abd Al-Aziz yuhdhir min sibaq tasalluh fi’l-mintaqa wa-awdat ‘tawazun al-rub” [Muqrin bin Abd Al-Aziz Warns of an Arms Race in the Region and of a Return to a “Balance of Terror”], *Al-Watan* (Abha), On-line, Internet, 4 December 2011, available from www.alwatan.com.sa/Politics/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=78218&CategoryID=1.

17. “Khalid bin Sultan: Amn Al-Kuwait min amn Al-Saudiya” [Khalid bin Sultan: Kuwait’s Security Is Part of Saudi Arabia’s Security], *Al-Ra’y* (Kuwait), On-line, Internet, 5 May 2010, available from www.alraimedia.com/Alrai/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=201410.

18. “Khalid bin Sultan: Taghayyur mawazin al-quwwa yaduna ila tatwir qudratna al-qitaliya wa-tahsinha” [The Change in the Balance of Power Requires Us to Develop and Improve Our Combat Capabilities], *Al-Madina*, On-line, Internet, 18 April 2011, available from www.al-madina.com/print/299303.

19. Fahd Al-Dhiyabi, “Saud Al-Faysal: Yajib tamkin al-shab al-suri min al-difa an nafsih, wa-Iran ghayr sadiqa hawl barnamijha al-nawawi” [Saud Al-Faysal: The Syrian People Must Be Empowered to Defend Themselves, and Iran Is Not Sincere about Its Nuclear Program], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, On-line, Internet, 13 February 2013, available from www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=717110&issueno=12496.

20. Saud Kabili, “Al-Mintaqa ala washk sibaq al-tasalluh al-nawawi” [The Region Is on the Brink of a Nuclear Arms Race], *Al-Watan*, On-line, Internet, 22 April 2012, available from www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=10530.

21. Sami Said Habib, “Qira’a fi tasrihat Al-Faysal” [A Reading of [Turki] Al-Faysal’s Statements], *Al-Madina*, On-line, Internet, 10 December 2011, available from www.al-madina.com/print/343867.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid. Another Saudi press analysis of Prince Turki’s statements likewise clarified that what he meant was that if the international community failed to stop Iran, other options, including a nuclear one, would be “inevitable” for Saudi Arabia. “Khabira: Imtilak al-mamlaka li-silah nawawi yajurr al-mintaqa ila sibaq li’l-tasalluh” [An Expert: The Kingdom’s Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons Will Propel the Region into an Arms Race], *Al-Ikhbariya* (Saudi Arabia), On-line, Internet, 5 January 2012, available from www.k1b1.com/print.php?action+print&m=newsm&id=18289.

24. Prince Turki al-Faysal’s speech was reported in “Al-Faysal: Al-Saudiya qad tudtarr li-hiyazat al-silah al-nawawi” [Al-Faysal: Saudi Arabia May Be Forced to Acquire Nuclear Weapons], *Al-Yawm* (Dammam), On-line, Internet, 6 December 2011, available from www.alyaum.com/News/art/37488.html. The commentary is found in Abd Al-Aziz Husayn Al-Suwaygh, “Al-Khalij wa’l-khatar al-nawawi?” [The Gulf and the Nuclear Threat], *Al-Madina*, part 2, On-line, Internet, 23 May 2012, available from www.al-madina.com/printhtml/379718.

25. Jason Burke, “Riyadh Will Build Nuclear Weapons if Iran Gets Them, Saudi Prince Warns,” *The Guardian* (London), On-line, Internet, 29 June 2011, available from www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/29/saudi-build-nuclear-weapons-iran/print.

CHAPTER 3

The Dynamics of Saudi Strategic Culture

Saudi assessments integrate the issue of nuclear weapons into a broader threat framework, and the credibility and import of policy statements can best be appreciated by placing them within the broader context of Saudi Arabia's strategic culture and of the latter's relationship to decision-making. Some analysts have highlighted, correctly, the importance of not ignoring the impact of a country's strategic culture as a factor shaping security assessments and choices, arguing that "different states have different predominant strategic preferences that are rooted in the early or formative experiences of the state and are influenced to some degree by the philosophy, politics, culture, and cognitive characteristics of the state and its elites."¹

One could add, as well, such enduring and less malleable givens as history and geography. Evaluating national leaders or ruling elites against the background of such factors yields a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of threat perceptions and of leaders' motivations, thinking, and decision-making process with respect to nuclear weapons than do assumptions based on paradigms drawn largely from pure theory or from the experience of the superpowers. By the same token, focusing on a country's strategic culture need not replace the threat/interest-based realist approach but enrich it and add flexibility to its application in concrete cases.²

Realpolitik and ideology intertwine to generate Saudi Arabia's strategic culture and, as an influential Saudi observer noted, combine to serve as the basis for the country's decision-making.³ As Prince Abd Al-Rahman, then Deputy Minister of Defense, told Strategic Rocket Force graduates, the King would guarantee the country's security and stability through a combination of "faith supported by power; nothing else works."⁴

The Decision-making Process in Saudi Arabia

Decision-makers, of necessity, formulate paradigms or models, whether consciously or unconsciously, in order to make sense of problems and to organize and interpret relevant information to enable them to make decisions.⁵ To a significant extent, a country's strategic culture may shape decision-makers' paradigms, but it is an interactive process and, once established, paradigms may be very difficult to change, what Robert Jervis terms "premature cognitive closure."⁶ In Saudi Arabia, such paradigms have evolved in conjunction with perceived threats and a sense of identity and, to a significant degree, dovetail with the prevailing parameters of legitimacy.

In essence, it is the top stratum of the royal family which makes the ultimate decisions. Within the context of the country's patrimonial socio-political system, characterized by patron-client relationships, most of these power networks ultimately lead to a member of the royal family, and personalities count more than do institutions. Some individuals in the royal family may have access to information and wield influence not based on holding any official title or position but, perhaps, because of their reputation within the family or their membership in specific blood-related family coteries. Many of the country's perhaps 10,000 princes are outside the immediate circles of national decision-making, but some of them may nevertheless hold important positions in the military, bureaucracy, business, or the sports sector (as do some princesses in the parallel female arenas). This allows them influence on specific issues, although ordinarily they will seek to attach themselves to a patron in the top ranks of royal decision-makers in order to exert that influence. Many key agencies connected with national security (Ministry of Defense, Ministry of the Interior, Intelligence Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG)) as well as local governorships are headed by a prince, while princes are deputies in several other key ministries and agencies (for example in the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources), but tight royal control is exerted even over those sectors of the system which may have a non-royal at the top.

Almost assuredly, there must have been discussions within the top strata of the royal family about nuclear issues over the years, no doubt with the participation of political advisers and technical and military

experts. If so, such discussions must have been held within narrow circles and tightly-held. Given the blurring between personal and institutional interests, one cannot be certain at which level of influence Saudi policymakers may be operating. For example, hypothetically, one would not expect the SANG, whose main mission is domestic security and which operates largely as a land force, to have a strong interest in and be a supporter of nuclear weapons, yet its official journal has indicated such interest and support repeatedly. However, personal issues may matter more than institutional ones, as the Commander of the SANG until 2010 was King Abd Allah, who would have had a broader national perspective than as simply a military service commander. He was then succeeded in the same post by his son, Prince Mitib, who can be assumed to aspire to accede to the throne himself some day, and would therefore be looking ahead at a higher than single-service institutional level.

What is more, consensus within the royal family is a fundamental principle of Saudi decision-making. While individuals at the top of the royal family clearly exert the greatest influence, they do so within a wider family framework, so that changes in policy perspectives are usually gradual rather than abrupt. Perhaps inspired by senior princes as a reminder to the rest of princes, an account in a Saudi daily close to the palace described the assembly of princes waiting to welcome the remains of Prince Sultan, who had died in New York, and emphasized the royal family's internal cohesion. As the article noted, "this family knows that its unity and cohesion...is the yardstick for preparing for crises, emergencies, and sudden shocks." Pointing to the regimes that were then falling in the region, the writer identified as the reason for their demise "personal objectives and individual desires." The article stressed that, instead, "the secret of success for nations...is in the ruling family's internal cohesion," and – perhaps prescriptively – praised how the young princes respected their elders in the Saudi royal family.⁷

While there may be individual positions within the royal family on a particular issue, if individual differences of views on the nuclear issue exist, they are hard to detect. Similarly, if there has been any diversity in opinion on this issue in the broader political body – with factional, tribal, professional, or bureaucratic interests at play as in any society – it has not been evident, and there have not been any structured public debates. What one sees in public is a consensus, which may be genuine to a significant

degree, the result of effective shaping by a system which controls the principal mechanisms of persuasion. However, despite the concentration of power within the royal family, the political process is an interactive one to some extent and one cannot ignore the impact of wider circles of society on policymaking even if this impact may be indirect or if it acts as an implicit limiting factor which policymakers have to factor into their assumptions.

The Centrality of Regime Legitimacy

Perhaps the key element in understanding Saudi Arabia's strategic culture, from the perspective of the country's rulers, is that of the essential need to maintain legitimacy both within the wider royal family – where competition and positioning for the future among cliques and individuals can be intense – and of the royal family in society as a whole. In Saudi Arabia's case, legitimacy consists of an aggregate collection of security, economic, religious, and symbolic legitimacy in relation to the existing system, which is embodied in the monarchy.

In a way, given the absence of mechanisms such as elections or a free media to define and determine the degree of legitimacy, it is a case of assumed legitimacy, a factor steeped in uncertainty that is perhaps more evident in its absence or disappearance than in its presence, and a factor which requires constant precautionary measures. Legitimacy in the context of Saudi Arabia means, in particular, providing for the defense of the Kingdom from foreign threats and is, at the same time, also connected to other central elements of legitimacy, which all depend on a safe and secure environment. These related elements include religious legitimacy – protecting the Two Holy Shrines (Mecca and Medina) and the Sunni branch of Islam, an element which the Saudi military recognizes as one of its basic missions.⁸ Moreover, there is also the element of providing the expected level of economic well-being for the population. Characteristically, one newspaper underlined the basic parameters of King Abd Allah's legitimacy, as it called him “the defender of the nation and the leader of development.”⁹ In order to safeguard legitimacy, policy decisions and initiatives must take into account or at least anticipate and manipulate the latent or active demands and expectations of key sectors in society, including of the bureaucracy, the military, the business

community, tribal leaders, and the religious establishment, as well as of the general public.^{10,11}

State and family interests tend to blur in Saudi Arabia, and responsibility for such basic requirements as listed above, to a great extent, lies squarely with the ruling family, the Al Saud. This responsibility is highly concentrated and, indeed, the Al Saud have traditionally fostered an identification and equation of the state with their own family or even with an individual ruler, and have governed their subjects by means of a paternalistic relationship. Characteristically, in his speech introducing the new budget in December 2012, King Abd Allah addressed the Saudis as “my sons and daughters” and represented their well-being as “my personal obligation and trusteeship toward you.”¹² Not coincidentally, after King Abd Allah’s recovery from surgery, a Saudi newspaper headline read “The King’s Recovery Is the Nation’s Recovery.”¹³ As one provincial newspaper put it on the country’s National Day, “this wonderful entity – nation, abilities, blessings, [and] strength of religion – all of that in totality is the Al Saud.”¹⁴ And, the ad which the Bin Ladin conglomerate sponsored in the SANG’s official journal, *Al-Haras Al-Watani*, on the occasion of the country’s National Day in 2012, congratulated the King, the Crown Prince, the Saudi people, and “the noble ruling family” as a separate category representing the nation.

In a sense, the Al Saud “own” the country. That appears to be a common view in the country, and probably not only among those who are disaffected. As one source critical of the Al Saud put it, “The Al Saud harbor no doubt whatsoever that the country – all that is beneath the ground and all that moves above it – is their private property, with no need to justify that.”¹⁵ It is the Al Saud who created the country – a first version in the 18th century and, in 1903, the current entity in the person of their ancestor King Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud – and who named it after themselves. Reminders of this national narrative are encouraged and promoted constantly.

According to the official discourse, between the early days of Islam under Muhammad and the creation of the Saudi state there had been only primordial chaos. Prince Salman, the country’s Minister of Defense and now also Crown Prince, has compared the current Saudi state to “the first Islamic state,” i.e. the one that Muhammad had established, and was proud that the Saudis had “returned to the Arabian Peninsula the security and

stability that it had lacked for many centuries.” He emphasized that prior to the Saudi state every region and tribe had been a state unto itself and at war with all the others.¹⁶ A military writer, typically, focused on the country’s “heroic leaders,” and stressed that before the creation of the Saudi state “there was no identity or political unity;” instead, there was only “a complete absence of security...while the terrible triad of hunger, fear, and disease ran roughshod over the Peninsula.”¹⁷ This identification of the royal family with the nation was underlined, for example, during a Ramadan reception, when a member of the country’s Consultative Council (*Shura*) addressed King Abd Allah on behalf of the visiting delegation of the country’s senior officials and notables by acknowledging that the King’s father had returned to the Peninsula its dignity in the form of “an Arab Saudi state, the first independent state in the Arabian Peninsula.”¹⁸

The royal family portrays itself as having created not only the country but also a civilized society and a national identity. As Prince Khalid Al-Faysal noted, thanks to King Abd Al-Aziz, the latter’s creation of a unified country “succeeded in transforming the Arabian Peninsula from a society of wars and strife to a civilized society representing a unique model of success in the modern era.”¹⁹ In the process, the same dignitary asserted that King Abd Al-Aziz (the father or grandfather of the current king and of many of the most senior princes) had created a unity of identity, so that now there was “a Saudi person, a Saudi way of thinking, a Saudi language, and a Saudi national dress.”²⁰ Indeed, in the Saudi ideology, which reinforces the sense of uniqueness, is the belief that the creation of the Saudi state had been “a miracle” wrought by the Al Saud family.²¹

Defense of the Realm

The royal family no doubt feels it has to be perceived by the domestic public as defending effectively the country for which the Al Saud feel proprietary responsibility. As an editorial in the Saudi Land Force’s journal noted, “the top priority for the Servant of the Two Holy Shrines (*Khadim Al-Haramayn*) [i.e. King Abd Allah] and for his faithful Crown Prince is to ensure that the nation remains secure.”²²

Domestic dissidents, such as the apparently foreign-based Hijaz regional independence movement, in fact, have used the potential for an Iranian atom bomb as a lever to criticize the Saudi government for an

alleged lack of an adequate response to threats to the country. As an anonymous writer on the Al-Hijaz website was to complain:

Oh Saudis, did you feel as I did bitterness and as being duped when I heard [Iran's president Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad announce to the world that Iran had become the world's eighth nuclear power? ...I read the pride in every Iranian's eyes. I saw Ahmadinejad hold his head up high. On the contrary I, as a Saudi, was tormented by feelings of bitterness, anguish, and disappointment. I felt a lump in my throat raising the question: "What do we lack as Saudis in order to become a nuclear power and to be proud of that in front of the world?" Why, why? ...Here, as a Saudi citizen, I ask King Abd Allah "Why do we place our security, our holy places, and our very existence in the hands of others?"...We only want to be able to hold our heads up high before the world and to hear you, Servant of the Two Holy Shrines, announce to the entire world that we have become the ninth nuclear power in the world.²³

Questions and reproaches stemming from the nuclear threat to Saudi Arabia could even come from the country's liberal quarters, as in the case of Abd Al-Aziz Al-Khamis, Director of the Saudi Human Rights Center and a frequent critic of the regime. Seeing in Iran's quest for nuclear weapons a factor which would change the regional balance of power, Al-Khamis noted on a Yemen-based website that this factor "has become a duty entrusted and thrust on the shoulders of the Saudi state to move expeditiously to also acquire nuclear weapons, in order to warn off any enemy, whether in the East or in the West."²⁴ Throughout the article there is a sense of implicit blame directed at the Saudi rulers for what the author interpreted as an inadequate response, as he remarked on "the indifference and slowness which impair Saudi actions to strengthen the country's military agencies," contrasting the lethargy on his side of the Gulf with the military activity on the Iranian side. Saudis were now allegedly afraid, "and are even losing their patience with the suspicious sluggishness with which the organs of the GCC, and above all Saudi Arabia, confront the destruction planned for it and its people." His recommendation was that "it is high time to acquire nuclear weapons and that task falls on the shoulders of Saudi

Arabia, and in the shortest time possible; otherwise, one day we will lament the time when there existed an Arab Gulf and an Arabian Peninsula.”²⁵

What is more, the Saudi leadership must be seen to provide protection, insofar as possible, with local capabilities, rather than depending on non-Muslims. Visible reliance on a non-Muslim country for protection of the Holy Land could be used as a club by domestic and regional critics of the regime and at least raise questions about the regime’s legitimacy and about its ineffectiveness in light of its massive spending on defense. Significantly, one of the stated objectives, or benefits, of Saudi Arabia’s acquisition of the CSS-2 surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) in 1988, according to then-Minister of Defense Prince Sultan, had been that that proved that Riyadh was not a hostage to the United States in acquiring weaponry.²⁶ Indeed, Saudi Arabia’s acceptance of a large U.S. military presence in the wake of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 appears to have been the catalyst for Usama Bin Ladin’s shift to open dissidence, and the presence of foreign forces on Saudi soil long remained a staple Al-Qaida propaganda theme. Accusing King Fahd (d. 2005) of having transformed the country into “an American protectorate,” Bin Ladin (d. 2011) in 1995 asked himself who could be trusted to provide security: “Is it the regime which reduced the country to a state of permanent military weakness in order to permit the importation of Crusader and Jewish forces to defile the holy places?”²⁷ When he declared a jihad against U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia the following year, this again was a major theme, as Bin Ladin accused the Saudi rulers of having permitted “Crusader American forces” to stay in the country for years and maintained that, as a result, “people ask themselves: ‘Why even have this regime?’”²⁸

Admittedly, criticism by such extremist dissidents probably has limited real impact at present. However, the Al Saud may fear that such criticism potentially could come to give voice to broader feelings of dissatisfaction if they are validated by a perceived failure by the royal family to provide adequately for the country’s defense. And, even if representing only a marginal slice of Saudi society, such criticism could be embarrassing to the Saudi ruling system and add pressure on decision-makers as they deal with the nuclear issue.

Defense of the Region

In addition, Saudi Arabia has a self-view as the principal Arab state in the Gulf and beyond, and as having a unique mission as a regional leader. For example, King Abd Allah's son, Prince Mitib, writing in a military journal while he was still Deputy Commander of the SANG, argued that based on its "Arab and Islamic principles," Saudi Arabia has "historical responsibilities as a state that has political, economic, geographic, and moral prominence such as few other countries have."²⁹ Likewise, an editorial in a special issue of *Al-Haras Al-Watani* in honor of King Abd Allah highlighted that the monarch is seen as having broad defense responsibilities extending well beyond Saudi Arabia. According to this journal, "history had a rendezvous with a great leader...someone whose destiny it is to defend the Kingdom, Islam, and the Arabs."³⁰

Saudi Arabia's legitimacy as the local leader also implies an obligation to provide for its neighbors' protection, and an inability to do so would reflect negatively on the royal family's credibility and legitimacy. With the great diminution of the influence of Egypt, Iraq, and Syria on the Arab political horizon due to their internal turmoil, Saudi Arabia has also highlighted its own increased leadership role. A key element of this aspirational regional leadership role is the ability to provide security. As one military officer saw it, Saudi Arabia "plays a pivotal and leading role in guaranteeing the security and stability of the region."³¹ A Saudi military journal provided a typical overview of the official self-perception in this domain, linking the country's "leadership role in the Islamic world...[and] its leading role in the Arab world, which stems from its being one of the largest Arab countries and having the greatest capabilities and prestige."³²

In particular, in the Gulf region, thanks to its relative greater size, wealth, and human and technical resources in comparison to the other GCC states, Saudi Arabia is the natural leader of that key regional organization, albeit not without some discomfort for its smaller neighbors. Predictably, one journal emphasized Saudi Arabia's "political role in Gulf politics as a leading state which bears most of [the Gulf's] burden."³³ Characteristically, Saudis sometimes refer to their country as "the Gulf states' elder sister."³⁴ A senior military officer and member of the royal family echoed this view a few years later: "Our country has become...a pivotal axis for the states of the region...the sad recent events in Bahrain

confirm our country's leading role and its ability to assume an important role in guaranteeing the region's security and stability."³⁵

Defense of the Umma

More broadly, Saudis view their country as having a special place and responsibility in the Islamic world, with one local academic characterizing Saudi Arabia as "the Muslims' *qibla* [i.e. the direction for prayer], the cradle of Islam, the bearer of the banner of Islam, and the defender of the causes of Arabness and of the Muslims in both material and moral terms in all quarters and all lands."³⁶ According to King Abd Allah – in a speech delivered on behalf of the ailing monarch by the Governor of Mecca, Prince Khalid Al-Faysal – "The Kingdom is faithful to its religious and historical duty...to serve Islam...and to proclaim and defend it in all corners of the world."³⁷ In effect, the Saudi King is the self-proclaimed defender of Islam, with the preceding monarch, King Fahd, having adopted the title of Servant of the Two Holy Shrines, while the Saudi regime has long relied on the support of the domestic religious establishment as part of the political system. At the heart of this mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship, the Saudi religious establishment is quick to highlight the Al Saud family's personal religious legitimacy and responsibilities. Typically, a member of the country's Council of Senior Ulama' noted, "This blessed state, the state of the Al Saud, is a state of orthodoxy (*tawhid*), religious outreach (*dawa*), and rule by the undefiled Sharia...and was established by a religious covenant (*baya shariya*)."³⁸

As such, the royal family must also be seen as an effective protector against all threats to Islam, and specifically to the Holy Shrines, whether from Israel or Shia Iran – which many in the Saudi religious establishment view as existential threats to Sunni Islam, doubly dangerous in the case of the latter because of its rival claim to religious legitimacy. Not coincidentally, an article in the Saudi press that dealt with the Iranian threat pointedly referred to King Abd Allah as "the Umma's shepherd" (*rai*).³⁹ Indeed, as Minister of Defense, Prince Sultan, had long justified Saudi Arabia's arming not only as a response to a need to address his own country's defense, but also that of the Arab world and of the Umma, or broader Islamic community.⁴⁰

Defense of the Economic Pillar of Legitimacy

In many ways, the economic pillar of the Al Saud's legitimacy is also tied to the defense of the realm from foreign threats and, in particular, from Iran. To a significant extent, the royal family has identified economic development with itself and the line between private royal wealth and that of the state is often blurred. The legitimacy of the existing system, one can argue, relies on an implicit social contract with the population to share the oil and gas wealth which the royal family controls, while the royal family claims the credit, and therefore also the responsibility, for the people's economic well-being. The media constantly reminds Saudi audiences that it is "the heroic leaders" who have created "abundance," as did the military media on the country's National Day.⁴¹ Another typical article in the military media, likewise, concluded that "Saudi citizens are very much aware of the achievements which are being attained day after day in every aspect of their lives; the enlightened leadership has devoted all its efforts and time and has mobilized all of the country's potential and wealth in order to raise the standard of living of Saudi citizens."⁴² As a leading Saudi businessman also waxed eloquently of the relationship between the country's rulers and society, "there is no doubt that our dear Kingdom's path of development is witness to the natural result of one of the wonderful illustrations of the cohesion between ruler and ruled...the leadership...has never wavered in its zeal to stand by its sons, the citizens, and to fulfill their desires and needs to ensure a life of plenty and of dignity."⁴³

Although significant socio-economic problems – such as unemployment, corruption, and high prices for food, housing, medical care, and weddings – have at times frayed this unspoken, but nevertheless real, social compact, enough of the population still share in the benefits to ensure stability for now. However, sufficient national income is vital for the system to remain viable, especially given rising expectations and a rapidly growing population. The Saudi rulers have been particularly sensitive to this facet of their legitimacy in the atmosphere of the popular unrest throughout the region in connection with the Arab Spring, as they succeeded in staving off discontent at home – in part at least – by being able to open the country's ample coffers for large-scale salary raises, bonuses, an economic stimulus to business, and various other generous

material incentives. Over the longer term, such legitimacy will also hinge on the success of the country's ambitious economic development plans for the post-oil era, which will also depend on a secure regional environment.

Notes

1. Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security*, xix, 4, spring 1995, 34.

2. Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies," *International Security*, xxiii, 1, summer 1998, 141-70.

3. Muhammad bin Abd Al-Latif Al Al-Shaykh, "Kayf yusna al-qarar al-siyasi fi Al-Saudiya?" [How Are Political Decisions Made in Saudi Arabia?], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, On-line, Internet, 18 April 2005, available from www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=294244&issueno=9638. His term for Realpolitik was "interest."

4. Mubarak Al-Fadil and Qablan Al-Hazimi, "Al-Amir Abd Al-Rahman bin Abd Al-Aziz raa takhrij add min dawrat quwwat al-sawarikh al-istratijiya bi-Wadi Al-Dawasir" [Prince Abd Al-Rahman bin Abd Al-Aziz Presided over the Graduation from Several Courses of the Strategic Rocket Force in Wadi Al-Dawasir], *Al-Jazira* (Riyadh), On-line, Internet, 2 July 2004, available from <http://search.al-jazirah.com.sa/2004jaz/jul/2/In1.htm>.

5. "Preconceptions cannot be abolished; it is in one sense just another word for 'model' or 'paradigm' – a construct used to simplify reality, which any thinker needs in order to cope with complexity." Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decisions: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable," *World Politics*, xxxi, October 1978, 83-84.

6. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 412. Drawing from psychology, in his seminal work on decision-making frameworks, he notes insightfully that "once a person has conceived of a problem in a given way, it is very hard to break out of his pattern of thought. New information, rather than calling the established sub-goal into question, will be interpreted within the old framework." Ibid.

7. Ahmad Al-Jamia, "Bayt Al Saud min al-dakhil takwin istithna'i hubb wa-wafa' wa-taqdir" [The Al Saud from the Inside: A Unique Structure, Love, Loyalty, and Respect], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 26 October 2011, available from www.alriyadh.com/2011/10/26/article678858.html.

8. See, for example, Al-Jadii, “Idad al-istiratijiya.”

9. “Khadim al-haramayn haris al-watan wa-qa’id al-tanmiya wa-qimma fi tawadu al-kibar” [The Servant of the Two Holy Shrines Is the Defender of the Nation, the Leader of Development, and the Acme in Modesty for Great Men], *Al-Madina*, On-line, Internet, 22 September 2012, available from www.al-madina.com/printhtml/402773.

10. For perceptive overviews of the Saudi political system, see Tim Niblock, *Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-18, and Bertelsmann Stiftung *BTI 2012 Saudi Arabia Country Report*. (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012), On-line, Internet, available from www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/Inhalte/reports/2012/pdf/BTI%202012%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf.

12. “Khadim al-haramayn yar’as jalsat majlis al-wuzara’ wa-yuqirr akbar mizaniya fi tarikh Al-Mamlaka” [The Servant of the Two Holy Shrines Chairs a Meeting of the Council of Ministers and Unveils the Largest Budget in the Kingdom’s History], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 30 December 2012, available from www.al-riyadh.com/2012/12/30/article797098.html.

13. “Shifa’ al-malik shifa’ al-watan,” *Al-Madina*, On-line, Internet, 29 November 2012, available from www.al-madina.com/node/416893.

14. Khalaf Al-Hashar, “Yawm al-watan al-80 am wa-Al Saud” [The National Day, Year 80, and the Al Saud], *Ha’il*, (Ha’il), On-line, Internet, 21 January 2013, available from www.hailnews.net/hail/article-action-show-id-2284.htm.

15. “Kayf yufakkir Al Saud” [How the Al Saud Think], n.d., Najran Land website, On-line, Internet, available from <http://najranland.8m.com/book.htm>. In practical terms, individual members of the royal family do own enormous swathes of the country’s land area.

16. Prince Salman’s speech reported in “Al-Amir Salman: La tujad usra aw qabila fi hadhihi al-bilad illa wa-li-aba’iha aw ajdadha musharaka faila fi tawhid al-watan” [Prince Salman: There Is Not a Single Family Or Tribe in This Country Whose Fathers or Grandfathers Did Not Make a Direct Contribution to the Nation’s Unification], *Al-Marsad* (Riyadh), On-line, Internet, 31 March 2011, available from www.al-marsd.com.

17. Brigadier General Salih bin Ibrahim Al-Tasan, “Fi dhikra yawmna al-watani” [Celebrating Our National Day], *Al-Difa* (Riyadh), September 2011, 55. *Al-Difa* is the official journal of the Ministry of Defense.

18. “Talaqqi tahani al-umara’ wa’l-ulama’ wa-kibar al-mas’ulin wa-jam min al-muwatinin” [Receiving Congratulations from the Governors, Ulama’, Senior Officials, and a Group of Citizens], *Al-Nadwa*, On-line, Internet, 16 August 2012, available from www.alnadwah.com.sa.

19. Abd Allah Al-Dawsi reporting the latter's speech, "Khalid al-Faysal: Amalt wa-asart mulukan mundh ahd al-malik Abd Al-Aziz hatta al-malik Abd Allah" [Khalid al-Faysal: I Worked with and Was a Contemporary of Kings from the Time of King Abd Al-Aziz to That of King Abd Allah], *Al-Nadwa*, On-line, Internet, 28 February 2012, available from www.alnadwah.com.sa.

20. "Talaqqi tahani al-umara' wa'l-ulama' wa-kibar al-mas'ulin wa-jam min al-muwatinin" [Receiving Congratulations from the Governors, Ulama', Senior Officials, and a Group of Citizens], *Al-Nadwa*, On-line, Internet, 16 August 2012, available from www.alnadwah.com.sa.

21. Turki Abd Allah Al-Sudayri, "Ma al-amir Salman fi haqa'iq tarikh" [With Prince Salman on Historical Facts], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 6 February 2012, available from www.alriyadh.com/2012/02/06/article707389.html.

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23. Nawawiyun saudiyun [Saudi Nuclear Guys], "Marra ukhra ma al-qunbula al-nawawiya al-saudiya wa-lakin bi-shakl mukhtalif" [Once Again on the Saudi Atom Bomb but This Time in a Different Way], *Al-Hijaz* (London?), n.d., On-line, Internet, available from www.alhejazi.net/seyasah/014206.htm.

24. Abd Al-Aziz Al-Khamis, "Han waqt al-silah al-nawawi al-saudi" [The Time has come for a Saudi Nuclear Weapon], *Ibda* (Sanaa), On-line, Internet, 23 February 2012, available from <http://ebdaa.com/?act=artc&id=5577&print=1>.

25. Ibid.

26. Interview with Prince Sultan by Muhammad Abd Al-Mawla and Muhammad Ghabris, "Hadith wazir al-difa al-saudi ila *Al-Sayyad*" [Interview with the Saudi Minister of Defense to *Al-Sayyad*], *Al-Sayyad* (Beirut), 29 April 1988, 35.

27. Usama Bin Ladin, "Khitab ila Abi Raghhal, Fahd bin Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud" [Letter to Abu Raghhal, Fahd bin Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud], 5 Rabi I 1416/3 August 1995, Minbar Al-Tawhid Wa'l-Jihad website, On-line, Internet, available from www.tawhed.ws/r?i=oxyobqbh. Abu Raghhal served the invading the Ethiopians as a guide on their way to attack Mecca in the pre-Islamic period, and is viewed in Arab culture as the archetypical traitor.

28. Usama Bin Ladin, "Ilan al-jihad ala al-amrikan al-muhtallin li-Bilad Al-Haramayn" [Declaration of the Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the

Two Holy Shrines], [1 Rabi II 1416/15 August 1996], Minbar Al-Tawhid Wa'l-Jihad website, On-line, Internet, available from www.tawhed.ws/r?i=1502092b.

29. Prince Mitib bin Abd Allah, "Al-Dawr al-saudi wa-thabat muntalaqatih" [The Saudi Role and the Firmness of Its Principles], *Majallat Kulliyat Al-Malik Khalid Al-Askariya* (Riyadh), On-line, Internet, 1 November 2010, available from www.kkmaq.gov.sa/detail.asp?InNewsItemID=371633&InTemplateKey=print. *Majallat Kulliyat Al-Malik Khalid Al-Askariya* is the official journal of the Saudi National Guard's military academy.

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32. Abd Al-Azhim Mahmud Hanafi, "Al-Dawr al-qiyadi li'l-Mamlaka taht qiyadat khadim al-hamayn al-sharifayn" [The Kingdom's Leading Role under the Leadership of the Servant of the Two Holy Shrines], *Majallat Kulliyat Al-Malik Khalid Al-Askariya*, On-line, Internet, 21 June 2011, available from www.kkmaq.gov.sa/detail.asp?InNewsItemID=393304&InTemplateKey=print.

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34. Badr Al-Balawi, "Al-Qunbula al-nawawiya al-saudiya" [The Saudi Atom Bomb], *Al-Sharq* (Dammam), On-line, Internet, 14 December 2011, available from www.alsharq.net.sa/2011/12/14/46046.

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36. Hamad bin Abd Allah Al-Luhaydan, "Majlis al-taawun al-khaliji yathbut faaliyathu" [The Gulf Cooperation Council Confirms Its Effectiveness], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 13 May 2011, available from www.alriyadh.com/2011/05/13/article632204.html.

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41. Brigadier General Salih bin Ibrahim Al-Tasan, “Fi dhikra yawmna al-watani” [Celebrating Our National Day], *Al-Difa* (Riyadh), September 2011, 55.

42. Staff Lieutenant General Husayn bin Abd Allah Al-Qabil, “Ajmal ibarat al-thana’ li-qiyadatna al-hakima” [The Highest Praise for Our Wise Leaders], *Al-Difa*, May 2011, 12.

43. Fahd Al-Dalani, “Al-Rajul al-mukhlis al-ladhi nadhar nafsah li-khidmat dinih wa-watanih” [The Righteous Man Who Has Devoted Himself to His Religion and Nation], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 15 January 2007, available from www.alriyadh.com/2007/01/15/article216480.html.

CHAPTER 4

Evolving Saudi Nuclear Threat Assessments

In many ways, defense policy in Saudi Arabia is threat-based, in that it responds to perceived threats, and considerations surrounding nuclear weapons are no exception to that mechanism. That is, to a great extent, the Kingdom's defense policy must address such manifest challenges or potentially face the consequences of a loss or at least a diminution of the ruling system's legitimacy if it fails to do so. Traditionally, Saudi policymakers have operated on the basis of their perception of being surrounded by active or potential threats, which have varied over the years. In more recent times, defining the nuclear threat has been one of the central elements of that threat and has represented the principal stimulus for thinking about nuclear power in Saudi Arabia.

It appears that Riyadh has had to rely for the political and technical intelligence on the capability and progress of Iran's nuclear program – which Saudi Arabia needs in order to develop its own assessments and plans – predominantly on foreign capabilities, whether from the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations, probably foreign governments, and the foreign media, many of whose reports are cited in the Saudi media. Other information or perspectives on Iran's policy may also come from sources within the Iranian system or from those who have broken with the Tehran government.¹ However the Saudi intelligence process may work, Saudi discourse is suffused with the implicit given that Iran would be fully capable of eventually implementing its nuclear project successfully, although the assessment of Iran's technical and political timetable for achieving its goal has contained considerable uncertainty, as has been true of the foreign estimates on which such Saudi judgments must rely.

The Long-Standing Israeli Threat

The understanding of the nuclear threat has shifted over time in reaction to regional developments. Not surprisingly, Israel has figured prominently in this respect, given its imposing nuclear capabilities and the presence of unresolved Arab-Israeli issues. Calls for a counterweight to Israel's nuclear weapons have long been a staple in public Saudi discourse, if not expressed openly by policymakers, at least in the views of a portion of the country's "informed public," those who are at least interested in current affairs, insofar as one can judge based on the positions articulated by opinionmakers that are allowed to appear in public, and thus presumably do not contradict official thinking. Tellingly, in a telephone conversation between Saudi Arabia's King Fahd and Egypt's President Husni Mubarak in July 1990 – which was intercepted by Iraqi Intelligence – King Fahd noted that "Israel...is now our main concern; they possess 200 nuclear warheads and 47 atom bombs and are committed to using them against us and against our Palestinian brothers."²

In the past, Saudi policymakers could rely, especially in terms of public perceptions, on the fact that there was or would be an "Arab" balance with Israel, as with Saddam Husayn's efforts in the nuclear field, which at certain phases reportedly had benefited from Saudi encouragement. In fact, there had long been reports of Saudi financial support for Iraq's nuclear effort in the past. For example, Sad Al-Bazzaz, a senior figure in the Iraqi media world and a Saddam regime insider, noted that after Israel had destroyed the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq, Saudi Arabia's King Khalid had been prepared to finance the reactor's reconstruction, allegedly to the tune of \$300 million, although the offer was never implemented, since France refused to rebuild the reactor.³ According to information provided by a defecting Saudi diplomat, Muhammad Al-Khilaywi, Saudi Arabia reportedly did actually help finance Saddam Husayn's nuclear program at one time.⁴ That option, of course, ended with the Gulf War.

In that vein, a Saudi op-ed in 1992 had continued to call for "an assured Islamic nuclear deterrent to neutralize Israeli nuclear power," noting that without such a deterrent a country would be "at the mercy of an adversary."⁵ Speaking of nuclear weapons, the same Saudi commentator fifteen years later still believed that "anyone who does not

possess such weapons while his adversary does will be, most often, at the mercy of his enemy and vulnerable to blackmail.”⁶

In fact, when Libya’s leader Muammar Qaddafi relinquished his nuclear weapons program in December 2003, a Saudi military journal carried a lengthy analytical article which took the Libyan leader to task for doing so. The article concluded that “despite the expected positive effects of this decision for Libya, the international and regional effects will not be of the same type, as the negative effects will be dominant, especially those with respect to the unity of Arab action and the future of the Arab-Zionist conflict.”⁷ Blaming Libya’s “eagerness to please [the United States] at whatever cost,” the author cited as negative consequences of Libya’s deal the validation for the United States of the principle of preventive war, a situation not supportive of stability but favoring the establishment of U.S. hegemony, the marginalization and subversion of international agencies, the embarrassment of Pakistan for its support to Libya’s nuclear program, and ensuing pressure on other Middle East states to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Most importantly, there would now be a further erosion of the balance of power in the Middle East in Israel’s favor, as a potential deterrent in the Arab camp was removed, which would “confirm and solidify Israel’s regional position” and facilitate the United States’ wider plan of enabling Israel to play the role of a regional great power.⁸ Speaking in terms of being able to pressure Israel to accept a nuclear-free zone, another article in the same military journal rued the failure of Iraq, Libya, and even Iran to pursue a nuclear program, as this “helped to weaken the three Arab (sic) countries’ power...and lost cards to use to pressure and negotiate.”⁹

Understandably, in the first decade of this century, the prevailing Saudi view still evaluated Israel as the dominant nuclear threat. Prince Muqrin, then Head of Saudi Intelligence, for example, in 2006 asserted that “Israel’s possession of a nuclear arsenal is considered the biggest permanent strategic threat to Gulf security in the short and mid-term.”¹⁰ And, added Prince Muqrin, it was Israel’s nuclear arsenal that had spurred Iran to also embark on its quest for nuclear weapons.¹¹ During the same period, a special dossier in the official journal of the *Shura* devoted to the nuclear threat focused solely on Israel.¹²

As Saudi Arabia’s powerful Minister of the Interior and Crown Prince, the late Prince Nayif (d. 2012), also noted in 2006, Israel’s

possession of nuclear weapons “is justification for every country to think about acquiring nuclear weapons.”¹³ Elaborating on such perceptions, a typical editorial from this time-frame in a Saudi-owned daily warned that Israel put the Middle East at the mercy of its nuclear weapons, and that it was prepared to launch a nuclear first strike “even if it was not threatened by an Arab or Iranian attack using nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.”¹⁴ The editorial then wondered skeptically “are the chemical and biological weapons which the Arabs do possess really a deterrent against Israel or Iran?” In that writer’s view, “the Arabs” clearly needed to acquire a nuclear deterrent, and he suggested in a round-about way that Arab leaders must consider that option. He provided an answer to his own rhetorical question: “the people in the cave are asleep, assuming that a philosophy of living in caves, deserted places, and caverns suffices for defense and protection and that there is no need to incommode the negotiators simply by raising the question of legitimate Arab security, which is being threatened.”¹⁵ The Saudi press, for its part, focused in particular on the combination of Israel as an “expansionist state” and its nuclear arsenal, which “place the Middle East countries under the urgent threat of [Israel’s] nuclear weapons.”¹⁶

A key lesson learned that emerged was that thanks to its nuclear deterrent Israel could enforce the status quo on its own terms.¹⁷ In the context of the concept of nuclear-supported hegemony, Saudi observers have often referred to the negative model to avoid seeing repeated, that of Israel’s use of its undeclared nuclear arsenal to establish and maintain a political situation to its favor, but one highly detrimental to Arab interests. As one editorialist saw it, Israel in fact saw no need at all to negotiate with the Arabs thanks to its nuclear weapons.¹⁸ In particular, the Israeli experience has convinced the Saudis that a country can use its nuclear deterrent to keep territory it may have seized. As the editor of the *Al-Jazira* daily saw it, “Israel, with the West’s help, acquired the nuclear weapons which it now uses to hold on to what it plundered from the Arabs and [this weapon] will serve as their ‘deterrent’ if [the Arabs] attempt to regain their rights.”¹⁹

A Saudi observer praised Israel sarcastically for its nuclear development: “Of course, one cannot blame Israel for seeking to hurt us with 400 atom bombs; rather, the rebuke should be to the Arab states which have ignored for so long the deterrent role of long-range

missiles.”²⁰ Citing Israel’s large nuclear arsenal, another Saudi writer noted that “The Arabs’ situation today in terms of power is enough to make friends cry and enemies rejoice!”²¹ As one Saudi observer noted, “to embark on a confrontation with America or Israel without possessing a deterrent is a type of political suicide.”²² An editorialist, for his part, concluded that “no one who is fair can be forced to accept the principle of the unilateral possession by that criminal entity Israel of the advantage of a nuclear deterrent poised against the entire Umma.” His corollary was that “it is therefore vital for Arab national security and to guarantee the success of peaceful Arab development policies that there be an Arab (or an Islamic) nuclear deterrent to confront Israel in order to neutralize the latter’s frightening nuclear deterrent.”²³

Refocusing to Iran

By 2006, however, the impending nuclear threat from Iran increasingly was joining that from Israel. Discussions began to appear in the Saudi media during the latter half of the first decade as to which country – Israel or Iran – posed the greater threat as a nuclear power and where the Saudi defense focus should be. In the view of one Saudi editorialist, for example, the uncontrolled Israeli nuclear arsenal posed “without any doubt a greater degree of concern” than did the Iranian nuclear program.²⁴

As Saudi Arabia increasingly came to believe that Iran was approaching nuclear status, attention began to shift to the latter as a more immediate and in key ways a more pernicious threat. To be sure, Saudi Arabia had viewed Iran as a threat ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. However, Iran’s possible acquisition of nuclear weapons would raise that threat to a new level. As one retired Saudi military officer put it, “Iran’s desperate and constant attempts to acquire nuclear weapons” had merely mutated “the Iranian threat to a new garb.” Chief among the consequences of becoming a nuclear power in his view is the ability to “apply one’s pressure and one’s demands on an adversary.”²⁵ To make his point, the author also quoted Arabic poetry to that effect: “the strong rule in every land; so that the weak are not allowed their rights,” which is reminiscent of Thucydides’ classic Melian Dialogue: “The strong do as they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Reflecting the same

viewpoint, an opinion piece by a liberal Saudi academic likewise argued: “it is vital to have a nuclear deterrent, whatever the cost. For us, it is not just one of a number of options but rather an inevitable necessity in a world that only understands the logic of power.”²⁶ And, as the article concluded, “All of that makes our possession of a nuclear deterrent a necessity for our national security and for the defense of our political independence in the face of any regional or international pressure.”²⁷ Another commentator, who writes often on defense issues, even posited that Turkey could easily develop nuclear weapons, further complicating the Arabs’ position in the “survival of the strongest” struggle, since “one of the elements of that survival...is acquiring a nuclear weapons deterrent either by purchase from others...or by developing [it].”²⁸

Prince Saud Al-Faysal put the nuclear threat in perspective in 2009, noting that Israel’s nuclear arsenal had been a threat for decades already, but if Iran now also acquired nuclear weapons that would “upset the traditional balance between the countries of the Gulf to Iran’s favor.” As he saw it, “we have every legitimate right to express our legitimate concern and our justified fears of any developments that lead to the proliferation of WMD in the Gulf region...and we also have the right to confirm our categorical refusal of any unilateral hegemony and influence at the expense of our states, peoples, and interests, or of any plans which transform our countries and peoples into chess pawns.”²⁹

Mobilizing the Saudi Public

Saudi policymakers, in their efforts to rank-order the threat to Saudi Arabia have had to be careful so as not to blatantly contradict deeply-held public views of a continuing Israeli nuclear threat. Such perceptions are still deeply ingrained in Saudi opinion at all levels and, moreover, dismissals of the Israeli threat could prove embarrassing in domestic opinion and among wider Arab circles. As one military observer noted, Israel’s monopoly of nuclear weapons represents “a permanent element of threat to the Arab world.”³⁰ Even as much of the Saudi media was shifting its focus to Iran, one Saudi commentator – a member of the *Shura* – reminded his readers that Israel was still an active nuclear threat, using its nuclear monopoly to blackmail not only the Arabs but Europe and Asia as well, and that any Israeli use of nuclear weapons in war would cause

“great destruction” in the region.³¹ Israel’s assumed possession of nuclear weapons for decades has led to ingrained Saudi perceptions, at least in public opinion, of a continuing active Israeli nuclear threat, and any future Iranian threat would only join, rather than displace, the existing Israeli one. Thus, one Saudi observer in 2006 typically characterized “the Arabs [as] between the pincers of the Israeli and of the Iranian nuclear deterrents.”³² Such perceptions have persisted and, in 2010, another editorialist spoke of the Arabs as living “between the two halves of a pincer, one of which is Iran...in connection with its nuclear program, and the other of which is Israel.”³³

Significantly, when the editor of one loyalist Saudi daily sought to mobilize support against Iran, he may have gone too far for public opinion by essentially dismissing any Israeli threat, nuclear or otherwise.³⁴ The resulting readers’ comments were scathing, reminding him that Israel still posed just as much of a threat as before and taking him to task for practically ignoring that threat. In the wake of the popular furor, he was forced to pen another editorial two days later, admitting that he had received many critical messages, but suggesting that he may have been reflecting official views in his original editorial when he noted that “what I wrote was not my personal airing of the replacement of Israeli hostility by Iranian hostility.”³⁵ He reassured readers that his earlier editorial did not mean that he was ignoring the Israeli threat, but he emphasized that Israel had also never attacked the Gulf states, and he thought it necessary to reemphasize the immediacy of the Iranian threat.

Ultimately, although the Saudis continue to see a dual nuclear threat from both Israel and Iran, the balance in emphasis clearly shifted toward Iran in recent years, as the Israeli threat was downgraded to more of a residual threat. In some ways, it is true, placing Iran in greater prominence may have been more acceptable and less controversial in the international arena as the proximate potential catalyst for Saudi Arabia’s considering its own nuclear weapons rather than would have been true of a focus on Israel. Likewise, Saudi policymakers might have assumed that a focus on Iran in this context might minimize Israeli opposition to a Saudi nuclear option. Nevertheless, illustrating the continued official dual threat focus – even if more recently an uneven one – Prince Turki Al-Faysal asked: “What would be wrong with acquiring a nuclear force” to confront Iran “or [to confront] the Israeli nuclear force?”³⁶

Shaping Regional Threat Perceptions

The Saudi-owned media has also sought to convince regional publics that a nuclear-armed Iran indeed had become a greater threat than Israel, which is important to Riyadh in terms of being seen as fulfilling its role of regional defender. As one editorial complained, some Arabs outside the Gulf still saw a nuclear Iran in positive terms as a balance to Israel, but the article insisted that Iran would only target the Gulf – rather than targeting Israel – and “transform the region into a political hostage,” and therefore, constituted the greater threat.³⁷ Other Saudis labeled such views which believed that Iranian nuclear weapons were a balance to Israel as only a “hypothesis” and as “just an impossible hope.”³⁸

However, convincing Arab audiences that the Iranian nuclear program represented the greater threat has not always been easy. According to one Saudi editorial, “some Arab observers” continued to view Iran’s nuclear program in terms of a balance to Israel’s arsenal and as a means to regain Palestinian rights. However, the writer argued that Iran was not genuinely interested in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rather, Iran’s “feverish effort to complete its nuclear program makes its intention plain that it will continue its confrontational and destructive policy against its peaceful Arab neighbors.”³⁹ And, he concluded, “no Arab denies...that the Zionists are our top enemy; that is true, but the mistake I want to address is that of glossing over another rogue state [i.e. Iran] on the brink of adding to its criminal record with WMD so that it can carry out its destructive plan in the region.”⁴⁰ A military study also took to task “some who hope” that Iran would balance Israel: “the truth, instead, is that it is not Israel which will feel directly the danger of [Iran’s] nuclear weapons, but rather it is the Arab states of the Gulf who will fall within the danger zone of Iran’s blackmail.”⁴¹

Notes

1. For example, the former spokesman for Iran’s nuclear negotiating team, Seyed Hossein Mousavian, was featured in the Saudi press, interview with Seyed Hossein Mousavian by Ayman Al-Hammad, “Iran qadira ala intaj silah nawawi wa-mahamm wikalat al-taqa al-dharraya tajassusiya” [Iran Is Capable of Building Nuclear Weapons

and the Atomic Energy Agency's Mission Is Espionage], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 28 December 2012, available from www.alriyadh.com/2012/09/28/article771824.html.

2. The intercepted conversation is one of the Iraqi documents captured in 2003, transcript in SH-MICN-D-000-839_TF, 28 July 1990, Conflict Records Research Center, Washington, DC.

3. Sad Al-Bazzaz, *Harb talid ukhra [One War Engenders Another]*. (Amman: Al-ahliya li'l-nashr wa'l-tawzi, 1992), 2nd ed., 202.

4. Paul Lewis, "Defector Says Saudis Sought Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, 7 August 1994, A20.

5. Sadaqa Yahya Fadil, "Al-Qunbula al-nawawiya al-islamiya bayn al-hulm wa'l-kabus" [The Islamic Atom Bomb Either Dream or Nightmare], *Ukaz* (Jeddah), 1 May 1992, 8.

6. Sadaqa Yahya Fadil, "Istikhdam al-silah al-nawawi...al-maful al-khafiy" [Using Nuclear Weapons...the Hidden Impact], *Ukaz*, On-line, Internet, 25 March 2007, available from www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20070325/PrinCon2007032597841.htm.

7. Yusuf Kamil Khattab, "Qarar Libiya al-takhalli an aslihat al-damar al-shamil: abaduh wa-natai'jhu" [Libya's Decision to Relinquish WMD: Its Dimensions and Results], *Majallat Kulliyat Al-Malik Khalid Al-Askariya*, March 2004, 38.

8. *Ibid.*, 35-38.

9. Hay'at Al-Tahrir [Editorial Board], "Hal yusbih Al-Sharq Al-Awsat mintaqah khaliya min aslihat al-damar al-shamil?" [Will the Middle East Become a Region Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction?], *Majallat Kulliyat Al-Malik Khalid Al-Askariya*, March 2004, 45. Iran had just signed the Additional Protocol to its NPT safeguards agreement, granting expanded international inspection rights, and the Saudis at the time apparently believed this marked an end to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

10. "Al-Amir Muqrin: Al-Nizaat al-madhhabiya wa'l-tasalluh al-nawawi yuhaddidan amn Al-Khalij" [Prince Muqrin: Ideological Conflicts and Nuclear Arms Acquisitions Threaten Security in the Gulf], *Ukaz*, On-line, Internet, 9 December 2006, available from www.okaz.com.sa.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Ahmad Muharram Najib, "Al-Silah al-nawawi yaqud" [Nuclear Weapons Rule], *Majallat Al-Shura*, Dhu al-hijja 1427/December 2006-January 2007, 32-41.

13. Prince Nayif quoted in a press conference in Tunisia, "Imtilak 'Isra'il' silahan

nawawiyān yuti mubarriran li-ayy dawla li-an tufakkir bi'l-husul alayh" [Israel's Possession of Nuclear Weapons Gives Any Country the Justification to Also Think about Acquiring Them], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 2 February 2006, available from www.alriyadh.com/2006/02/02/article127533.html.

14. Ghassan Al-Imam, "Al-amn al-qawmi al-arabi wa'l-qunbula al-iraniya" [Arab National Security and the Iranian Bomb], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, On-line, Internet, 10 May 2005, available from www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=298477&issueno=9660.

15. Ibid.

16. Ali Abbud Madi, "Nam annaha al-khatar al-akbar" [Yes, It Is the Greater Threat], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 16 November 2003, available from www.alriyadh.com/2003/11/16/article18406.html.

17. Jasir Abd Al-Aziz Al-Jasir, "Naam li-silah nawawi khaliji" [Yes to a Gulf Nuclear Weapon], *Al-Jazira*, On-line, Internet, 7 December 2011, available from www.al-jazirah.com.sa/20111207/du8.htm.

18. Yusuf Al-Kuwaylit, "La-yakun amn Isra'il waraqat al-musawama al-arabiya" [Let Israel's Security Be the Arab Negotiating Card], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 4 December 2001, available from www.alriyadh.com/2001/12/04/article30286.html.

19. Jasir Abd Al-Aziz Al-Jasir, "Naam li-silah nawawi khaliji" [Yes to a Gulf Nuclear Weapon], *Al-Jazira*, On-line, Internet, 7 December 2011, available from www.al-jazirah.com.sa/20111207/du8.htm.

20. Fahd Amir Al-Ahmadi, "Sahh al-nawm ya arab wasalat al-arbami'a!" [Hope You Have Slept Enough, Oh Arabs; the Fourteen Hundreds Have Arrived], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 13 July 2002, available from www.alriyadh.com/2002/07/13/article26773.html. The 1400s refers to the current century in the Islamic calendar.

21. Id bin Masud Al-Juhani, "Hal yufiq al-arab ala hadir al-quwwa al-isra'iliya?" [Will the Arabs Awake from the Noise of Israeli Power?], *Al-Hayat* (London), On-line, Internet, 12 April 2008, available from <http://international.daralhayat.com/print/200023/archive>. The author is Director of the Arab Gulf Center for Energy and Strategic Studies.

22. Salih Al-Namla, "Kuriya, Taywan, Iran wa-tanaqud al-siyasa al-nawawiya al-amrikiya" [Korea, Taiwan, Iran, and the Contradictions of American Nuclear Policy], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 8 October 2003, available from www.alriyadh.com/2003/10/08/article19079.html.

23. Sadaqa Yahya Fadil, "Istikhdam al-silah al-nawawi...al-maful al-khafiy" [Using Nuclear Weapons...the Hidden Impact], *Ukaz*, On-line, Internet, 25 March 2007, available from www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20070325/PrinCon2007032597841.htm.

24. “Li-madha istithna’ Isra’il?” [Why the Exception for Israel?], *Al-Madina*, On-line, Internet, 22 September 2010, available from www.al-madina.com/print/265335.

25. Staff Major General Salama bin Hadhdhal Bin Saydan (Ret), “Al-Tahtid al-irani fi thawbih al-jadid” [The Iranian Threat in Its New Garb], *Al-Jazira*, On-line, Internet, 16 August 2008, available from www.al-jazirah.com.sa/2008jaz/aug/16/ar8.htm.

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27. Staff Brigadier Zayid bin Muhammad Al-Umari, “Dawafi imtilak al-qudrat al-istratijiya al-sarukhiya al-fada’iya wa’l-nawawiya” [The Incentives for Acquiring Strategic Rocket, Space, and Nuclear Capabilities], *Quwwat Al-Difa Al-Jawwi Al-Malaki Al-Saudi*, December 2010, 15.

28. Sami Said Habib, “Ardughan wa-sibaq al-tasalluh al-nawawi al-qadim” [Erdogan and the Coming Nuclear Arms Race], *Al-Madina*, On-line, Internet, 17 September 2011, available from www.al-madina.com/printhtml/327185.

29. “Nass kalimat al-amir Saud Al-Faysal wazir al-kharijiya al-saudiya” [The Text of the Speech by Prince Saud Al-Faysal, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 7 January 2009, www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=501885&issueno=10998. Saudi concerns had already sharpened due to Iran’s development of SSMs some years earlier, which were also viewed within the context Iran’s intent “to become a regional great power and to be able to impose its hegemony in the region.” “Wast mazid min al-tawatturat wa’l-daght al-sarukh al-irani shihab 3 yadkhul al-khidma” [Amid Increasing Tensions and Pressure the Iranian Shihab-3 Missile Enters Service], *Majallat Kulliyat Al-Malik Khalid Al-Askariya*, 1 December 2003, www.kkmaq.gov.sa/detail.asp?InNewsItemID=129818&InTemplateKey=print.

30. Major General Muhammad Jamal Mazhlum, “Al-Amn al-qawmi al-tahaddiyat al-askariya wa-subul al-tasaddi laha” [National Security: Military Challenges and the Means to Counter Them], *Majallat Kulliyat Al-Malik Khalid Al-Askariya*, 1 June 2008, www.kkmaq.gov.sa/detail.asp?InNewsItemID=273652&InTemplateKey=print.

31. Sadaqa Yahya Fadil, “Istikhdam Isra’il li-tarsanatha al-nawawiya” [Israel’s Use of Its Nuclear Arsenal], *Majallat Al-Shura*, Jumada II 1430/May-June 2009, 28.

32. Talal Salih Bannan, “Al-Arab bayn kammashat al-rub al-nawawi!” [The Arabs between the Pincers of Nuclear Terror!], *Ukaz*, On-line, Internet, 2 April 2006, available from www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20060402/PrinCon200604026920.htm.

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Iranian Case from a United Arab Perspective], *Al-Madina*, On-line, Internet, 7 January 2010, available from www.al-madina.com/print/213010.

34. Turki Abd Allah Al-Sudayri, “La-nafham shawahid al-makhatir al-qa’ima” [Let Us Understand the Evidence for the Existing Threat], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 15 October 2011, available from www.alriyadh.com/2011/10/15/article675765.print.

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36. Ali Al-Qahis, “Al-Amir Turki Al-Faysal yutalib bi-tahwil majlis al-taawun ila ittihad ashbah bi’l-urubbi wa-insha’ jaysh khaliiji muwahhad” [Prince Turki Al-Faysal Calls for a Transformation of the [Gulf] Cooperation Council into a Union Resembling the European Union and for the Establishment of a Unified Gulf Army], *Al-Riyadh*, On-line, Internet, 22 March 2011, available from www.alriyadh.com/2011/03/22/article615880.html.

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38. Abd Al-Munim Mustafa, “Kull shay’ lam yaud kafiyan” [All of That Is Not Enough], *Al-Madina*, On-line, Internet, 14 February 2010, available from www.al-madina.com/print/224041.

39. Sulayman Al-Asad, “Al-Silah al-nawawi al-irani didd man?” [The Iranian Nuclear Weapon – Against Whom?], *Al-Jazira*, On-line, Internet, 26 December 2011, available from www.al-jazirah.com.sa/20111226/du13.htm.

40. Ibid.

41. Major General Husam Suwaylim (Ret), “Ahdaf Iran al-siyasiya wa’l-istratijiya wa-asalib tahqiqha,” [Iran’s Political and Strategic Objectives and the Methods to Achieve Them], *Al-Haras Al-Watani*, part 1, August 2011, 39.

CHAPTER 5

Analyzing the Threat in Riyadh: Why Would a Nuclear Iran Be So Dangerous?

Not surprisingly, the Saudis devoted an increasing amount of attention to analyzing the changing Iranian threat and its implications as Iran was seen coming closer to acquiring nuclear weapons. How Iran might use nuclear weapons and how Saudi nuclear weapons might be used to counter that threat have elicited a considerable amount of discussion and speculation in both civilian and military circles. Saudi policymakers and analysts have focused exclusively on Iran's nuclear program from a Saudi threat perspective, with Iran seen as an aggressive state pursuing nuclear weapons as a means to increase its capability to threaten its neighbors and to impose its hegemonic control on the region. There has been no attempt by Saudi Arabia to analyze the Iranian nuclear program from Tehran's standpoint, with a regime which feels threatened by a U.S. military presence in the region and by the prospect of regime change promoted or abetted from outside, a concern very likely intensified by the events in Libya and Syria and the role played by outside support to the dissidents in those two countries.

In part, deep and abiding religious undercurrents exacerbate the bilateral relationship. That is, Saudis in general, and the country's religious establishment in particular, view the Shia (whether in Iran or the other regional communities) with distaste and suspicion born of long-standing theological differences. The intense competition for regional influence, based on state interests, complements both countries' readiness to react viscerally to each other's policies. And, to lend concrete validity to such mutual mistrust, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been engaged in a covert war in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, while Riyadh has blamed the protests by the Shia majority in Bahrain on Iranian influence rather than on local grievances. Not surprisingly, Saudi assessments of a

prospective Iranian nuclear capability are considered within that existing overarching threat framework. As one editorial in 2013 summed up the Saudi view, Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons to compensate for its “religious and ideological inferiority complex,” and its ultimate objective was to “oblige the world to accept it on the list of great nuclear powers.”¹

Iran’s Nuclear Program: Military or Civilian?

Saudi Arabia had long been convinced that Iran’s nuclear program, whatever Tehran’s claims, was meant for military purposes and not for civilian use. One observer in a Saudi-owned newspaper claimed in 2005 that Iran was merely pursuing a policy of deception similar to those that Israel, India, and Pakistan had followed until they had developed nuclear weapons.² As a more recent editorial, among many articulating the Saudi consensus, noted, “Iran’s repeated assurances...that its nuclear program is not intended for the production of nuclear weapons...is hard to believe.”³ Saudi doubts about the civilian nature of the Iranian nuclear program, despite Tehran’s assurances, have continued unabated until the present.⁴ Arguments by Iran that it needed nuclear power to generate electricity were dismissed out of hand, even though Saudi Arabia has made similar arguments about impending energy shortages in advocating its own civilian nuclear program. As the editor of one Saudi daily put it, Iran is “a state with enormous reserves of oil and gas, but has used [this argument] in order to achieve other objectives.”⁵ In fact, the whole thrust of Saudi analysis and policy planning has been based on the conviction that Iran has pursued a nuclear option specifically for military purposes.

Creating a New Hegemony

As some in Saudi Arabia saw it, Iran would be able to translate nuclear weapons into considerable, and perhaps decisive, clout in the region. A consensus emerged in Saudi Arabia that Iran was not likely to use a new nuclear capability against Israel because of the latter’s overwhelming overmatch and U.S. support. Significantly, a retired Saudi general, asked: “What will the Iranian regime now be able to do if it acquires nuclear weapons?” According to that officer, what was of

particular concern about Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons was that, unlike some other nuclear powers, "the difference is that in the case of Iran it has become clear that the latter has a geo-political plan for expansion."⁶ As another retired Saudi military officer saw it, acquiring nuclear weapons would enable Iran to "consolidate its security, extend its influence, and break the international isolation which has beset it since the Revolution."⁷

According to another observer, "the Iranian nuclear bomb has only one objective, namely that of dominance by a new Persian Empire over Asia and the Arab and Islamic worlds," which he saw as replacing in a way the earlier Ottoman Empire, and, as he put it, the intent was to "spread this new Persian Empire's political and religious culture."⁸ One editorial claimed that a nuclear Iran was merely following in the steps of the Shah, who had hoped the nuclear program he had initiated would enable Iran to become the "policeman of the Gulf."⁹ A report in a Saudi-owned newspaper commenting on a meeting between the defense ministers of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait noted that, according to unnamed sources, the GCC viewed Iran's recent refusal to allow international inspection of its nuclear program with "extreme concern" and that all "understood very clearly" that if Iran reached the stage of manufacturing an atom bomb that "will lead to a redrawing of the map of the Middle East region and, as a result, to a change in the balance of military power in the region, opening the way for Tehran to extend and expand its political and military influence [and] for the 'Persianization' of the Gulf as a first phase."¹⁰

Similarly, a Saudi military study posited that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons "in order to safeguard its regional role, and to expand that role so that the Islamic Republic's presence is at a level no less prominent than that of India, Israel, or Pakistan."¹¹ Another Saudi study specifically linked Iran's potential acquisition of nuclear weapons to a new ability to establish its hegemony in the region by changing borders, partitioning existing states into mini-states, and turning the Arab states into satellites.¹² As that observer saw it, "we can confirm that when the production of Iranian nuclear weapons is complete they will not be directed against Israel at all... Rather, they will be used to threaten and blackmail the Arab states, starting with those in the Gulf."¹³

An editorial, likewise, characterized the Gulf countries – with their

key assets along the coast – as “becoming the hostage of Iran’s ambitions” once the latter acquired nuclear weapons. Seeking to “transform the region and to exercise its hegemony, once it acquires nuclear weapons [Iran] will be able to accomplish what it has so far been unable to do, and without dropping a single atom bomb.”¹⁴ Saudi observers frequently concluded that a nuclear Iran, indeed, would be able to “change the map.”¹⁵ An editorial in a Saudi-owned newspaper stressed that Iran would use its nuclear weapons to extract “major concessions, that is to turn the region into a hostage to the conduct of Iranian policy.”¹⁶ Iran’s nuclear weapons would be used “to frighten and then attrit the Arab states in an arms race [as the latter try] to achieve a nuclear balance.”¹⁷

Another article in the military media focused on the implications for affecting the Gulf countries’ decision-making once Iran became a nuclear power, noting that “the intent in [Iran’s] acquiring this [nuclear] weapon is to blackmail the Gulf countries and to score political gains...which will limit the independence of political decision-making in the Gulf in general terms, and which will impose on the GCC countries a new security reality in both regional and domestic terms.”¹⁸ Indeed, Iran would then use the new capability to demand from the West a new strategic deal which would recognize Iran’s dominant role in the Gulf’s security and recognition of the legitimacy of its regime.¹⁹ Some Saudis speculated that Iran might not even declare it had nuclear weapons but might rely on a strategy of ambivalence.²⁰ And, even if Iran acquired sufficient enriched uranium for one nuclear bomb at first, it could wait until it had accumulated enough material for “a small arsenal” before proceeding to weaponization, since “a single nuclear weapon is not useful to establish a nuclear deterrence balance.”²¹

Saudis emphasized not only the material character but also the psychological aspect of nuclear weapons as part of a new strategic equation. Some Saudis felt that simply living next door to a nuclear-armed Iran could unhinge the regional balance by pulling the GCC apart as a result of what one might term the “avalanche syndrome.” That is one could equate such a situation to living in the shadow of a snow-covered mountain, when one might unconsciously start to tip-toe even inside one’s own house out of concern about triggering an avalanche. The GCC’s smaller members, in particular, intimidated by Iran’s hegemony and conscious of their vulnerability, might become wary of irritating Iran and

drift into the latter's orbit. As one Saudi commentator warned, "There is a fear that some of the Gulf states, acting out of fear, will prefer to lie down under Iran's nuclear wing. If that happens, the Gulf states' orientation will change, thereby causing a split in the Arab world."²² As another Saudi observer put it, Iran's "hegemony will be entrenched and will become a tangible reality when it acquires nuclear weapons."²³

Exporting the Revolution and "Offensive Deterrence"

In addition, according to a retired senior Saudi military officer, "acquiring a nuclear deterrent is what will provide it [i.e. Iran] the appropriate conditions to export and impose the Revolution."²⁴ Another Saudi military overview concluded that Iran's objective was to establish its hegemony over the entire Middle East and some countries in Central and South Asia, and especially where there were Shia communities, by exporting its revolution, as it had been trying to do even without nuclear weapons.²⁵ The study assessed that the only element of Iran's national power that had been missing was the nuclear one, which was now said to be on its way.

In particular, according to a Saudi editorial emphasizing Iran as the primary nuclear threat, Tehran relied on its ability to use "sectarian differences as justification and then as [potential] for incitement," referring to Iran's alleged involvement with Shia communities in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia itself.²⁶ Riyadh, in particular, appeared apprehensive about its own indigenous Shia communities in the oil-rich Eastern Province and along the southern border with Yemen, attributing discontent there not to the long-standing discriminatory treatment at the hands of the Saudi government but to Iranian incitement. Saudi policymakers and public opinion became increasingly concerned about what was viewed as Iran's capability to incite and support the Shia communities the region after the unrest in Bahrain in 2011, which Riyadh blamed on Iran. As the Saudi Land Forces' journal saw it, Iran would utilize its nuclear status "to blackmail the Arab states beginning with the Gulf States in order to incite and support Iran's extended hands [i.e. the Shia communities] inside those states on a continuous basis in order to carry out Iranian plans."²⁷ One political commentator argued that Iran was planting agents in the Gulf "in order to destabilize the Gulf."²⁸ Another

commentator writing in the Saudi military academy's official journal, focused on Iran's exploitation of the local Shia communities as part of its "interference" in the Gulf States, which he compared to that of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁹ According to the Saudi foreign minister, in fact, "Iran's interference in the internal affairs of the Gulf states is continuing."³⁰

As one Saudi opinion piece saw it, as dangerous as the threat that Iran posed already by its creation of "a fifth column" in the region already was, "the threat today cannot be compared in any way to the threat in the future when [Iran] acquires nuclear weapons."³¹ Even those Saudis who dismissed Iran's saber-rattling as largely bluster were concerned that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the latter would change the regional military equation decisively.³² Specifically, according to a military study, "if Iran acquires nuclear weapons that will provide it with an ideal military screen (*ghita*) with which to carry out that mission [i.e. of exporting the revolution]."³³ That is, the perception has been that Iran could use its nuclear weapons as a deterrent against regional or international retaliation for an aggressive policy directed against the Arab Gulf states using conventional or unconventional means. Iraqi military thinkers had already discussed years earlier this aspect of using nuclear weapons and had labeled such a strategy "offensive deterrence" (*al-rad al-hujumi*).³⁴

It was this Iran/domestic Shia threat backed up by a nuclear deterrent that Saudi official circles viewed as the most lethal likely combination. While the current Iranian threat was already viewed with concern, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons was seen as increasing that threat exponentially. One writer highlighted that "the psychological dividing line between nuclear and conventional weapons is enormous, despite the increase in the lethality of modern conventional weapons."³⁵

Saudis also have feared that Iran, as a nuclear power, might also be emboldened to engage in conventional military operations at a higher level than at present. Here, too, Iran could use a nuclear capability as a deterrent behind which it could feel secure that the international community would not likely intervene or retaliate. Addressing Iran's future nuclear capability, one Saudi observer noted that "Iran dreams of completely deterring the United States and of obliging the latter to defer to Iran's interests."³⁶ An editorial, likewise, stressed that even the great powers would not risk war against a nuclear state, noting that "even if tomorrow

Iran undertook to occupy Bahrain – which is something only too possible – or if its militias seized southern Iraq, there would be no great power which would dare to prevent Iran from doing so by military means.”³⁷ Another editorial in a Saudi-owned newspaper, typically, argued that thanks to nuclear weapons Iran would be able to expand and even occupy Kuwait.³⁸

However, others believed that Iranian aggression would likely not take the form of a ground or amphibious invasion, for which Iran has limited capabilities. Rather, many Saudis assessed that Iran would most likely have recourse to its air, naval, and SSM assets in any confrontation with the regional countries. Iran had already publicized explicitly a potential target list on the Saudi side of the Gulf in a conventional confrontation – including oil facilities, cities, power stations, and ports – many of which are vulnerable and whose loss would threaten Saudi Arabia’s vital interests, and such information was often communicated to the Saudi public by its own media.³⁹

Nuclear Weapons and Warfighting

But, apart from acquiring nuclear weapons as a deterrent and political lever, might Iran also resort to nuclear weapons in a warfighting mode? Even if the Saudis recognized that Iran’s use of nuclear weapons in a war as a far less likely contingency than its use of these weapons to support its use of force at lower levels, they did not, and could not, dismiss that possibility entirely.

Specifically, some Saudi observers concluded that Iran was unlikely to use nuclear weapons in a war against the Arab states because that would also threaten the Shia communities living in those countries.⁴⁰ However, there were also Saudi “pessimists,” that is those who did not exclude the possibility that Iran might use a nuclear capability in a warfighting mode. Thus, one commentator in a Saudi-owned newspaper dismissed those who felt that Iran would not use nuclear weapons against an Arab state, given that it was Muslim, by pointing out that Iran had already used chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq War against Iraq.⁴¹ However low the probability of a nuclear war, some – and perhaps even most – Saudis did not dismiss it offhand. Certainly, most Saudis believed that Israel “would not hesitate to use whatever WMD it has, including nuclear weapons, in any future war

with the Arabs” not only as a last resort but even in other situations, such as not being able to deal with a conventional Arab attack.⁴² Even Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faysal, was not reassuring on this count, as he noted in 2010 with regard to the Iranian nuclear program that “history shows that no weapon has entered the region without its ending up being used.”⁴³

As an editorial in a Saudi-owned newspaper also asked plaintively in a discussion on nuclear weapons, “is it possible for us to imagine how our current human era will be described if a fool one day commits the fatal error of pressing the button?”⁴⁴ Some believed that Iranian leaders could miscalculate and that such human errors could result in a nuclear war.⁴⁵ Other observers considered that Iran was willing to use, or at least to threaten to use, nuclear weapons, based on the latter’s eschatological worldview and desire to bring about the reappearance of the occulted Imam of Shia doctrine.⁴⁶ One editorial in 2013 was skeptical that deterrence would work with Iran, since it claimed that the Iranian leadership was unpredictable, and that even potential alternatives to the current leadership believed in the return of the awaited Mahdi and might be willing to hasten the process at any cost. The editorial concluded by asking “How, then, can we trust a nuclear Iran?”⁴⁷

Other Saudis also feared that Iran was not a rational actor, suggesting that the Iranian leadership had mental issues.⁴⁸ Yet another editorial in 2008 also focused on the uncertainties of the Iranian leadership’s perceptions of the nuclear factor. As the editorial saw it: We are confronted by two possibilities: either we believe and trust that the Iranian leadership understands the risks and is governed by logic and will not cause the death of a million human beings in order to win a war which could be decided instead peacefully...but that means that we have not learned our lesson from Saddam Hussein or...the other possibility is that we do not trust anyone.

The same writer, for his part, concluded that “we cannot build our future by trusting in good intentions; the past has taught us not to trust any leader.”⁴⁹ And, he too also interjected the element of imponderable ideological considerations that had to be factored into the risk of nuclear war, namely that some “thoughtless leaders” in Israel or Iran might actually view a nuclear war as hastening the coming of the Messiah or the Mahdi, respectively.⁵⁰ At least one Saudi commentator, in fact, felt that

Israel would have no qualms about targeting large Arab cities and the industrial and oil infrastructure, as well as military facilities, with its nuclear weapons.⁵¹

The above 2008 editorial then asked against whom Iran might use its nuclear weapons. Even in case of a confrontation with the United States, Iran was judged as unlikely to strike the United States with its nuclear weapons. Instead, if Iran wanted to hit at U.S. interests indirectly, the writer posited that although either Israel or the Gulf could be direct targets, Israel too was unlikely because of its ability to retaliate. He concluded that “Therefore, that leaves Iran with virtually a single target if it wanted to harm the United States and minimize the risk of retaliation: the Gulf.”⁵² Likewise, a Saudi military journal rejected the likelihood that Iran would strike either the United States or Israel with its nuclear weapons, given the overmatch Iran would face. In light of that, the writer argued that “the clearest and most feasible objective of a war, in the thinking of Iran’s leaders, would be to embark on a war against the Arabs and, in particular, against the Gulf States.”⁵³ Another editorial derided “some Arabs...who believe that the use of nuclear weapons against them would be impossible as long as they themselves did not have [such weapons],” labeling such attitudes as “naiveté,” and assessing that Israel would have used that capability in 1973, as would have Iran or Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.⁵⁴ Indeed, the same writer maintained that “Iran’s arming itself with the bomb might entice it in the future to use it, not against nuclear-armed Israel but, rather, against the Sunni Arab states which do not possess a strategic weapon capable of deterring or responding.”⁵⁵

One Saudi military writer recently discussed the categories of potential targets in a first strike – which he believed would be focused on counter-force military targets – if ever there should be a nuclear war. Although his assessment was in generic terms, with no specific countries named, given the timing and current Saudi security concerns, the intent was clearly to address the situation in the Gulf. In his view,

For those countries possessing nuclear weapons, there is a whole other target set for selection, focusing on a strategy of striking the enemy’s standing forces, provided there are forces that are vulnerable to a first strike, which would give an advantage for taking the initiative to the party initiating the war. This strategy is directed against military targets only,

and he who has the capability to launch a first-strike must calculate whether he has the ability to destroy every missile in the other party's arsenal. Otherwise, the result can be a guaranteed disaster.⁵⁶

Although Iran was not specifically mentioned in this assessment, given the recent Saudi preoccupations with the threat posed by a potential Iranian nuclear capability, the assumed linkage for Saudi military readers was no doubt clear.

The Threat to Saudi Arabia's Economy

Saudi decision-makers have also been concerned that an assertive nuclear-armed Iran could easily threaten the economic pillar of the ruling family's legitimacy and, in particular, the energy sector upon which most of Saudi Arabia's national income and stability depend. Even before Iran would become a nuclear power, Saudis feared that strikes by the United States or Israel intended to prevent Iran from acquiring that nuclear capability could lead the latter to unleash a costly attack aimed at Saudi Arabia's economy, as Iran had threatened to do in retaliation for any strike against its nuclear program. In particular, Saudi and Gulf oil and gas facilities and export mechanisms are vulnerable to such attacks. Even the "soft power" option of punishing sanctions put in place, while less confrontational than a military strike, it was feared, might elicit a forceful Iranian response if the Iranian regime believed its stability was being undermined. However, the tangible steps Iran only took the form of warnings, such as forays by Iranian naval vessels near Saudi oil facilities and the cyber attack on Aramco, Saudi Arabia's national oil company, which many suspected had been carried out by Iran.⁵⁷

Saudis were divided over the likelihood and feasibility of Iran's carrying through with its repeated threats to close the Straits of Hormuz, which could disrupt – even if not stop – oil exports from Saudi Arabia, with some hoping that the West would not accept such a significant economic challenge. Despite being a supporter of harsh sanctions against Iran, one Saudi newspaper editor worried that Iran could even resort to "committing suicide by closing and mining the Straits of Hormuz" in a situation fraught with uncertainty.⁵⁸ Indeed, one Saudi commentator warned Iran that if the latter closed the Straits the West would react by striking Iran with nuclear weapons, and would then destroy the regime and

occupy the country.⁵⁹ However, given the widespread assumption in Saudi Arabia that not even a great power would confront a country that had nuclear weapons, the implicit assumption was that once Iran actually acquired that capability it could pose a more credible threat to close the Straits of Hormuz than it could now. As a writer in a Saudi military journal feared – although projecting such views as being felt in Israel – a nuclear-armed Iran could control oil in the Gulf, thereby giving it a decisive voice on pricing.⁶⁰ In the event, Riyadh began preparing to revitalize the pipeline to the Red Sea that it had used to bypass the Straits of Hormuz during the Iran-Iraq War in case shipping through the Gulf was disrupted again.⁶¹

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CHAPTER 6

Thinking in Terms of Solutions: Stopping Iran

Highlighting the looming Iranian problem publicly begged the question of what could be done to neutralize the nuclear threat if and when it actually came to pass. Even if not challenged openly by public opinion, any government would likely feel sensitive about providing an answer to a threat about which it had repeatedly informed the public, thereby raising the latter's level of concern. By and large, Saudi Arabia recognized that there was not much it could do about countering the nuclear threat from Israel. It was too late for that. Moreover, as noted, Israel increasingly has been seen as a far less imminent threat than that emanating from Iran. Not surprisingly, the Saudis' focus has been, instead, on how to deal with Iran. Saudi Arabia hoped to avoid creating a repetition of the situation it had come to face with Israel and believed that there was still time to act. Saudis addressed this issue directly, with Saudi spokesmen and analysts considering possible solutions to stopping Iran's march toward nuclear weapons. Such options ranged from doing nothing, to accepting a foreign nuclear umbrella, to hoping for a strike derailing or delaying the development of an Iranian bomb, to relying on the effectiveness of soft power, and, ultimately, to seeking a countervailing nuclear deterrent.

Doing Nothing?

As for the first option, that of doing nothing and merely adjusting to a new situation, Saudi Arabia implicitly rejected it. To do nothing, from the Saudi perspective, would have been to abdicate any possibility of countering what was perceived as an active threat already, as noted above, and a threat that would only increase if Iran acquired nuclear weapons. If anything, Saudis believed that a passive attitude on their part would only encourage Iran in its aggressiveness. As a Saudi political analyst noted,

the Gulf states “must seek immediately and resolutely to acquire nuclear weapons, using any possible means,” arguing that “it is not logical for Iran, whose objectives of expansion are well-known, to seek nuclear weapons while the Gulf states do nothing.”¹

True, some senior Saudis may have at least considered the possibility of accommodating Iran by recognizing the latter’s interests. For example, in July 2011, the country’s Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al-Faysal – in a departure from the harsh rhetoric that had been emanating from Saudi Arabia – appeared to suggest that one needed to recognize Iranian interests and power when he said that “Iran is a neighboring country; if it wants a leadership role it must take into consideration the interests of the countries of the region and not [only] its own interests.”² However, in what was a highly unusual follow-up, a Saudi academic took Prince Saud Al-Faysal to task publicly, noting that his remarks differed from previous positions, that it seemed that Saudi Arabia was accepting Iran’s leading role in the region, and asking whether this represented a change in Saudi policy and if Saudi Arabia was now willing to share influence in the Gulf with Iran. Indeed, he asked openly if that meant that the Gulf States now accepted Iran’s leadership, if this was really Saudi policy, and if Saudi Arabia was now prepared to coexist with Iran’s ambitions. Clarifying Saudi Arabia’s policy and interests, the commentator stressed, instead, that “there is no substitute for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to be an effective player in the regional power balance equation...and there is no excuse for asking Iran to safeguard our interests.” And, he added, “I do not believe that Saudi Arabia can or will accept coexistence with a leading role or hegemony by Iran in the Gulf.” Asking himself if Prince Saud Al-Faysal really meant to link a leading role for Iran in return for the latter’s protecting the Gulf States’ interests, he concluded that accepting such a role for Iran would represent “a revolution in Saudi policy.” Instead, what Saudi Arabia had to do was ensure its own self-defense and demand that Iran end its quest for nuclear weapons.³

Given the context of the Saudi political system, such immediate and forceful public questioning of a senior member of the royal family probably suggests some backing from influential circles within the royal family and may reflect differences of opinion at the top about the approach to Iran. Subsequently, Prince Saud Al-Faysal reverted to the more standard Saudi hard-line, as at a GCC Foreign Ministers’ summit held in Riyadh in

November 2011, where he condemned not only Iran's "persistent interference" in the affairs of neighboring states but also its pursuit of nuclear weapons, which he noted "is considered a patent threat to the security and stability of the region."⁴

Nevertheless, some elements of a Saudi carrot and stick policy, or at least a desire to avoid a direct confrontation with Iran remained, as in February 2012 two Iranian warships deploying to the Red Sea were allowed to make a port call in Jeddah. Likewise, a Saudi military journal at the end of 2012 published two articles – albeit written by foreigners – which focused on the desirability of good Arab-Iranian relations and the need to come to an understanding, based on the fact that they shared a common geography, history, culture, and political, economic, and security interests, and suggested many potential joint projects, even on civilian nuclear energy.⁵ The principal stumbling block, however, was said to remain the doubts around Tehran's nuclear intentions, which had to be resolved first. Urging Iran to abandon its nuclear quest, the Saudi media even appealed to Iran's purported shared interest with the Gulf countries as common victims of a supposed "vast conspiracy" by the West and Israel to spark a war between Iran and its Gulf neighbors, which would destroy both belligerents and allow Israel to dominate the region.⁶

A Foreign Nuclear Umbrella as an Alternative?

Could the provision of a nuclear umbrella by another country provide a viable policy incentive that would influence the Saudi leadership to consider alternates to a nuclear option of its own in response to an Iranian nuclear breakout? Such guarantees have been effective in limiting proliferation in several regions of the world, but the Saudi case may be less amenable to such a solution, and there has been long-standing skepticism in Saudi Arabia about such proposals. As a Saudi observer put it, when discussing the nuclear threats in the region, "only the Arabs themselves can defend the Arabs' security."⁷

First, it is doubtful that the Saudis would view the Pakistani nuclear deterrent as a reliable umbrella for their own security based just on religious solidarity. As a member of the royal family who was later to become Prince Sultan's adviser on national security noted, "Saudi Arabia does not accept the notion that a Pakistani bomb is an Islamic bomb.

Instead, national interest is regarded as the most likely factor affecting how nuclear capabilities will be used.”⁸

Likewise, when then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton floated the possibility in 2009 of an American nuclear umbrella for the Middle East, the Saudi press was skeptical at best, and even hostile, perhaps reflecting official views which the Saudi leadership would have been reluctant to express openly. One Saudi editorialist claimed that the inclusion of Israel in such an arrangement represented a political stumbling block, and he asked “Is Israel a friendly country?” – A key question for him, since Israel was also to be included in the program.⁹ According to the same editorialist, it was Israel’s nuclear weapons that were the “real threat to peace in the region.” In fact, by offering protection to “friends,” that limitation would even spur others to acquire nuclear weapons, as they would feel vulnerable to attacks by a country protected by the American nuclear umbrella.¹⁰ Another concern was that such a relationship would create an uncomfortable dependence by the junior partner. As the same writer put it, speaking of the 2009 U.S. proposal,

This situation reminds us of what happened with Europe when the Soviet Union was still in existence, when the United States extended a nuclear umbrella “with the intent of protecting its European allies from Soviet nuclear weapons.” Some of the countries even today are finding it difficult to free themselves from that American domination; the same thing is happening with the countries of Eastern Europe, as the United States is extending a nuclear umbrella, which Washington claims is intended to protect those countries from a nuclear Iran, but which raises concerns in Russia and in other countries, which see it as a threat to their own security.¹¹

In the event, Riyadh did not need to oppose the idea officially, as Egypt’s President Husni Mubarak came out against it, effectively obstructing it, at least for the time being.¹² In the wake of the regime changes resulting from the Arab Spring, there was likely to be even less regional support or “cover” for a Saudi acceptance of an umbrella than before. Even those, such as Prince Turki Al-Faysal, who have considered an American nuclear umbrella as theoretically workable, did so only on condition that the Middle East as a whole became a nuclear-free zone, including the requirement that Israel relinquish its nuclear arsenal, thereby voiding any realistic near-term possibility of such a nuclear umbrella.¹³

At the same time, there was a growing sense that the United States would simply not be able to control nuclear proliferation everywhere by using this mechanism. As an editorial in a Saudi-owned paper put it, “the world policeman [i.e. the United States] will not be able to establish a nuclear umbrella to defend its spheres of influence from threats.”¹⁴ In fact, reflecting an anarchic world system, this same editorial envisioned the possibility that the NPT would collapse and that the world would become a “law of the jungle” environment, which “will force ‘the school principal’ [i.e. the United States] to think about just protecting himself instead of worrying about protecting others.”¹⁵ Another editorial by an academic from the UAE, but published in a Saudi-owned newspaper, went even further in discussing a response to Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons and the threat that posed to the Gulf, as it openly raised doubts about U.S. reliability:

The GCC has legitimate concerns about the United States, and it is particularly not wise to rely on American protection in light of the decline of American unipolarity. There is mounting skepticism about the United States’ ability and willingness to fulfill its security and stability obligations in the region over the long term...Relying solely on the American protection services is not convincing and its date of expiration has almost been reached. What Washington offers in security and military services is no longer of the same quality as before.¹⁶

Beyond that aspect, there were also uncertainties about the reliability of American guarantees, with concerns about the depth of the United States’ commitment to support its allies in the region, especially in the wake of the forced departure of a number of rulers during the Arab Spring. Revealingly, senior Saudi policymakers were reportedly upset by what they interpreted to have been the United States’ abrupt abandonment of its close regional ally, Egyptian president Husni Mubarak, which might raise doubts about the reliability in other cases of expected U.S. support and protection. Prince Turki Al-Faysal, for example, probably reflecting impressions at the senior levels of the royal family, noted that relations at the time between Saudi Arabia and the United States were “below average,” among other reasons, due to Saudi irritation with “the haste with

which the American leadership, for example, pushed President Husni Mubarak out of power, even before the Egyptian people had expressed their opinion...this angered me personally...Saudi citizens [on the contrary] are faithful to their friends and allies...if only [President Barack Obama] had waited a little and let the Egyptian people make their own decision.” In contrast, according to Prince Faysal, at the same time, Saudi King Abd Allah had been providing advice to Mubarak privately, apparently with how to deal with the crisis.¹⁷

As one commentary in the Saudi press also argued, “America is no longer a reliable friend for its strategic friends and allies, with the exception of Israel.” As a result, the United States’ friends in the Middle East “must look out for their own interests without reference to those of the USA.” Specifically, alluding to the experience with Mubarak, the commentary concluded that “if America expects that its biggest selling point to its friends is a security umbrella, that umbrella was smashed on the banks of the Nile.”¹⁸

Moreover, Saudis were raising concerns already by mid-decade about a perceived U.S. retrenchment in the region vis-à-vis Iran. Although not articulated openly by official sources, there was an undercurrent in the Saudi media critical of the United States, claiming that the latter’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 had made it possible for Iran to become dominant there. Expressions such as that the United States had “delivered Iraq to Iran on a golden platter” became common, even by influential journalists close to the palace.¹⁹ At the time of the 2013 Korean crisis, some Saudis even interpreted the commitment which the United States displayed for its regional allies as an indication that Washington differentiated between those friends in East Asia which “it would avoid sacrificing at any price,” and countries in the Middle East, where only Israel was said to qualify for that status for the United States.²⁰

Some Saudis limited themselves to raising general – but transparent – reservations about outside protectors, as did one editorialist, who noted pointedly when discussing the Iranian threat that “we all understand full well that...friendships do not last forever...and we do not trust other parties to concur with our views and objectives.”²¹ Others were openly alarmist, often fearing that the United States could decide to make a deal with Iran or, as one academic put it, “what if the United States decides to cooperate with Iran to divide up influence and interests in the region?”²²

Saudi journalists were often suspicious of Iranian-U.S. negotiations. One journalist claimed that “the Gulf States feel that the secret as well as open talks which are being conducted between Washington and Tehran do not take [the Gulf States] into consideration to any degree,” which “annoys the Gulf states.”²³

In late 2012, a Saudi newspaper editor raised the possibility of secret U.S.-Iranian talks at the expense of the Gulf countries. Although he acknowledged that “this perhaps may not be at the expense of U.S.-Gulf relations, at least for now,” he also wondered “should we become prisoners of a foreign umbrella or should we [instead] take into account what is of benefit to our future by relying on ourselves?”²⁴ One commentator, likewise, thought that the United States “will inevitably act to reach an understanding [with a nuclear-armed Iran] on the Gulf’s future.”²⁵ And, with reference to Iran’s future nuclear capability, the same writer concluded that “the time has come for self-reliance...and to create the conditions for a strategic defense balance.”²⁶ As a new round of negotiations was set to begin in February 2013, the Saudi media expressed discontent – although attributed to other Gulf diplomats – that the Gulf countries would not have a role, and claimed that the GCC countries “do not hide their concern that a deal will be reached at the expense of their regional security and of their strategic interests.”²⁷

Such expressions of doubt about the reliability of outside guarantees often went hand-in-hand with the promotion in Saudi circles of greater GCC unification, as was the case with one editorialist writing in favor of a unified GCC, as he asserted that “regional powers [i.e. Iran] will not find a deterrent to reduce the impact of their ambitions of expansion except by confronting these [ambitions] with a barrier of unity.”²⁸ As another Saudi editor put it, in calling for greater GCC unity in the face of a potential Iranian nuclear threat, “the defense [of the Gulf] must not be decided by outside states.”²⁹

In practical terms, as emerged at a roundtable at *Al-Riyadh* newspaper in April 2012 between a delegation of visiting Japanese politicians and businessmen and a group of Saudi journalists, the Saudi hosts confirmed to their guests that “the Gulf states cannot dispense with the United States, and the strategic alliance with the latter is profound and deeply-rooted...the alliance with the United States is the best option.” At the same time, however, as one of the Saudis present stressed, the Gulf countries

“have a right...to look to a variety of sources for armaments, from any country whatsoever.” And, the same speaker continued, “reliance on the United States is not a completely dependable option, and the Kingdom will turn to any country with which it can cooperate.”³⁰ All this, of course, does not mean that the long-standing U.S.-Saudi relationship would not continue. On the contrary, one can expect it to remain robust. However, as far as the nuclear threat, Saudis simply may view this relationship as insufficient.

Significantly, a frequent theme in Saudi writing has been that even U.S. allies are not comfortable with a total reliance on the latter. Drawing on perceived lessons from the Cold War, for example, a Saudi writer asserted that Great Britain and France had both pursued their own nuclear weapons precisely because they did not have “the assurance...that Washington would come to their assistance with nuclear weapons in case they were subjected to a Soviet nuclear attack; ultimately, the United States would not sacrifice Washington or New York, for example, for the sake of defending Paris and London.”³¹ Similarly, when speaking of the potential Iranian nuclear threat, a Saudi observer noted that “the West cannot always be relied upon, and those in the Gulf are the ones best suited to defend their own security.”³²

The Active Options – Striking or Squeezing Iran’s Nuclear Program?

The Strike Option

In a way, Saudi Arabia would probably have been content to do nothing, provided the problem of the Iranian threat was solved by third parties, something over which Riyadh had little, if any, control. Specifically, Riyadh followed closely the prospects for the international community to deal with Iran’s nuclear program either by military strikes or by pressure using economic and political sanctions.

If successful, a strike against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure could have resolved the issue permanently or at least would have postponed the necessity for Riyadh to make a decision about acquiring its own nuclear capability. However, the success of such a strike was by no means certain, while the security, political, and economic consequences in the region

could be severe. Not surprisingly, the Saudis were very interested in trying to determine the likelihood of such a strike. Informed Saudi opinion on whether or not a strike was forthcoming was often divided and continued to oscillate between the two prospects, although an evolution appears to have occurred towards skepticism over the years.

A few years ago, Saudi sources suggested they were convinced that the United States would act decisively to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. As the SANG's journal saw it, Iran would be targeted by the United States with an air and missile attack "because the latter believes that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons and the missiles capable of delivering the latter are a direct and grave threat to its vital interests, and it will not allow that even if it requires striking dozens of facilities, sites, and military targets."³³ By 2009, however, the Saudi press had begun to suggest that the United States was still considering its options and had not made a decision about whether or not to strike Iran.³⁴

Initially, according to foreign press reports, the Saudi leadership supported strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities – including by Israel – although not in public.³⁵ As one could have expected, once that support became public, the resulting reactions in the region were exploited against the Saudi regime by religious dissidents and, in particular, by domestic and regional Shia sources.³⁶ At least in public, Saudi decision-makers and other senior figures sought to engage in damage control to respond to the negative publicity caused by the leaks and began to express vehement opposition to such strikes against Iran. As Prince Turki Al-Faysal told a German magazine, "I have dealt with these issues all of my life and I am telling you: Saudi Arabia would never accept to allow Israel to attack any country in the area whatever that country was."³⁷ Likewise, reflecting this political sensitivity, Saudi Arabia strenuously denied rumors that it had handed over to the United States an Iranian nuclear scientist who had come on the Pilgrimage.³⁸ Apart from the issue of image, Saudi policymakers quite probably were also becoming increasingly concerned about escalating Iranian threats of reprisals in case of an attack on its nuclear program. As a senior figure in the Saudi royal family remarked to the author, he was "fully against any Israeli or American" military strike, citing concerns about Iranian retaliation, and he termed Iran "a paper tiger with steel claws."³⁹

As one Saudi observer noted, a strike against Iran might not succeed, but would result instead in retaliation by the latter against its neighbors – which could include the targeting of vulnerable Gulf oil facilities, power grids, and water desalination plants – as well as lead to heightened Iranian support for subversion in the region.⁴⁰ Some in Saudi Arabia believed a strike would only delay Iran’s progress in any case, with an end to the nuclear quest only possible through regime change, given Tehran’s strong commitment to the program.⁴¹ Others continued to be unsure about the chances of decisive success for an Israeli strike, wondering whether a regional war would be sparked or whether Iran’s nuclear program would be destroyed for good, with one editorialist noting in 2013 that “History does not permit us to sleep [soundly] by relying on this second scenario.”⁴²

Over the years, moreover, a gradual pessimism appears to have taken over in decision-making circles in Riyadh, with an increasing conviction that efforts by the international community or even of the likelihood of a U.S. or Israeli strike against Iran or any other likely measure might prove of only limited effectiveness in derailing Iran’s march toward nuclear weapons. Some in the Saudi and Saudi-linked press had concluded already at an early stage that a U.S. strike was unlikely, such as an Egyptian commentator, Abd Al-Munim Said, who, writing in a Saudi-owned publication, cited a lack of U.S. public support, doubts about the success of a surgical strike, the unlikely option of a ground commitment, fear of Iranian retaliation, and fear of a repetition of the effect of the Israeli attack on the Osirak reactor that actually spurred Iraq to greater efforts in its nuclear program.⁴³

Many believed that the United States would not make a final decision on whether to strike Iran in any case while it was still involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, given the potential consequences for U.S. forces in the region.⁴⁴ Others in military circles seemed to have concluded that even after the conclusion of these wars the United States might be reluctant to act. For example, a Saudi military study in 2009 posited that, as a result of the cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, “the United States’ confidence in the effectiveness of preventive wars has been shaken.”⁴⁵ In particular, as another military study argued, the United States simply would not be able to undertake another potential war, as “the U.S. wars – against terrorism, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan – have attrited U.S. power

and have made it impossible for [the United States] to attack any other country.”⁴⁶

A Saudi pundit, for his part, also judged that a U.S. strike was not probable, since the state of the U.S. economy made American policymakers wary of starting a new war, although a strike by Israel might be more likely.⁴⁷ Another Saudi observer calculated in 2012 that “there is not sufficient consensus [in the United States] to launch a war against Iran.” According to that same author, “the Vietnam experience” and what he said were at least partial U.S. defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan “have made...American leaders...think long and hard and to delay making difficult decisions such as this.”⁴⁸ Likewise, a Saudi editorialist, claiming to cite U.S. military experts to the effect that a strike against Iran would not be decisive in any case, concluded that “President Barack Obama is not a man who wants to embark on conflicts.”⁴⁹ By 2012, a Saudi commentator had also determined that “the military option against [Iran] has become a remote likelihood.”⁵⁰ At the end of 2012, a senior officer writing in a military journal analyzed in detail the divided opinion in both the United States and Israel – with the United States having the final say, in his view – and concluded that Washington for now at least would hold off on a strike in order to give economic sanctions time to work.⁵¹ By early 2013, one Saudi pundit stated openly that “Iran knows full well that hints of a military option will not be fulfilled,” and even interpreted harsher warnings from President Obama during his visit to Israel in March 2013 as “empty promises,” and affirmed that “I do not believe they will see the light of day.”⁵²

Other observers assumed that the international community as a whole simply lacked the resolve to stop Iran.⁵³ Still others believed that the West had concluded that it was already too late for a military strike to reverse Iran’s trajectory in any case.⁵⁴ One Saudi observer judged that the political and media escalation by the United States was intended merely to pressure Iran and to reassure the Gulf countries that the West would not abandon the region.⁵⁵ A Saudi researcher, for his part, speculated that the United States, instead, would seek to contain Iran with a Cold War-style strategy, since military action entailed too many drawbacks.⁵⁶ By the end of 2011, Prince Turki Al-Faysal had decided that convincing Iran to stop its nuclear program had already failed.⁵⁷

The Saudi media in general also viewed the likelihood of an Israeli strike as increasingly limited as time went by. Some initially were of the opinion that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “will not accept Iran’s emergence and continuation as a nuclear power in the region.”⁵⁸ However, by 2010, a consensus seemed to be coalescing progressively in Saudi opinion that neither the United States nor Israel was probably going to mount a strike to derail Iran’s nuclear program, although such assessments would fluctuate depending on varying news reports from the West. As one observer noted in November 2011, Israeli talk of preparations to strike were little more than “bogus propaganda,” ostensibly intended to divert attention from the Palestinian issue.⁵⁹ An editorial commented that, at best, the Israeli government itself was divided over whether to launch a strike.⁶⁰ As another editorial asserted, moreover, “objective conditions and the strategic interconnection of interests among various parties bring talk of directing a military strike by Israel and its allies into the realm of the impossible.”⁶¹

Key to this view was the Saudi assumption that “Israel knows that Tehran has passed the point of vulnerability in its nuclear program.”⁶² Indeed, others even accused the United States and Israel of doing nothing to stop Iran, and claimed that this was part of a pattern also applied to North Korea’s nuclear program.⁶³ Alleging that Israeli and Iranian interests against the Arabs coincided, one observer claimed that Israeli influence exercised through the Jewish community in America, who he said has a disproportionate presence in Congress, “not to speak of their control of financial capital, centers of influence, and the media, and their dominance over most of the think tanks...and influence over centers of decision-making,” shaped U.S. policy to work toward a secret understanding with Iran.⁶⁴

Squeezing Iran – The Soft Power Option

Saudi Arabia, perhaps not surprisingly, seemed to prefer that non-military methods, whether negotiations or economic and political sanctions, succeed in stopping Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons rather than seeing a military strike with its attendant risks or doing nothing. However, the Saudi media expressed doubts whether international sanctions would be effective, with one editorial characterizing such efforts as

“insufficient,” and concluding that “this situation raises doubts about how serious the West is about dealing with the potential Iranian nuclear threat if Iran succeeds in achieving its goals.”⁶⁵ In particular, there were doubts about the effectiveness of sanctions in general if not enforced strictly, with one editorial noting that Iran had been able to deal with sanctions during the Khomeini era while, due to Iran’s increased capabilities and expected sanction-busting, “any future Western or international sanctions will be insufficient as long as major industrial nations are not serious about enforcement.”⁶⁶ By 2010, some Saudis were already suggesting that even the tougher sanctions then being discussed might delay, but not prevent, Iran’s going nuclear.⁶⁷

However, with the new, more stringent, financial and oil sanctions that the United States and the European Union began applying on Iran in 2011 and 2012, Saudi Arabia appeared to become more optimistic about the prospects for the success of “soft power.” In fact, a senior figure in the Saudi royal family, speaking to an American audience, stressed the desirability of “squeezing” Iran through the latter’s oil sector as a way to make it more difficult for Tehran to meet its citizens’ needs, to thus convince it to forgo the nuclear option.⁶⁸ Saudi Arabia, in fact, supported the sanctions actively, with Prince Abd Al-Aziz bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, among other Saudi officials, reassuring domestic opinion and the international community that his country would ensure sufficient oil supplies to replace reduced oil deliveries from Iran, whether as a result of the embargo or if Iran tried to disrupt traffic through the Straits of Hormuz.⁶⁹

Watching and Waiting

Increasingly, Riyadh seems to have concluded that it could do little to affect the situation and that it would be prudent to wait and see what the international community could accomplish in stopping Iran, especially after the new sanctions on Iran had begun to take effect. Over time, there developed a noticeable change in Saudi press coverage, with a decrease by mid-2012 of the earlier extensive analytical writing on Iran in the military media. In the civilian media, editorials on the Iranian nuclear threat continued to appear, although fewer than before, although all the reports still agreed with previous positions and, in particular, with the assessment

that Iran was continuing on its nuclear path. To a certain extent, at the same time, Saudi authorities may have felt that a solid analytical and political case had already been made for the domestic public and that it might now be prudent to keep a low profile while the international community exerted pressure on Iran.

There was a noticeable increase in media coverage, as one could expect, whenever there were new developments, such as a new round of talks with Iran. However, Saudi media opinion remained highly skeptical of the prospects for any significant progress in negotiations between the international community and Iran. Saudi observers have consistently interpreted Iran's willingness to negotiate as "trickery in order to gain time," and even held that "Tehran has copied successfully the policy of negotiating just to negotiate on the nuclear issue" from Israel's tactics in dealing with the Palestinian issue.⁷⁰ As the Saudis saw it, Iran's stalling was in fact succeeding and, as one Saudi press source put it, "the Obama Administration's and the West's failed soft policy has been countered with Tehran's tortuous policy, whose objective is to gain time."⁷¹

When the 5+1 (the members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) talks with Iran reconvened in February 2013 in Kazakhstan, Saudi commentators, typically, were doubtful there would be any genuine progress. One commentator predicted that "the negotiations ... will lead to a dead-end," since "from the beginning of the negotiations [Iran's] approach has been a tactical one characterized by gaining time in order to speed up its nuclear development."⁷² Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al-Faysal, for his part, feared some compromise between the 5 + 1 Group and Iran, and went out of his way to reiterate his country's position: "We are not looking for appeasement or an arrangement between Iran and anybody with which it negotiates. What we want, instead, is a solution that prevents the increase of nuclear weapons in the Middle East."⁷³

With the introduction of the more stringent sanctions, Saudi press reports began to focus on the resulting severe economic difficulties which Iran was experiencing as a result of the cutbacks in oil exports and of the financial transaction restrictions.⁷⁴ Indeed, one editorial in the influential Saudi daily *Al-Riyadh* assessed that Iran was jeopardizing its economic stability and that the resulting domestic discontent could lead to an "internal explosion." The editorial even called for, in essence, regime

change through a movement similar to those elsewhere during the Arab Spring, with hopes for free elections and a pluralistic democracy.⁷⁵

However, in time, Saudi media opinion, based on the apparent lack of progress in negotiations, began to doubt that the economic sanctions would succeed, claiming that the Iranian regime “does not care if the people are hungry or sick” and that Tehran would continue to pursue its nuclear goals.⁷⁶ The 2013 crisis with North Korea seemed to reinforce this perception, as Saudis noted with amazement the extent to which a state was willing to sacrifice its economic well-being in order to obtain nuclear weapons for its security.⁷⁷ At the same time, there were suggestions in the Saudi-owned media that the United States had exhausted all its options with Iran and – reluctant to use military force – was now backtracking from prevention to a posture of containment, and was only looking for ways to rationalize the change.⁷⁸ In fact, one Saudi commentator evaluated that “waiting, containment, diplomacy, and sanctions have become incentives” for Iran rather than deterrents and concluded that “only a nuclear weapon deters a nuclear weapon.”⁷⁹

If Iran’s progress was not halted by the international community, this would reinforce the skepticism that some in Saudi Arabia nurtured about the international community’s ability to prevent countries in general from acquiring nuclear weapons. According to an editorial in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* from mid-2009, for example, North Korea’s experience was said to show that the latter “was able to defy the world and to continue with its nuclear program and be neither attracted by the carrot nor frightened by the stick,” and the writer pointed out that “it will not be long before Iran, too, will join the nuclear club.”⁸⁰ He concluded that “it will not be possible for America, or the world policeman as some view the latter, to stop the virus of nuclear proliferation.”⁸¹ As Prince Turki Al-Faysal also maintained in December 2011, “our efforts and the world’s efforts failed to convince Israel to abandon its WMD, as has also been the case with Iran’s arming with the same weapons.”⁸² In a way, by its focus on the international community’s efforts, the Saudi media may have been shifting the blame for any future Saudi acquisition of nuclear weapons to the United States or the West for shirking their responsibility to stop Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons, with the Saudis then able to argue at some time in the future that they had had no other choice but to follow Iran’s

example in the wake of the international community's ineffectiveness in stopping Iran.

Notes

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CHAPTER 7

Thinking in Terms of Solutions: Considering a Saudi Nuclear Option

As noted already, senior Saudi officials often warned that their country could adopt another option, that of acquiring its own nuclear weapons in order to off-set and neutralize the effect of any future Iranian bomb.

Saudi Arabia's Traditional View of a Nuclear Option and Its Evolution

Although there had been reports of attempts by the Saudis as early as 1989 to obtain experimental nuclear reactors from China as a start toward eventually acquiring a weapons program, nothing had come of such talk.¹ And, the Saudi media would respond routinely with vehement denials to any suggestions of Saudi nuclear plans or activity. For example, in the wake of press coverage based on revelations by a defecting Saudi diplomat about his country's cooperation in that field with other countries, the Saudi media dismissed such reports as just "a press campaign targeting Saudi Arabia."² Likewise, whenever reports surfaced about Saudi-Pakistani cooperation in the nuclear field, Saudi sources would deny them heatedly, as in a Saudi editorial following Prince Sultan's visit to Pakistan in 2006, which dismissed accounts of cooperation in the nuclear arena as "asinine allegations."³

Prince Sultan, the Saudi Minister of Defense at the time, himself rejected such reports as "baseless allegations."⁴ The official organ of the Muslim World League (a Saudi-based and financed international organization), while maintaining that Saudi Arabia had a right to nuclear weapons, likewise characterized any such Western speculation about

cooperation with Pakistan as “surprising” and “ridiculous.” And, this source attributed such accounts to “the Zionist lobby” and to U.S. efforts to blackmail Saudi Arabia into cooperating with the United States’ Middle East policy.⁵ More recently, Saudi Arabia appears to have been anxious to show that, had it wanted to, it could have acquired nuclear weapons years ago. For example, a Saudi-owned newspaper reported that the post-Soviet Ukrainian government had proposed to Riyadh in 1994 to help the latter develop nuclear weapons, but that the then-monarch, King Fahd, had declined the offer.⁶

Moreover, the focus of Saudi policy in the past was to put its faith in a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. Although such appeals by policymakers and the media for a nuclear-free zone have continued, with somewhat of a revival in 2013, these calls appear to be largely pro-forma nowadays, although they offer an opportunity to elicit praise in the local media for the efforts by the Saudi authorities on behalf of such goals. As one Saudi writer enthused, Saudi Arabia had “left no stone unturned” in its efforts to promote a nuclear-free region, and its efforts were proof of the principled, noble, and bold character of Saudi diplomacy.⁷ However, in practical terms, the intent seemed designed to generate diplomatic pressure on Israel and Iran, as consensus had emerged in Saudi Arabia that such proposals had been a failure and were unrealistic, with many observers pointing specifically to Israel’s continuing nuclear arsenal as a decisive obstacle.⁸ As a military study concluded, “there is no possibility of making the Middle East region free of WMD in the near future.”⁹

In fact, Saudi Arabia’s policymakers came to believe, as Prince Turki Al-Faysal expressed it, that “our efforts and the world’s efforts to convince Israel to relinquish its WMD and now Iran, too, with respect to the same weapons have failed.”¹⁰ A corollary was that the effort to promote a WMD-free Middle East “has resulted in failure,” as one newspaper editor assessed it.¹¹ At base, Saudis were skeptical of the likelihood of nuclear disarmament in general. One typical Saudi press article reflecting this outlook termed nuclear disarmament “a dream for some, a nightmare for others,” and argued that “it will never happen” unless underlying political issues are resolved first. Indeed, the writer concluded that it was not “practical” that the great nuclear powers would denuclearize and predicted that “all states will seek to assure their security and their effectiveness by acquiring nuclear weapons, even if only in small quantities.”¹²

Nuclear Proliferation and the Issue of Fairness

Quite apart from the justification for acquiring nuclear weapons based on security concerns, Saudis also routinely raised the issue of fairness and justice, which have an impact on Saudi thinking on proliferation. Specifically, Saudis have long objected to what they see as a double standard on the part of the United States and the West, who are said to ignore Israel's nuclear arsenal while denying similar weapons to others. As a well-placed former royal adviser complained with some intensity to the author, "The United States did not criticize Israel for its nuclear weapons, but now it criticizes Pakistan [just] because it is a Muslim state."¹³

A Saudi pundit, likewise, lamented the fact that "it is permissible (*halal*) for it [i.e. Israel] to possess weapons to destroy, obliterate, and kill us, [yet] it is forbidden (*haram*) for others to possess arms for self-defense."¹⁴ Praising in ironic terms Israel for its determination in developing its nuclear arsenal, another Saudi criticized the pressure exerted on the Arabs to sign the NPT while at the same time not doing so with Israel.¹⁵ Yet another Saudi analyst, likewise, accused the United States of being one of the biggest nonproliferation violators because of its support for Israel's nuclear program.¹⁶

One Saudi observer even alleged that the United States had turned a blind eye to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and even "gave the green light to Iran" while shortchanging the Arabs and the Turks in the region.¹⁷ Still another Saudi writer, declaring that "it is logical for the Arabs to...reject double standards," noted that "for every action there is a reaction...and the Arabs can be called to account for their attempt to acquire nuclear weapons only once there is the removal of weapons of WMD from the entire region."¹⁸ A Saudi editorial, in fact, blamed this double standard for complicating the international community's ability to deal with Iran, since the latter could argue that Israel's nuclear weapons are permitted.¹⁹

Saudi audiences interpreted President Obama's 2009 landmark speech in Cairo as heralding a new U.S. effort to halt nuclear proliferation the Middle East, but were soon expressing their disappointment with what they viewed as a double standard by the United States towards Israeli nuclear weapons. Typically, one commentator noted with respect to the

continuing U.S.-Israeli nuclear cooperation that “barely a year passed since Obama’s speech before he was forced to eat his words and he appeared before the entire world bereft of any power and ability to make decisions freely when faced with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu” and took the U.S. president to task for “flip-flopping...on his ‘firm’ position.”²⁰

There has also been an enduring Saudi resentment about what is seen as the double standard and hypocrisy exercised by the Great Powers in general toward smaller powers wishing to join the nuclear club, with one military journal arguing that “the Great Powers who possess these [nuclear] weapons talk about steps to prevent nuclear arms and participate in international conferences on this topic. They even sign treaties to limit nuclear arms and confront and combat any step to acquire nuclear weapons by states outside the nuclear club. However, when it comes down to the actual situation, we find a different standard.”²¹ Other commentators criticized specifically the United States for retaining its own nuclear arsenal while condemning other countries for trying to also acquire that capability.²²

One Saudi writer, using a sarcastic tone for an underlying serious message, noted that Iran was building a nuclear reactor in a quest for nuclear weapons with which to “terrorize us and deprive us of our sleep,” making it impossible to go to work or school or to move without living in fear. Referring to the West ironically, he questioned whether “our friend the West who loves us without doubt and without ambiguity prefers [Iran] over us” and asked “why doesn’t it allow us to build a very small factory in which we can manufacture a small bomb...which would put our minds at ease and not harm [the West] at all? Just asking...Maybe it is a daydreaming question, the question about building a small bomb [even] the size of an orange.”²³

Promoting Nuclear Weapons

The General Desirability of Nuclear Weapons

By the middle of the last decade, as Iran announced its success with the enrichment of uranium, one could notice a spike in Saudi writings about the significance of nuclear weapons in providing security. Saudi

observers frequently viewed other countries' experience with acquiring nuclear weapons in a positive light, thereby legitimizing the process itself in an indirect way. For example, one senior military writer noted that "we can see that many countries, especially developing ones, have spared no expense in order to acquire capabilities to ensure for themselves a position among the world's states, as is the case with North Korea, or in order to preserve their unity or for their population's security, as is the case with Pakistan."²⁴

At times, Saudi observers proposed the adoption of nuclear weapons in generic terms. For example, a Saudi military study concluded that "modern-day states have begun to understand clearly that their existence and ability to protect their people from any foreign aggression is intimately linked with their national security, which in turn will not be achieved except by developing weapons for security, the principal one of which is nuclear weapons, which contribute to deterring foreign aggressors."²⁵ Another observer posited that "some" understood that "the countries in the region have as their only option to follow the example of countries such as India, Pakistan, and Israel" and that merely discussing such an option openly might induce other countries – clearly intending Israel and Iran – to reconsider their policies.²⁶

An "Arab" or "Gulf" Deterrent

At other times, the Saudi media promoted the nuclear option using circumlocutions intended not to be too provocative, such as "the Arabs" or "the Gulf countries," as the prospective nuclear power in response to nuclear threats. Even as early as at least 2007, the Saudi press was already writing that "there is no dispute that most of the Arabs wish that an Arab state would acquire WMD."²⁷ Likewise, one Saudi media commentator noted that if Iran did not agree to a nuclear-free Middle East then "there is no alternative to taking Arab decisions for self-defense whether by means of overt or covert plans" and, that in order to counter the Iranian threat, predicted that "small and large neighboring states will also seek to acquire nuclear weapons."²⁸ Again, an editorial in 2010 depicting a looming dual nuclear threat from both Israel and Iran hinted that "some" assessed that "there is no alternative but to think in terms of a nuclear option," since "the existence of the Arabs between the pincers of an Israeli and an

Iranian nuclear deterrent is not an option.” Highlighting the need to deal with Israel’s nuclear weapons, this Saudi editorialist likewise asserted that

The only single genuine option in dealing with the conflict with Israel is Arab self-reliance, and relying above all on God. One of the most important elements of that self-reliance is creating a genuine nuclear deterrence balance with both Israel now and with Iran in the future, beginning with a joint decision by all the Arab states to withdraw from the current NPT which allows some countries to possess [nuclear weapons] and forbids it to others, and to Arab countries in particular and to Islamic countries in general. The combined Arab countries can cooperate in developing a peaceful and a military nuclear program.²⁹

Responding, in particular, to a projected Iranian nuclear threat, some Saudi sources issued indirect but transparent warnings of unspecified others in the Middle East who would be likely to seek nuclear weapons if Iran did so. For example, one editorial advised that “The international community must demonstrate its will and resolve to prevent the start of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, as it will not be possible to otherwise prevent [such a race] if Tehran enters the nuclear club.”³⁰ Affirming that the Arab states have the same right to self-defense as any other state, one writer observed that “the need is increasing for a joint Arab nuclear strategy to acquire nuclear weapons, whatever the legality of the path taken to achieve that, in order to provide for deterrence and self-defense and to confront the Israeli and the Iranian [nuclear] programs.”³¹ As a Saudi newspaper editor put it, “one cannot be reassured about the intent of either Israel or Iran,” as the Gulf and Peninsula Arabs would find themselves “between two fires” once Iran also acquired nuclear weapons. For him, “the only plausible option for the Arab Gulf states is to begin immediately the development of a nuclear program with the intent of producing a nuclear weapon deterrent which will make us at least equal in defensive capabilities.”³² In fact, he advised that “the Gulf Arabs are in dire need of this weapon and [must acquire it] quickly, before we are subjected to the dual nuclear hegemony – Israeli hegemony and Iranian hegemony.”³³

For his part, a senior Saudi military officer noted that Iran’s failure to comply with international controls of its nuclear programs could “lead to a new conventional and unconventional arms race in the Gulf region.”³⁴ Another military observer also argued that the “Gulf states...will have to

build a nuclear arsenal in order to create a balance of terror that will deter Iran from blackmailing the non-nuclear Arab and Islamic states.”³⁵ Similarly, a Saudi newspaper editor called for a “Gulf nuclear weapon.”³⁶ Yet another Saudi commentator argued that “the Gulf states” must create a nuclear balance in the Gulf to neutralize the Iranian nuclear threat.³⁷ In 2013, a key Saudi editor expressed his concern about the looming Iranian threat to the Gulf in dire terms as “a challenge to our existence,” with “the clock ticking, so that no time is left for our options except to also acquire power as quickly as possible.” Addressing the Gulf States, he warned that anyone desiring peaceful coexistence with Iran would need first to create “a military and strategic balance – including the possession of nuclear weapons, whether by development or purchase,” which he saw as “an option that is unavoidable, at whatever cost.”³⁸

Realistically, of course, none of the smaller Gulf countries could have been expected to respond to Iran’s nuclear arsenal with one of their own, and such calls for a “Gulf” weapon could only be interpreted as a convenient cover of plausible denial for Riyadh.

Being Candid – A Saudi Deterrent

Mirroring warnings from official circles, some Saudis also made the case openly for an independent Saudi nuclear deterrent. For example, Saudi human rights activist Abd Al-Aziz Al-Khamis, expressing his support for a national nuclear deterrent, argued for self-reliance in defense of the country’s natural resources from Iranian nuclear threats, since “only our own power growing out of the people of the Gulf themselves will protect these riches, and not the West’s fleets.”³⁹ A paper that a Saudi academic presented at a conference at the Institute for Diplomatic Studies in Riyadh, likewise, concluded that, in view of the looming Iranian nuclear threat, “it is vital to adopt a policy of nuclear deterrence...Saudi Arabia must pursue the acquisition of nuclear weapons, even if only by purchase.”⁴⁰ Though acknowledging technical and financial obstacles, as well as the likelihood of regional and international confrontation in connection with a Saudi nuclear option, one Saudi commentator concluded that, nevertheless, “some countries are willing to bear the burdens of acquiring nuclear weapons as a trade-off for the feeling of having achieved comprehensive long-term security assurance.”⁴¹

Ordinary Saudis on fora, blogs, tribal websites, and in comments which are published to press articles online routinely express strong popular support for a Saudi nuclear option. If anything, not fettered by the constraints of policy responsibility, such commentators often seem to be even more hard-line and supportive of nuclear weapons than are government officials or the mainstream media. For example, responding to an article discussing whether Saudi Arabia should acquire nuclear weapons, one reader noted that “If Saudi Arabia had the atom bomb that would provide the greatest security for its government, since neither America nor anyone else can harm or provoke a state which has the atom bomb.”⁴² Yet another reader held that “The Kingdom must think about and begin to acquire weapons of deterrence, and this cannot wait...at whatever the cost,” while a third stated that “I am one of those supporting Saudi Arabia’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, because Saudi Arabia has a trusteeship over Mecca the Venerable and Medina the Brilliant, and America one day could abandon the Kingdom.”⁴³

Typically, in a message “addressed to our people in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” one blogger hoped that Saudi Arabia would seek the help of Pakistani and Chinese experts “so that the Kingdom can become the eighth nuclear nation in the world.”⁴⁴ For that blogger, “the Kingdom, thanks to these [nuclear] weapons, will have the right to be a full member in the nuclear club and, as a consequence, will be worthy of becoming a member of the Security Council, since it will possess what the Great Powers possess, and it will be a state which must then be recognized as great and powerful.”⁴⁵ Another blogger, whose message went viral in Saudi Arabia, urged that “The Saudi government and [the country’s] defense policymakers must begin a project to acquire nuclear weapons immediately...I beg anyone who has access to the policymakers who deal with the defense of the Kingdom to forward this request as an urgent appeal from the people, since it is our duty for the defense of our religion and our nation.”⁴⁶ Such hints continued through 2013. As one press commentator warned, “If Iran insists on nuclear weapons, there will be a nuclear arms race in the region between Iran and Saudi Arabia.”⁴⁷

If there are opponents in Saudi Arabia to a nuclear military option, their views are not evident in public. It is true that there may be at least some Saudis who may be concerned about further nuclear proliferation on practical grounds. As one report noted, “there are some Saudis who do not

welcome a policy of a nuclear arms race in the region for a simple reason, namely that the states in the region do not have the technical capability for such a race.”⁴⁸ One Saudi observer did express his malaise – albeit obliquely – with the wisdom of anyone trusting in nuclear weapons. Alluding to the potential destructiveness of nuclear weapons, and railing against Iran’s quest for such weapons, he argued that what made the most sense was the conduct of ants who, when attacked with destructive substances by man, will not resist but will manage the situation by fleeing to another area where they can avoid death and start new colonies in order to stay alive – which is the supreme objective. He contrasted this non-confrontational strategy with that of “some ignorant humans who adopt confrontation and resist death with death.”⁴⁹ Although directed at Iran, there were also uncomfortable implications for any present or would-be nuclear power.

Explaining Saudi Openness

Unlike the complete secrecy which surrounded Saudi Arabia’s acquisition of the CSS-2 SSMs from China in 1986, official statements and reporting about nuclear issues have been extensive, although one can only speculate about the intent behind such openness. The purpose of such coverage, on the one hand, may have been to deter Iran by warning the latter that Saudi Arabia would respond in kind if Iran acquired nuclear weapons and that this would thereby set off an expensive and hazardous arms race in which any projected Iranian advantage would be neutralized. As one Saudi commentator noted, “Simply considering this [nuclear] option openly forces other countries in the region to reconsider, knowing that they cannot continue to pursue their nuclear programs while the Arabs remain in their nuclear backwardness.”⁵⁰ More general media coverage might also have been intended to convince the public and the military that policymakers were in fact aware of the threat and were preparing to do something meaningful about it.

The visibility and frequency of discussions in the Saudi media about the nuclear issue may also indicate that Saudi policymakers wanted to ensure support within society by giving the impression of a bottom-up demand for a nuclear option. Highlighting what the government could portray as popular demand might serve to prepare the public by creating a

consensus and allowing the royal family to gain credit for responding to society's ostensible security needs. Emphasizing the Iranian threat may also be a means of unifying society on the basis of patriotism in an effort to forestall discontent similar to that in other countries in the region as part of the Arab Spring. Moreover, discussions in the military media may have been intended to generate ideas about military doctrine, as well as pursuing the same objectives as with the civilian media. To be sure, by 2013, there was not only a decrease in public analysis about Iran's nuclear program but also an apparent retrenchment in the accessibility of the military media, which is no longer available online.

From available indications, the acquisition of nuclear weapons would probably be a popular decision among Saudis in any event, and the government needed only to crystallize and channel such inchoate support rather than having to create it from scratch. In many ways, the Saudi public's available information about the Iranian threat and about nuclear weapons, although filtered and shaped to produce specific effects, builds on long-accepted popular negative attitudes toward the Shia, distrust of the West, and national pride. In addition, public declarations may also have been intended to pressure the United States and the international community into being more proactive against Iran by warning about the specter of runaway proliferation in the region if nothing was done.

Notes

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CHAPTER 8

Thinking about Nuclear Strategy

Conceptualizing Nuclear Deterrence

Saudi Arabia's policymakers did not discuss openly how they might envision using a potential nuclear arsenal. Such indications as are available have to be gleaned, instead, from discussions in the military and civilian media, although here, too, one cannot expect a clear translation of policy into concepts and doctrine. Saudi Arabia, although a propagator of its version of Islamic practice and a supporter of proxies in other countries as it seeks to enhance its influence and security in the region, is basically a status-quo state and would almost assuredly intend to use any nuclear arsenal in a deterrence capacity to enhance regional stability. Saudi supporters of a nuclear option have stressed repeatedly this defensive aspect of nuclear doctrine as a form of reassurance for foreign and domestic publics, with one arguing that in the nuclear field "the [Arab] Gulf states have proven to the world their maturity by not seeking [nuclear weapons] in the past."¹

In the division between "pessimists" who, conceptually see nuclear weapons as destabilizing, and "optimists," who see nuclear weapons as stabilizing through mutual deterrence, the Saudis tend to fall squarely in the latter camp, although, as noted already, the Saudis also have doubts about whether Iran is a rational actor relying on a calculus of balance of power, or whether that approach could be overridden by what they interpret as Iran's messianic religious tendencies.

The Saudis pay close attention to the history of nuclear deterrence and their understanding of other countries' experience provides insights into Saudi thinking on the role and advantages of nuclear deterrence as it might apply to their own country. A Saudi newspaper editor encapsulated eloquently the prevailing Saudi view of the utility of nuclear weapons. As

he saw it, “the simplest option if you wish to protect yourself and fortify your nation and your people in case you are menaced by a neighbor who covets your country’s riches and who has hostile intentions is for you to be able to ward him off by having defensive means at least equal to, if not better than, his, with capabilities that will deter him and make him think a thousand times before he attacks you.”² Another Saudi commentator stressed the unique utility of nuclear weapons within the context of deterrence, noting that “possessing force is the most unambiguous means of preventing the use of the opponent’s force; only iron counters iron.”³ In real terms, as one senior retired Saudi military officer saw it, a Saudi deterrent is needed to neutralize Iran’s deterrent advantage, for such a capability would “constitute a counter-deterrent to an Iranian nuclear deterrent.”⁴

What stands out in Saudi discussions within policy, military, and civilian circles is the consensus around the belief of the validity and effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. In drawing lessons learned from the past, the Saudis repeatedly referred not only to the relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but also to Pakistan and India, and North Korea and the United States as proof that mutual nuclear deterrence is an effective mechanism to ensure security and stability.⁵

Typically, one Saudi journalist stated categorically that “nuclear weapons are the safety valve for world peace.” As he saw it, mutual nuclear deterrence during the Cold War had resulted in “the nuclear paralysis...[that] imposed peaceful coexistence between the western camp led by Washington and the eastern camp led by Moscow.” And, in light of the perceived success of mutual deterrence, he expressed his absolute confidence that “production of nuclear weapons today represents, in fact, a peaceful nuclear path.”⁶ As another Saudi observer saw it, “The system of the balance of nuclear terror between the eastern and western camps was a success even with the presence of marginal nuclear powers such as Britain, France, and China in that system, since both camps had the strategic assurance that the eruption of a nuclear war between them was impossible thanks to the presence of a second-strike capability on both sides.”⁷ In fact, Saudis believe that this “strategic stability” based on nuclear weapons continues to this day as the basis of the security relationship between the United States and Russia, and the difficulty in

reducing the number of nuclear arms “shows the extent to which states are [still] focused on that.”⁸

Saudis also see as the key lesson from Pakistan’s acquisition of nuclear weapons that the nuclear option had been the only possible response once India had developed its own nuclear program in 1974, for Pakistan had then realized that without its own nuclear deterrent India would initiate further military confrontations and that Pakistan “would perish.”⁹ Highlighting the success of nuclear deterrence, this same article concluded that, without a doubt, it had been Pakistan’s own nuclear tests which had caused India to hesitate and back off from attacking Pakistan, and drew a parallel to Israel’s nuclear threat to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ Although in the early stages there had been skepticism in Saudi Arabia that mutual deterrence in the Pakistan-India dyad was stable and there was concern that tension between the two countries could escalate into a nuclear war, by the end of the last decade there was a growing perception that nuclear deterrence had been successful and stabilizing in this case, with nuclear weapons seen as enabling Pakistan to safeguard its independence.¹¹ Significantly, in relation to the utility of deterrence, in a 1998 opinion piece, the then-Assistant Defense Minister, Prince Khalid bin Sultan, had highlighted the U.S. strike against a suspected chemical weapons factory in Sudan, noting that Sudan had had to absorb the affront to its dignity and sovereignty because “power talks.”¹² That is, since Sudan could not retaliate, all it could do was to remonstrate with words and seek sympathy, whereas had it had the means to retaliate or to threaten to do so “the language and conduct [of the United States] would have been different.”

He contrasted this case with the impact of nuclear weapons in the Pakistan-India relationship, where “the voice of power was loud and [India] threw its weight around and threatened, up until the time it heard another voice of power no weaker than its own on the opposing side [i.e. Pakistan], whereupon it moderated its language and requested a dialog.” The cause imputed to this change in India’s attitude was “the balance of power of conventional or nuclear weapons.” In effect, according to Prince Khalid, in May of that year, India had conducted five nuclear tests, and had accompanied the latter with demonstrations of power and intimidation, including calls to Pakistan to negotiate, but not about the key Kashmir issue, and threatened instead to occupy the rest of the disputed province. As Prince Khalid saw it, “Power was talking, and what power –

nuclear power!” However, before the end of the same month, India had had to moderate its tone and even became willing to discuss the future of Kashmir, and all because Pakistan that month had exploded its first nuclear weapon. As he concluded, “a balance of nuclear terror will create peace” and “having power is vital, and a balance of power is inevitable.”¹³

Likewise, a Saudi military observer defined the pursuit of nuclear weapons as a quest for “the equality of deterrence so that a state can be secure from external threats, especially if it is confronted by a historic enemy,” as he saw illustrated by Pakistan’s deterrent against India or India’s deterrent against China.¹⁴ In general terms, Saudis also view Israel’s possession of nuclear weapons as having been a factor enabling the latter to withstand international pressure to join the NPT.¹⁵ As a senior military officer expressed it, “Contemporary states began to realize clearly that their existence and their ability to protect their populations against any foreign aggression is tied intimately to its national security which, in turn, will not be achieved except by developing defensive weapons, uppermost of which are nuclear weapons, which support deterrence against foreign aggressors.”¹⁶

In selling the concept of nuclear deterrence, a dean at Naif Arab University for Security Sciences, a senior academic institution run by the country’s Ministry of the Interior, stressed the positive results of mutual nuclear deterrence in terms of facilitating peaceful coexistence, citing the case of Pakistan and India and the United States and the Soviet Union. For him, in fact, this concept is “completely easy to understand,” and he advised that “the GCC must strive to acquire a nuclear weapons deterrent...at whatever sacrifice.”¹⁷ Otherwise, he concluded gloomily, “everyone will regret it when it will be too late.”

Here, too, Saudi Arabia’s history with its SSMs may provide some glimpses into its deterrence thinking, despite the recognized qualitative differences with nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia used its SSMs in an explicit deterrent mode aimed, first, against any Israeli strike after the SSMs were publicized in 1988 and, again, against Iraq following the latter’s invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War, 1990-91. Although one cannot determine the effect the Saudi SSMs had on either Israeli or Iraqi decision-making, Saudi leaders believed that their deterrence had been successful.¹⁸ However, Saudi decision-makers apparently were also prepared to launch the SSMs during the Gulf War in

case Iraq caused unacceptable damage with its own Scuds or used chemical weapons against Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ As Prince Khalid bin Sultan, at the time Commander of the Combined Forces, maintained, Saudi Arabia would have launched only as a last resort – “only if all other available weapons had been used...and if this was absolutely vital and unavoidable.”²⁰

Nuclear Deterrence and Dealing with the Great Powers

The reality of a state’s overall power in international affairs generated by nuclear weapons has long been a subject of Saudi interest and concern, and Saudis have emphasized the accompanying benefits once a state joined the nuclear club, in addition to that of defensive deterrence. In particular, an aspect of the perceived utility of nuclear weapons from Saudi Arabia’s perspective is that of the leverage they provide against military and political pressure from the Great Powers. Some Saudis believe that it was the possession of nuclear weapons that enabled the Great Powers to “impose their hegemony over other states and to shape international policy according to their interests.”²¹

Dealing with the Great Powers

While by no means in the same category as the looming Israeli or Iranian threats, and although it is not discussed frequently in public, some Saudis nevertheless feel concerns even about friendly outside powers. In a way, some Saudis simply sense such subliminal threats in an indistinct manner, sensitive to what they see as potential U.S. pressure in the future. For example, for some Saudis, in addition to exercising defensive deterrence, the United States was also seen as using nuclear weapons in a more assertive manner, such as by deterring and coercing other countries into not opposing its policies.²² An officer writing in a military journal, for his part, was uncomfortable in general terms, as he noted that “it is not in the interest of Arab national security that the United States continue to be alone in possessing the strongest nuclear and missile strike force so that it controls unilaterally the management of the international system,” preferring instead a multipolar world.²³ And, as a Saudi proponent of nuclear weapons put it, “this call stems from a fear for the Arabness of the

Gulf not only because of Iran and its minions but also because of Western control over the destiny of the Gulf states.”²⁴

More specifically, some Saudis still bring up such threats as that mooted in the United States in the wake of the 1973 October War to the effect that Washington might retaliate with a food embargo for any future Saudi oil embargo similar to the one Riyadh had implemented against most Western countries during that war.²⁵ However farfetched it may be, some Saudis – though very probably only a small minority – also worry that Israel and the United States might want to partition Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries and turn them into mini-states that are not a threat to Israel.²⁶ Even a member of the royal family, the reformist Prince Talal, has himself on occasion raised this possibility as an Israeli policy goal, and he assumed that the United States would remain passive if that happened.²⁷ Syria and Shia quarters in Iraq have actively fed such fears of partition further.²⁸

Comments such as those by a U.S. presidential candidate in 2007 to the effect that Mecca and Medina should be held hostage to nuclear strikes against further terrorist attacks have also generated fear and resentment, as indicated by the Saudi media reaction at the time.²⁹ Such latent fears persist and are reawakened in the Saudi media from time to time by injudicious remarks or incidents in the West, one of the most recent being news of a course taught at a U.S. professional military educational institution, which reportedly included options to “strike Mecca and Medina with nuclear weapons in order to obliterate them and to kill as many Muslims as possible.”³⁰ Even in the mainstream Saudi press occasionally one can find reports of conspiracies, such as one of an alleged U.S.-Israeli-Iranian plot “to weaken and bring down the Arab Umma as a whole and, in particular, the Gulf states.”³¹

Moreover, some Saudi observers believe that the United States could use its nuclear weapons not only as a deterrent but also as a war fighting tool in some circumstances. Particularly during the presidency of George W. Bush, Saudi observers viewed the United States as prepared to actually launch nuclear weapons against Iran or Syria if the latter attacked Israel with WMD.³² And, some were convinced that the United States had considered doing so against Libya and, later, against Syria.³³ In general, the United States was also seen as likely to consider using nuclear weapons rather than accepting a war of attrition.³⁴

An op-ed in the Saudi press even claimed that it was only thanks to its nuclear weapons that “Pakistan escaped from [America’s] clutches by a miracle.”³⁵ The same writer concluded that “the possession of a nuclear deterrent by any state is a patriotic and a national duty even more than being a strategic priority.”³⁶ Recent events in Libya may have provided especially worrisome lessons learned relevant to proliferation, as it is widely believed in the Middle East that had Muammar Qaddafi retained his nuclear program the United States and other NATO countries would have been reluctant to become involved on behalf of the opposition seeking to topple his regime. In one instance of advocacy, a writer in the Saudi press asked whether NATO would have dared attack Libya if the latter had had nuclear weapons, and “would the Europeans consider admonishing Qaddafi if he insinuated he would launch a nuclear missile against France?” Likewise, the author wondered whether Syria would be under such pressure now if it had a nuclear capability.³⁷ And, he suggested that “once the Arabs possess nuclear weapons they will have a different degree of influence in the international balance.”³⁸ Another author was confident that the world would respect the Arabs if they had nuclear weapons and that it would then be possible to pressure Israel, as well Iran into withdrawing from the disputed islands it occupies in the Gulf, to prevent it from supporting the Asad regime in Syria, and to oblige the United States and the West to change their policies because “they only respect those who can rely on power when they negotiate.”³⁹

North Korea: A Success Story in Deterrence?

Drawing Lessons from North Korea

Focusing on the centrality of power politics, Saudis often have sought lessons learned for dealing with the Great Powers from the success of other small nuclear powers. For example, Saudi observers believe that North Korea provides an instructive example since, by acquiring a nuclear deterrent, Pyongyang increased its leverage, and the latter’s acquisition of nuclear weapons was characterized in the Saudi press as having “provided it with a powerful nuclear shield both on a regional level and beyond.”⁴⁰ The Saudi media drew a stark contrast between the United States’ willingness to invade Iraq in 2003 but not North Korea even though – or

because – the latter had a proven WMD arsenal. For a Saudi military journal, by claiming to have nuclear weapons “the [North] Korean government responded in a practical way to American pressures which sought to force it to relinquish its nuclear program, at a time when it feared it would become Washington’s next target after the latter finishes with the Iraqi case. It thus wants to inform Washington that it is not an easy target like Iraq.”⁴¹

As a writer in the civilian media likewise argued in 2003, “the reason [for not invading] is obvious, namely that [North] Korea has the atom bomb while Iraq only has media noise about its imaginary power.” And, the article added, “The United States knows the danger of ‘provoking’ a nuclear country such as North Korea, and so has contented itself with verbal protests void of any meaning.”⁴² The article concluded that “the balance of terror may be one of the lessons of the war now in progress in Iraq... What America has done may awaken dreamers and make them open their eyes to the bitter truth in our ugly world and motivate them to arm.”⁴³ Another observer concluded that once North Korea had acquired nuclear weapons, the United States could no longer solve the Korean issue by force and was obliged, instead, “to use the carrot with North Korea instead of the stick.”⁴⁴

Based on the North Korean experience, an article in a Saudi military journal deduced that “it appears that one of the basic principles – albeit one that has never been said openly because it is not possible to do so – on which U.S. strategy is based is that of not taking lightly an initiative for any military action against any country which has one of the WMD (nuclear, chemical, or biological). That is what explains the fact that the United States has not attacked North Korea, which may have a respectable missile force and nuclear weapons.”⁴⁵ Even the director of a liberal Saudi website expressed his support for nuclear weapons as a deterrent against hegemony and noted that thanks to its nuclear weapons North Korea had succeeded in thwarting U.S. plans for such hegemony, since it was henceforth impossible to threaten North Korea or to force it to be submissive.⁴⁶ Indeed, an editorial in a Saudi-owned newspaper assessed that North Korea had successfully challenged the world and “was not frightened of the stick,” and that by now “removing nuclear weapons from a country like North Korea is not feasible in practical terms, since

considerations of the cost and risks would make taking such a step a major gamble whose cost most of mankind would have to pay.”⁴⁷

North Korea has continued to propagate such ideas in the Gulf, as was the case with that country’s ambassador to Kuwait, who told the Kuwaiti press that “we were obliged to develop nuclear weapons, since American nuclear weapons are deployed in South Korea at present...we will not relinquish our nuclear weapons intended for the defense of our country...we desire a dialog with [the United States] but aggression occurs by the strong against the weak, the best examples of which is what happened to Afghanistan and Iraq.”⁴⁸

The 2013 Crisis with North Korea

Saudi Arabia, as one could expect, paid close attention to the protracted crisis of 2013 between the United States and North Korea, a crisis in which the latter’s nuclear arsenal has been a central component. As is true of the rest of the international community, Saudi Arabia could not predict the outcome of the confrontation but, at the very least, the Korean crisis introduced an element of troubling uncertainty for the Saudis. Not surprisingly, no official statements have emanated from Riyadh as of this writing.

However, as far as the Saudi media was concerned, some potential lessons learned seemed to be emerging. First, there was concern that the United States’ preoccupation with East Asian affairs stemming from the crisis with North Korea could mean that Washington would pay less attention to problems in the Middle East.⁴⁹ Another Saudi viewed North Korea’s nuclear bluster in the evolving confrontation as confirmation that rights could only be seized by power, and that weakness would mean a loss of rights.⁵⁰ Participants in the Saudi Hawamir Al-Bursa blog discussing the implications of the North Korean crisis noted that the United States had not attacked North Korea (or other nuclear powers). But, according to the bloggers, this situation showed that the Arab world was vulnerable because it lacked nuclear weapons, as “our Arab countries have become the exemplary image of the model victim for an executioner.” An accompanying undertone suggested a challenge to decision-makers, as one blogger noted sarcastically that “it is impossible

that our rulers are considering developing nuclear weapons in the Gulf, because Auntie America would get mad at them.”⁵¹

Although the potential cost of nuclear weapons has never been raised, at least insofar as Saudi Arabia is concerned, a theme that occurred repeatedly in relation to the North Korean crisis was that of the enormous economic burden which the North Korean population has had to carry to pay for the country’s nuclear status. Observers have noted that the North Korean case showed that possessing nuclear technology did not automatically translate into prosperity, social progress, or achieving Great Power status, quite apart from the repellant nature of that country’s internal repression.⁵² It is unclear whether such writers assumed that Saudi readers might apply such criticism subtly to their own situation and national policy or whether an unintentional double standard is at play.

Some Saudis believed that North Korea was merely saber-rattling, since it could not really match the United States in power, but others worried that the high-risk brinkmanship might spill over into a nuclear war.⁵³ In particular, Saudis may be pondering what the North Korean crisis might mean for Iran’s behavior. Writing in a Saudi-owned newspaper, the former head of Iraq’s military intelligence warned that the effect of North Korea’s readiness to engage in nuclear threats would encourage Iran to also adopt a defiant posture.⁵⁴ Another editorialist in a Saudi-owned newspaper, discussing Iran’s nuclear ambitions, likewise compared Iran to North Korea, taxing both as “unpredictable.”⁵⁵

Saudi opinion was often not critical of North Korea for the 2013 crisis, or at least not exclusively so. Some opinion pieces seemed to place equal blame on the United States, or even predominantly on the latter, suggesting that Washington had long threatened North Korea, that it was using the crisis as a means to pressure South Korea into buying expensive U.S. military equipment or as a way to cement its military presence in South East Asia, and that the U.S.-led economic embargo perhaps represented “a blatant attack.”⁵⁶ And, some expressed a grudging admiration of a nuclear North Korea, suggesting the latter was dealing with the crisis as a Great Power would and that Pyongyang was willing to sacrifice in order to “maintain its national sovereignty and independence.”⁵⁷

How to Implement Deterrence

Establishing Credibility

There have been no official indications as to how Saudi Arabia would implement nuclear deterrence in concrete terms if it's acquired nuclear weapons. Overall, however, Saudis seem to adhere to a "fleet-in-being" view of deterrence. That is, by simply possessing nuclear weapons one gains automatic deterrence, as well as the ability to translate that deterrence into political clout. For one Saudi academic, who argued in favor of acquiring nuclear weapons, military power is primarily a political weapon, and "simply having military power supports a state's position and political independence, while the politician who negotiates having only a sword will of course be weaker than his counterpart if the latter has a rifle."⁵⁸

However, at the same time, Saudi military thinkers, in particular, have shown that they are fully aware that an effective deterrent also requires credibility. As a study in a Saudi military journal stressed, "the decisive factor today, as it has been throughout history, is the ability to use a weapon." It is this factor which "must constitute a deterrent to the leadership in Tehran in order to prevent that leadership from embarking on a military venture whose outcome is uncertain or to prevent it from igniting an armed conflict whose cost exceeds the value of that war."⁵⁹ In that respect, according to the same author, "the GCC states' arsenals of arms and the ability to use them is in favor of the Gulf states more than in Iran's favor, and that must constitute a deterrent factor to Tehran's leadership."⁶⁰

Conversely, one can speculate that Saudi Arabia perhaps might not limit itself to a passive sort of deterrence if and when it acquired a nuclear capability. Rather, given the prevailing view of a nuclear-armed country's relative immunity from retaliation, Riyadh might be tempted to play a more assertive hand in the confrontational situations which have already developed in its shadow war against Iran in such areas as Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria, potentially opening the door to unintended escalation.

Would Saudi Arabia declare its nuclear capability? In order for a nuclear deterrent to be effective, others must either know of its existence or assume its existence. An undeclared capability, but one surrounded by

sufficient hints signaling its existence in no uncertain terms, might prove attractive. That option would enable Saudi Arabia to use its nuclear capability for the intended deterrent role while managing or delaying, if not totally avoiding, potential discord with the international community. Perhaps, here again, Saudi Arabia's experience with its SSMs may be instructive. As Prince Khalid bin Sultan was to note in reference to the SSMs, "The effectiveness of a deterrent capability depends on a potential enemy knowing of its existence."⁶¹ Apparently, Saudi Arabia was relying on their discovery as the preferred method of making their existence known for, according to Prince Khalid, "if it [i.e. the weapon system] was not detected by June 1989, we should consider leaking the news ourselves."⁶² And, as part of a deterrent strategy, Riyadh would have to decide whether to communicate what the "red lines" might be that could trigger nuclear use or whether to rely on a significant degree of uncertainty.

Avoiding Escalation Dominance

Saudi Arabia will still face a threat from Iran whether or not the latter acquires a nuclear capability and, in any event, Saudi Arabia is not likely to rely solely on a potential future nuclear deterrent for its national security. Riyadh completed a \$30 billion arms deal with the United States, announced in December 2011, for conventional military equipment intended not only to deter Iran at present but, apparently, also as a means to prevent Iran's escalation dominance in the future.

On the one hand, as one editorialist saw it, if a nuclear-armed Iran attacked the Gulf States even with conventional weapons, no country would be able to call on foreign support because Iran's nuclear capability would serve as a deterrent to such aid.⁶³ Moreover, a robust conventional capability at every level could forestall placing Saudi Arabia in an unenviable position in the future – should it decide to acquire nuclear weapons – where nuclear weapons would be the only remaining military option in case of a military conflict with Iran if it could not match Iran at lower levels of force. One of the lessons a Saudi scholar highlighted from the U.S. experience was that of "developing conventional military capabilities in order to be able to engage in a limited war without having recourse to using WMD."⁶⁴ Saudi Arabia frequently has showcased its

conventional defensive capabilities – and especially its air and air/missile defense systems – verbally and in field exercises, with the then-Deputy Minister of Defense Prince Khalid bin Sultan noting after one such high-visibility air defense exercise, that the exercise had been “a message to states which use surface-to-surface missiles to send messages [i.e. Iran] that the Kingdom has the deterrence capability against such missiles.” And, he reassured his audience that “we will be fully prepared for years to come, not just for now.”⁶⁵

Beefing Up the Strategic Rocket Force and the Space Sector

Saudi Arabia’s Ballistic Missiles

Although Saudi Arabia’s Strategic Rocket Force and the space sector will be the subject of a subsequent study, what is important here is their relationship to the broader nuclear issue. Most Saudis seem to recognize that in order for nuclear deterrence to be effective there is also a need to have a demonstrable or assumed capability to deliver the weapons and a perceived willingness to actually use nuclear weapons. For example, one commentator noted perceptively that “The possession of nuclear weapons is meaningless from a strategic point of view as long as there is not a parallel development in the system for delivering these nuclear weapons to the selected targets.”⁶⁶ In all probability, the most realistic method of delivery of any nuclear weapons by Saudi Arabia would be by SSMs. Aircraft are slow, have a limited range, are too vulnerable to countermeasures and error, and pilots are too valuable, while SSMs are a more reliable vehicle for such a mission.

Saudis view nuclear weapons, SSMs, and space-based capabilities as interrelated elements of a cohesive deterrence package, as was the case with one senior Saudi military officer who spoke of “strategic power in its three dimensions: missiles, space, and nuclear.”⁶⁷ Indeed, Saudi media reports routinely link Iran’s missile developments to the latter’s projected nuclear weapons acquisition.

The actual acquisition of new SSMs would be a strong indicator of Saudi intent to acquire nuclear weapons. Although Saudi Arabia’s ageing CSS-2s apparently have not been upgraded, for now at least, the supporting infrastructure has been expanded and improved in recent years,

including the opening of a new headquarters in Riyadh in 2010 and of a new training center and school in 2011, both of which received wide media publicity. The Strategic Rocket Force's personnel now number "in the thousands," according to the commander of one of the Strategic Rocket Force bases.⁶⁸ Foreign media reports also suggest that Saudi Arabia is looking abroad for new SSMs.⁶⁹ And, there is strong support in the domestic media for such a step, with one commentator insisting that new SSMs are "a right for the Kingdom for self-defense, whether the American administration... approves or disapproves."⁷⁰

A likely follow-on system would be the CSS-5 from China, which would take advantage of the long-standing bilateral relationship with China in the field of SSMs and of China's reputation for discretion in arms sales. Indeed, the same commentator believed that Saudi Arabia has actually already acquired the follow-on CSS-5 although, if true, that may refer possibly only to an understanding with China to deliver such missiles in the future on short notice.⁷¹

The Nascent Space Sector

Similarly, the Saudi military and civilian media have expressed considerable support for the emerging space sector, citing the benefits in terms of early warning, command and control, communications, and reconnaissance and, in particular, for successful targeting.⁷² Some Saudis view space capabilities as key for deterrence, even if for now in conjunction only with SSMs.⁷³ Saudis have become especially concerned about the capabilities and implications of Israel's space-based systems, which provide the latter with the ability to obtain early warning and to avoid a surprise first-strike, quite apart from the ability to spy on the Arabs.⁷⁴ One military study even urged "the Arabs" to manufacture their own satellites, citing as a side benefit the spin-off of other science-based industries, including that for the production of heavy water (which can be a key component in reactors used to produce isotopes for dual nuclear purposes).⁷⁵

Cooperation in the space sector has expanded significantly recently with Russia and other former Soviet states, and has included the launching of numerous space satellites and collaboration in research. There are plans

for a new Saudi space center and there is talk of establishing a Saudi space agency to promote further progress.

Integrating a Nuclear Capability into the Saudi Force Structure

There is no hard information about how Saudi Arabia would integrate a nuclear capability into its force structure if and when it does acquire such a capability and, at this stage, all one can do is speculate. Unquestionably, command and control would remain strictly in Saudi hands and, moreover, within the ruling family, whatever formal organizational relationships and ranks are involved. Here too, Saudi Arabia's history with its CSS-2 SSMs may be instructive about such questions. During the Gulf War, according to Prince Khalid bin Sultan, it was King Fahd (as the King is also commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces) who had command and control of the SSMs, holding the ultimate say about launching and canceling launches.⁷⁶ To be sure, technical support and very probably the actual operational handling of the SSMs was in the hands of Chinese advisers, a situation that may well have continued for many years thereafter, as suggested by the fact that as late as 2006 the King awarded one of the country's highest decorations to the Chinese head of the Joint Military Committee in recognition for "strengthening friendship and cooperation." Since the ceremony was hosted by Saudi Arabia's Strategic Rocket Force, the event was clearly in connection with China's support of the CSS-2 program.⁷⁷

Similarly, command and control over a nuclear device could be in Saudi hands even if foreign advisers were required to maintain and operate the actual systems. Nuclear devices may require foreign technical support for some time to come, as in the case of the SSM program where, as noted, Chinese personnel were – and may still be – present in Saudi Arabia. In the event, the Saudis have continued to depend on foreign technical support for even key conventional sectors of their military for many years already.

It is also not clear whether nuclear weapons would be integrated with the SSMs (where it would make operational sense for them to be collocated), with the Saudi Air Force, or become a separate service, as was the case with the CSS-2 SSMs, which eventually became the Strategic Rocket Force.

The Potential Mechanics of Acquisition

Developing a nuclear weapons capability is not an easy process, and requires a complex technical infrastructure, skilled cadres, and effective safety and command and control mechanisms, quite apart from the necessary fissile material. It is implausible that Saudi Arabia would be able to develop nuclear weapons relying on its domestic capabilities for the foreseeable future, given its lack of physical infrastructure and cadres in this field. For Saudi Arabia to duplicate Iran's path to nuclear weapons would require many years. Saudis admit that "there is no doubt that such [nuclear] technology requires great effort and internal development in the fields of science and engineering over a long period of time in the future," noting that Iran's program had begun already some thirty years earlier.⁷⁸

Rather, acquisition would almost assuredly occur by purchase. As one Saudi blogger in a forum connected to the Saudi Stock Exchange urged, the country should not waste its money buying expensive conventional Western arms but, instead, "for less than that, we can buy a ready-made turnkey atom bomb."⁷⁹ Another blogger, likewise, urged that "thanks to the wisdom and planning of our enlightened leaders, and the creative use of oil money, [we] avoid the foolishness of repeating the initial steps and instead proceed directly to a deterrent weapon which, with our money, we can afford...we have awesome buying power."⁸⁰ In the Saudi case, the traditional status of latency, in which a state could mobilize the necessary technical and material prerequisites in preparation for a transition to developing a nuclear weapon at the appropriate time, is a non-issue, as that route would be bypassed by a direct transfer of a finished product.

Based on history and existing connections, the most likely source for a nuclear weapon would be Pakistan, although additional know-how or technology might also be forthcoming from other countries. There has been a long-standing bilateral relationship in the field of nuclear power between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.⁸¹ Saudi Arabian oil and financial aid helped Pakistan overcome international sanctions following its first nuclear detonation in 1998. When the then-Defense Minister Prince Sultan visited Pakistan in 1999, he was allowed to tour the country's nuclear development facility at Kahuta – the first foreigner to do so, as the Pakistani hosts stressed – and he was briefed on the program by the country's leading nuclear scientist, A. Q. Khan, often called the father of

Pakistan's atom bomb, who showed him several nuclear weapons, including a Pakistani-made Gauri SSM equipped with a nuclear warhead.⁸² Saudi sources were anxious to downplay the visit, claiming that Prince Sultan had only visited the first part of Pakistan's nuclear reactor and not the secret parts as had been reported.⁸³ But, another Saudi report also noted that Prince Sultan at Kahuta had "praised Dr. Abd Al-Qadir Khan and his colleagues...for the achievement of establishing this wonderful scientific structure."⁸⁴ Prince Sultan's son and Deputy Minister of Defense, Prince Khalid, was reported to have been present at a Pakistani nuclear test in October 2005.⁸⁵ In promoting a Saudi atom bomb, at least one Saudi pundit has called openly for nuclear cooperation with such countries as Pakistan to bring to fruition what he termed "this great dream."⁸⁶

To be sure, there is no hard evidence of any bilateral deal having been struck for nuclear weapons, although unverifiable media reports have surfaced periodically to that effect. For example, in 2003, an unnamed "ranking Pakistani insider" was the source for the reported existence of a secret agreement for "nuclear cooperation" intended to provide Saudi Arabia with nuclear weapons technology.⁸⁷ Again, an unnamed "senior U.S. official" claimed that Saudi Arabia had helped finance Pakistan's nuclear program, and suggested that Pakistan could well make nuclear weapons from its arsenal available to Saudi Arabia.⁸⁸ More recently, based on unattributed "intelligence reports," the British press also reported an alleged deal in which "the Saudi monarchy paid for up to 60% of the Pakistani nuclear [program], and in return has the option to buy a small nuclear arsenal ('five to six warheads') off the shelf if things got tough in the [neighborhood]."⁸⁹ Some Saudis have shown a particular sensitivity to what they believe are U.S. plans to disarm Pakistan. A recurring theme for Saudi pundits has been that Washington was promoting chaos in Pakistan in order to achieve its ultimate objective...that of partitioning the country and removing its nuclear arsenal, since both the United States and Israel feared a transfer of nuclear technology to the Arabs.⁹⁰

Warheads, or their components, could be transported fairly easily to Saudi Arabia. All that would really be required in order to provide the desired effect is a tangible presence of what can be portrayed with at least some credibility to be a nuclear device. It is not necessary that any nuclear weapon be in a state to be deployed or launched immediately or that it be

on ready-alert. To some extent, perceptions can be as effective as reality, as shown by the acquisition and presence even of some conventional state-of-the-art equipment of which the Saudi military very likely cannot make optimal use. As Prince Bandar bin Sultan, (long-time Saudi ambassador to Washington and son of the late Defense Minister, and now Director General of the Saudi Intelligence Agency), viewed the deterrent value of his country's SSMs, "the psychology behind [the missile] was more important than its capability."⁹¹

From the Saudi perspective, a physical presence would probably be sufficient, at least initially, as an immediate psychological and political factor to reassure the country and its regional friends that Riyadh had a counterweight and deterrent to any political influence and military advantage that Iran would have gained from acquiring a nuclear arsenal of its own. An integrated system with a launch capability, command and control, and other technical aspects to make the program genuinely credible – even if to achieve only a rudimentary and an unlikely war fighting option – could come considerably later.

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CHAPTER 9

Where Does the Civilian Nuclear Power Sector Fit In?

Nuclear Energy Plans

In parallel with the increased attention that Saudi Arabia has paid to nuclear weapons, there has also been progress in the civilian nuclear sector which, to some extent at least, may be seen as a related facet of the nuclear military option. Saudi discussions about civilian nuclear power provide some insights into the Saudi understanding of nuclear power in general, and official support for nuclear power can be viewed as a government commitment to the nuclear idea overall. The primary mover for a civilian capability, to be sure, has been a recognized need for future energy supplies. In effect, increasingly frequently the Saudi media has been filled with legitimate concern and even dire predictions about the growing proportion of domestic oil production consumed for local power generation, the rising demand for electricity, and the future depletion of oil reserves. Promoters have focused on the many potential benefits for medicine, agriculture, transportation, and industry, as well as power generation and water purification, including the creation of thousands of new jobs.¹

Riyadh has proposed ambitious plans entailing 16 nuclear reactors by 2030, to be devoted mainly to the generation of electricity and water purification, as the central part of a strategy focused on renewable energy. There is to be an initial 5-year study and planning cycle, to be followed by a 5-year building phase.² The King Abd Allah Complex for Nuclear and Renewable Energy, which is to oversee research, planning, and management of the country's nuclear activities, was established in April 2010. Riyadh has reached agreements for cooperation on nuclear development with such countries as Pakistan, the United States, China, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Argentina, France, and South Korea.

True, in the case of a civilian nuclear option – unlike that of the military option – doubts have been aired in the Saudi media as to its desirability, although there was no structured public debate, and we are not privy to the discussions that may have occurred within government circles. The focus of those who were unconvinced about the wisdom of pursuing a nuclear option varied, as they have argued over the years about the high cost of reactors and nuclear fuel, the risk of accidents, or the preference of other alternative forms of energy, such as solar.³ One critic of the Saudi nuclear power program, who was a proponent of solar energy instead, even sought to tap into fears of giving greater leverage to the West, as he argued that the country would become dependent on the West for uranium to fuel its planned reactors, and he assessed that “If we begin to rely on others for energy, that opens the door to blackmail!”⁴ Evidently, such doubts have not had an impact on policy decisions, as one journalist supportive of nuclear power pointed out that “avoiding nuclear power is just not in the cards.”⁵

Nuclear Energy and National Security

For the vast majority of voices in the Saudi media, nuclear power in itself is viewed as an element of national pride and as evidence of modernity and, perhaps not coincidentally, the logo of the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education is built around the symbol of an atom. As one commentator noted, praising King Abd Allah for his vision, the civilian nuclear sector will “raise Saudi society toward the knowledge society in the century of knowledge-based economies.”⁶

Reflecting the psychological facet of nuclear power, Saudi observers, often also explicitly conflate the development of a civilian nuclear sector with national security and the balance of power in the region, with its impact somehow perceived and promoted as a quasi-military factor. In fact, one Saudi proponent of civilian nuclear projects in the Gulf openly claimed that such countries as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or the UAE did not need nuclear capabilities for energy since they were already major oil producers, but that a civilian nuclear program was part of the local response to the threat from Iran.⁷ As a Saudi academic saw it, a peaceful nuclear capability somehow would endow the GCC countries with the ability to “withstand the demands of Israel and Iran.”⁸ And, he added, if

the GCC countries adopt nuclear power for peaceful purposes, “they will thereby augment their power, which will be added to their oil, economic, and strategic power, which will provide them a powerful dynamism that will enable them to demand from Israel and Iran a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. This will not happen unless the other parties are convinced that the GCC and the Arab states have entered the correct path to mastering nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.”⁹ Others were more explicit in blurring the civilian and military benefits of nuclear power, with one Saudi observer noting that if Saudi Arabia, or Egypt, established peaceful nuclear programs “that will pave the way for the development of nuclear weapons.”¹⁰

Indeed, in arguing in favor of a civilian nuclear program, a writer in a Saudi military journal even proposed that such a capability would enable his country to be a major international player, with Mecca as the center of the world. Paraphrasing Halford Mackinder’s 19th century geopolitical argument about the dominance of the Heartland, he identified Saudi Arabia as the latter and, by extension, as the actor destined to rule the world, “provided it has the other elements of power.”¹¹ One Saudi editorial saw nuclear power as a lever for Riyadh to exert its influence over its neighbors, as he called for merging the nuclear programs in the GCC as part of the broader unification which Saudi Arabia has promoted, although apparently there has not been any response in that vein from any of the other member states.¹² Likewise, a Saudi academic reminded readers that the individual Gulf States have few cadres in the nuclear field and should therefore pool their resources, implicitly under Saudi patronage.¹³

In more concrete terms, one Saudi editorial raised the possibility that Iran could use its existing civilian nuclear reactor at Bushehr as a weapon of war by releasing nuclear material on purpose in order to pollute the Gulf to disrupt shipping and contaminate water for desalination plants.¹⁴ Similarly, a retired senior military officer encouraged the development of a civilian nuclear capability, one which, however, he saw as “having the possibility of being used for military purposes in case of need.”¹⁵ One Saudi commentator, significantly, seemed to be concerned about the potential diversion of a civilian program to military uses. Claiming that it is easy to use spent material from civilian facilities for nuclear weapons – but attributing such intentions only to unspecified neighbors – he worried that “many countries seek to establish a nuclear reactor to generate

electricity...but the fear of their neighbors' arming quickly causes them to rush toward military escalation." The same source also worried that civilian reactors –although only those in other countries are mentioned – would be able to produce spent plutonium sufficient for many atom bombs.¹⁶

All this is not to say that the Saudi civilian nuclear sector will be misused for military purposes. One must remember that the covert conversion of fissile materials to military use presents significant technical difficulties, and especially so if effective international controls are exercised to prevent the diversion of spent fuel.¹⁷ Rather, where there could well be a crossover between the civilian nuclear sector and a military program may be if the civilian nuclear sector over the longer term is used as a support element for maintaining and expanding an acquired military nuclear capability. That is, a civilian nuclear sector could provide ancillary infrastructure and trained personnel, as well as serve as a source for acquiring dual-use technology, components, and expertise which could also be applied to developing or maintaining nuclear weapons.¹⁸ For example, the creation of a civilian nuclear sector could help form and sustain a cadre of nuclear experts – both Saudi and foreign – who could function in either sphere. King Abd Al-Aziz University (which has the only department of nuclear engineering in the GCC) and the nuclear physics programs at three other Saudi universities already prepare both academics and technicians who could participate as dual-program personnel, as will the planned nuclear research center at King Abd Al-Aziz University – which is also to include many foreign experts.¹⁹ Over the past few years, virtually every Saudi university has recruited faculty in nuclear physics, although there is no indication as to how successful that effort has been. In addition, Saudi students are pursuing nuclear studies abroad in a number of countries.

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CHAPTER 10

The Religious Sector: Legitimization and Accountability

The Theological Reasoning

Ruling circles in Saudi Arabia have also sought to ensure support from the country's religious establishment, which could provide the necessary legitimization and moral justification for the acquisition and use of any future nuclear capability. In conceptual terms, Muslim clerics often address WMD as a single analytical category, rather than differentiating among different components, and their legal rulings are applicable to all such aspects of WMD, but the focus is clearly on nuclear weapons, to which they devote the greatest attention.

Such religious/ethical considerations are significant to most regimes in the region, and of capital importance to Saudi Arabia's ruling family, given the latter's foundations on a base of religious legitimacy within the country and given the family's claim to leadership for their country in the Muslim world. As has been true throughout Islamic history, the clerics' crafting of religious opinions is often intertwined with political considerations. Any opposition or criticism on moral grounds from this sector could prove embarrassing, so that this is always be a closely-monitored factor. Although the mainstream Saudi religious establishment is essentially an administrative arm of the regime, this is not necessarily true of all the country's clerics.

Already in 2002, writing in the Saudi military journal *Al-Jundi Al-Muslim*, a relatively liberal cleric, A'id Al-Qarni, drafted a *fatwa*, or religious opinion, on the use of WMD in war, which set the official tone.¹ The thrust of the *fatwa* was that there is no doubt that shooting (*ramy*) is the greatest element of power and that the greatest means to terrify the enemy of God by shooting is by possessing all the weapons with which

one can shoot against [those enemies], or at least the most powerful weapons. Possessing WMD – nuclear, chemical, and biological – is considered one of the means to strengthen the position of the Islamic states vis-a-vis the infidel states and to make them feared, and a means for them to ensure their survival, their position, and their stability, especially nowadays when the whole world is challenging the Muslims.²

Navigating through different interpretations of legal principles and historical analogies over the legality of using weapons that might cause collateral damage among non-combatants and among fellow-Muslims being used as human shields, Al-Qarni draws the conclusion that using such weapons in this manner is permissible if to not do so would otherwise hinder the mission – the jihad in this case. Of course, less powerful weapons should be used if it is possible to achieve victory. If not, or if one suspects that the enemy will do so, then the use of WMD is permissible.³ Ultimately, Al-Qarni leaves discretionary power to the leaders, basing his judgment on the legal principle of utility (*maslaha*), as he concluded that “it is up to the discretion of a Muslim ruler to do as he sees fit for the common good.”⁴

Likewise, a thesis prepared at Prince Nayif University for Security Studies was published in 2004 addressing the legality of WMD. Using classic Islamic texts and precepts as applied to the law of war, the author stresses the permissibility of having the same weapons as the enemy – particularly any weapons that an infidel has. As the author concludes: “all these proofs confirm the duty incumbent on Muslims to acquire all the categories of weapons that the infidels have so that [the Muslims] can deal with [the infidels] as the latter deal with the Muslims.”⁵ While acknowledging that international customary law of war would condemn nuclear weapons in particular, he concludes that:

However, Islamic law has defined the objective of the legality of arming, as God said: “Against them make ready Your strength to the utmost Of your power, including Steeds of war, to strike terror Into (the hearts of) the enemies, Of Allah and your enemies.” [Qur’an, viii 60] Therefore, any weapon that does not terrify the enemy and does not frighten him is to be considered deficient in terms of legitimacy, as it does not fulfill the objective for which

arming was designed. A nuclear state fears only another nuclear state.⁶

Moreover, arguing against those who maintain that Islamic states have signed the NPT and must honor it even if Israel has not done so, the author counters that “the Islamic states are obliged to force all countries to divest themselves of WMD, and if the latter do not respond to that, then [the Islamic states] are free to break those agreements.”⁷

An Egyptian scholar specializing on religious studies, writing in a Saudi military journal, justified, in particular, the concept of nuclear deterrence in religious terms. He stated that “deterrence was the first military strategy [that emerged] in the shadow of Islam.”⁸ Indeed, deterrence was said to “lead...to the fulfillment of the Islamic mission better than any other means.”⁹ And, the author stressed that deterrence would only be effective if there was an offensive capability.¹⁰

The Saudi media has also elicited the views of non-Saudi clerics, such as those at Al-Azhar, the influential Sunni religious educational and religious complex in Egypt. In one media survey by a Saudi newspaper, leading Al-Azhar clerics confirmed that Islam views as a religious duty that Muslims acquire all forms of power to deter aggression, although they engaged in some casuistry, differentiating between acquiring nuclear weapons (which was allowed) and using such weapons, which was forbidden, although, again the clerics made a distinction between just wars of defense and unjust wars of aggression.¹¹

Meshing Religion with Realpolitik

However, Saudi clerics can provide not only the necessary moral backing for the government but they can also stray into the political arena and pressure policymakers on this issue, potentially reducing the latter’s room for maneuver. That is, clerics can push the issue even harder than the government may have intended and question the policymakers’ effectiveness. For example, cleric A’id Al-Qarni, expressing annoyance that the West arms itself while proscribing others from doing so, belittled the Arabs’ alleged preoccupation with culture, and argued that the world respects a country for its power, not for its good taste.¹² Referring to nuclear weapons, he claimed that Iran “has broken the code,” that is that

“manufacturing a single [atom] bomb is more awe-inspiring than a hundred epics reminding us of our ancestors’ glory.” Indeed, the world respects the Great Powers specifically because they have nuclear weapons. He concluded, therefore, “Oh, Arabs, I beg you to develop the atom bomb and nuclear weapons” because “the world is run according to the law of the strongest.”¹³

Although this article appeared in a major Saudi-owned newspaper and, therefore, was politically acceptable, the fact that it turned out to be so popular that it quickly went viral, being reproduced on numerous blogs, fora, and personal websites in Saudi Arabia and throughout the Arab world, may have been disconcerting for Saudi policymakers, as it channeled public opinion and served almost as a challenge to the latter to do something quickly.

Saudi clerics could even put forth purely Realpolitik arguments, rather than using religious terms. For example a prominent Saudi cleric, Safar Al-Hawali, argued in favor of scientific development as a way to confront the enemies of the Muslim world based on his political analysis, as he claimed that “were it not for the atom bomb, India would not listen to Pakistan.”¹⁴ Yet another Saudi cleric called for technological transfer to the Muslim world, condemning western efforts to thwart such attempts, as with Iraq’s nuclear program, and suggested covert transfers, “so that the enemy is surprised by the effort once it is completed,” giving as an example that of Pakistan’s atom bomb.¹⁵

Other external religious quarters may also provide support for, and indirect pressure on, Saudi decision-making, as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, which identified Israel as the biggest nuclear threat and hoped that Saudi Arabia would balance the latter with its own nuclear power.¹⁶ Meshing theology and Realpolitik, a prominent Egyptian-born cleric based in Kuwait likewise argued in apocalyptic terms that Iran’s “nuclear [weapons] are not being developed [to be used] against the Jews...but to slaughter the Arabs...wake up you slow ones...any benighted policymaker who knows nothing about religion will...confuse things.” He claimed that the Shia Iranians would even use nuclear weapons to “wipe Mecca and Medina off the face of the earth.”¹⁷

More extreme Saudi clerical elements with jihadist ties also back the pursuit of a nuclear capability, although they refrain from giving any credit to the Al Saud. While beyond the accepted bounds of the political

arena in Saudi Arabia, jihadists go even further in their support for nuclear weapons than do spokesmen in the mainstream clerical establishment. For example, the Saudi cleric Nasir bin Hamad Al-Fahd, who has been linked to Al-Qaida and is now in prison, published a widely-distributed *fatwa* giving great leeway for the use of WMD against infidels, noting that “if it is not possible to repel the infidels from the Muslims except by using these weapons [i.e. WMD] then they are permissible even if [these weapons] kill them all and destroy their agriculture and progeny.”¹⁸ Indeed, according to Al-Fahd, WMD are allowed even in the equivalent of offensive wars (*jihad al-talab*).¹⁹

Although removing a potential source of criticism by eliciting the views of the Saudi clerics, Saudi policymakers also risk raising expectations and limiting their freedom of maneuver. Similarly, confirmation by foreign clerics that might support the Saudi rulers’ assertions of being the protectors of Islam at the same time may place the Saudi rulers in a predicament, as such arguments by the clerics could serve as a touchstone for potential critics if nothing is perceived to have been accomplished to protect Islam and its holiest shrines.

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CHAPTER 11

Reshaping Relations within an Evolving Gulf Nuclear Environment

Transforming the Gulf Cooperation Council?

In one sense, the shadow of nuclear proliferation has already stimulated potential geo-strategic change in the Gulf. For Saudi Arabia, a key policy concern related to the emerging Iranian threat and, in particular, to the nuclear aspect of that threat and to Riyadh's potential response in terms of also seeking nuclear weapons, has been the need to reconsider and refashion its relationship with its smaller neighbors in the GCC. Apparently seeing the evolving threat situation both as a challenge and an opportunity, Saudi Arabia has sought to translate its own present and future military clout into greater political influence in the immediate region. According to a Saudi military journal, the essential impetus for such a development within the GCC was the need to "confront the inequality in the balance of terror resulting from the existence of a nuclear power in the Middle East, namely Israel, and of a regional power doing its utmost to develop nuclear weapons [i.e. Iran]."¹

Riyadh's new vision for the GCC has been centered on unprecedented integration which, unavoidably, would occur essentially under Saudi Arabia's aegis, given the latter's disproportionate size, wealth, and unique human and technical capabilities to protect the Gulf in comparison to its GCC neighbors. Not surprisingly, it has been Saudi Arabia which has taken the lead in efforts to reshape the future of the GCC, and which has generated sweeping proposals for a significantly greater degree of unification which, if implemented, would mark the greatest change in the structure of that organization since its creation in 1981. As a writer in a Saudi military journal, addressing recent developments, depicted the situation, "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the main partner in bringing

about a developed institutional framework which would concretize the aspirations of the sons of the region into a collective entity with which they could confront the challenges of preserving security, achieving development, and structuring and developing mutual cooperation.”²

Saudi Arabia sees itself as the natural leader of that key regional organization and, characteristically, Saudis sometimes refer to their country as “the Gulf states’ elder sister.”³ Saudis stress their country’s unique importance for the GCC’s security, with one Saudi press commentary claiming that their country, “thanks to its regional and international standing and to the wisdom of its leaders, represents the strategic depth” of the GCC.⁴ As one senior Saudi military officer saw it, Saudi Arabia “plays a pivotal and leading role in guaranteeing the security and stability of the region.”⁵ Another senior military officer, a member of the royal family, echoed this view: “Our country has become...a pivotal axis for the states of the region...the sad recent events in Bahrain confirm our country’s leading role and its ability to assume an important role in guaranteeing the region’s security and stability.”⁶

Emphasizing the Nuclear Factor

Offering a Saudi Nuclear Umbrella?

The emerging nuclear factor has been a central component of Riyadh’s envisioned new relationship within the GCC. In real terms, Saudi Arabia has hinted it could provide at least an informal nuclear umbrella to the rest of the GCC if the situation reached a nuclear stage.

Voices in Saudi Arabia have long suggested that their country is the GCC leader and, noting that his country was “the representative of the Gulf region,” one leading journalist, asked “what if Riyadh acquired a nuclear weapon to confront Iran as part of that equation of balance?”⁷ Specifically in support of the idea of a unified GCC, Saudi sources have argued that the country’s size would even provide strategic depth and refuge for the GCC population in case there were nuclear leaks from Iran’s nuclear infrastructure.⁸

Policymakers and the media in at least some of the smaller GCC states concede the need for a major role by Saudi Arabia in Gulf security, with the Qatari-born Secretary General of the GCC, Abd Al-Rahman Al-

Atiya, depicting Saudi Arabia as “the basic pillar of the GCC and someone who is able to protect the latter’s territory, skies, and borders.”⁹ Many Kuwaitis – especially in the country’s Sunni community – as was the case with one local politician, have readily acknowledged that Saudi Arabia is “Kuwait’s strategic depth.”¹⁰

Recently, some of the GCC states have also recognized the need for a nuclear deterrent should Iran acquire the atom bomb. In practical terms, such a deterrent could only be achieved by the GCC’s biggest member, Saudi Arabia. For example, the King of Bahrain hinted at his support for Saudi Arabia’s nuclear option at a press conference, as he warned that “although today we miss Egypt’s and Syria’s absence, if Iran develops the atom bomb there is no doubt that the Arab countries will also acquire it.”¹¹ In the context, it would hardly have been missed by a regional audience that only one other Arab state could realistically be assumed to be able to fill that role in confronting Iran – Saudi Arabia. As an editorial in the Kuwaiti press urging the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent to respond to Iran also acknowledged, a nuclear establishment requires depth for physical space and security, “such as the Suman Desert in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”¹²

Increasing Saudi Leverage with the International Community

While perhaps a secondary consideration to promoting unification, mobilizing regional approval for a Saudi nuclear deterrent provides further legitimacy for the Saudi leadership with its own public to pursue that option if it decides to do so. Such support from the smaller GCC states is no doubt also welcome in Riyadh in order to provide to the latter greater political leverage with the international community with respect to a nuclear option. Clearly, a GCC consensus could facilitate international acceptance of Saudi nuclear weapons. As a Saudi journalist recognized, “I imagine that the hardest phase if the Kingdom or another Gulf state acts to acquire WMD would be that of getting international agreement.” However, he continued, “if there was a consensus and solidarity in diplomacy among the Gulf countries for one of the countries to acquire them [i.e. WMD], there is no doubt that this would contribute to strengthening that country’s negotiating position with the international community.”¹³

Promoting the Idea of Union

The overall threat context has provided the framework for a tangible plan for union from Saudi Arabia. Prince Turki Al-Faysal broached the subject of union at least as early as March 2011 in a major speech which he delivered at a conference in Abu Dhabi focused on Gulf security, linking unity specifically to the Iranian nuclear threat.¹⁴ At the December 2011 GCC Summit, held in Riyadh, King Abd Allah formally called for movement toward “a single entity.” Although the final communiqué called for “the need for a confederation” and proposed a standardization of financial practices, greater coordination in defense matters, and other secondary agreements, an accompanying joint “Riyadh Declaration” – citing “changes, challenges, and threats” – set loftier goals, such as a transition of the GCC “from the stage of cooperation to that of a union.” The latter declaration spelled out concrete areas for integration to be studied, including a customs union, a common currency, a joint market, coordinated diplomacy, and “close ties, cooperation, and rapprochement” in education, the media, sports, and even the Boy Scouts.¹⁵

In his keynote speech focusing on Iran’s nuclear program at a conference on Gulf affairs held in Riyadh in December 2011, Prince Turki Al-Faysal presented his vision in detail of a more unified GCC in all spheres as a necessary counter to the Iranian threat. His proposal went far beyond any previous ones, as he advocated “the establishment of a unified Arabian Peninsula, with an elected *Shura* for the single state, a unified military, a unified economy, a single currency, a unified school syllabus, and unified energy and petro-chemical industries.”¹⁶ At a conference held in Riyadh in April 2012, a stand-in for the ill Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faysal called for “transitioning from the cooperation to the union phase.”¹⁷ Prince Salman, Saudi Arabia’s Defense Minister, based on his reading of history, also foresaw the development of the GCC into a unified entity – one no doubt under Saudi leadership – for he touted Saudi Arabia’s experience as the first state to have become unified in the Arabian Peninsula since the early days of Islam.¹⁸ The effort to promote unity soon became identified with King Abd Allah personally, placing considerable Saudi prestige on the line.

The Saudi media, as one might expect, has supported such proposals for unification enthusiastically, as when an editor close to the palace

termed GCC unification “that about which minds dream and that which the requirements of the present situation dictate,” while calling King Abd Allah “a man of history” for proposing this initiative.¹⁹ A military journal stressed that “The givens of the strategic situation in the Gulf region point to an enlargement of the Saudi role, based on the wise vision of the Servant of the Two Holy Shrines.”²⁰ One Saudi press commentary called for the establishment of a single federal or confederal political entity resembling the United States, Canada, or Mexico.²¹

Gulf Responses

Acknowledging the Growing Threat

However, Riyadh’s political task has been a delicate one – to act as the GCC’s big brother without frightening and alienating the smaller members. To be sure, the ominous threat situation has resulted in an unusual degree of receptiveness on the part of the smaller GCC states to greater coordination. Indeed, the joint communiqué following the GCC summit in Riyadh in December 2011 highlighted “the adoption of the initiative [proposed] by the Servant of the Two Holy Shrines to transition from the phase of cooperation to that of unification, so that the GCC’s entities form a single entity which will bring about good and repel evil in response to the aspirations of the GCC countries’ citizens and in order to deal with the challenges which these countries face.”²² This situation stood in stark contrast to that of earlier GCC summits, when some of the member states had been openly reluctant to confront Iran. At the 2005 summit, for example, there had been no consensus to even mention Iran’s nuclear weapons in the final communiqué, apparently much to the dismay of the Saudis.²³

Since then, there have been discussions on unified defense, security, and foreign policies, and integration in such as areas as air defense and early warning, the creation of a combined defense council, as well as calls for a standing combined force under Saudi leadership and, in 2012, the announcement of the creation of a joint nuclear radiation monitoring center. Recognizing the growing threat, not only from Iran’s potential nuclear weapons but also from its appeal to the local Shia communities, some of the GCC states – and especially Bahrain and some quarters in

Kuwait, countries that have large Shia populations of their own and feel most vulnerable to Iran – have shown unusual deference to Saudi leadership, enabling Saudi Arabia to gain increasing recognition of its regional leadership. As an editorial by an unnamed former Kuwaiti diplomat noted, Saudi Arabia has replaced Egypt as the “powerbroker” (*wasit*) in the region.²⁴ Bahrain’s Prime Minister, Prince Khalifa bin Salman, for his part, welcomed warmly the Saudi king’s call for a unified GCC, and stressed that “we look forward to the unification of the Gulf as soon as possible.”²⁵

Dissonant Views on the Nuclear Issue

However, Saudi Arabia has not always found it easy to translate its talk of the Iranian threat, offers of a future nuclear umbrella, and promotion of a more unified GCC into universal acquiescence, as some of the member states have become increasingly uncomfortable with Saudi Arabia’s growing clout and pressure for unity.

First, in some states there is a different perception of the Iranian threat, and there may be a reluctance to provoke Iran by being seen as supporting a confrontational Saudi approach to relations with their neighbor across the Gulf, and even more so if nuclear weapons were involved. As a result, some in the GCC have been anything but receptive to the Saudi initiative, differing with Riyadh on the nuclear threat assessment and on potential remedies. As a Kuwaiti editorial complained about such doubters, “it appears that some officials in some of the GCC states can be described as not comprehending the extent of the Iranian threat.”²⁶ The Gulf’s Shia communities, as one could expect, have been especially opposed to closer ties to Saudi Arabia, as has Oman, which traditionally has felt only a limited immediate Iranian threat.

On relations with Iran, Fahd bin Mahmud Al Said, Oman’s Deputy Minister for Cabinet Affairs, emphasized a more benign view of Iran than that which Saudi Arabia had been promoting, as he noted that “geography is determinant in the region and Iran, despite everything, is a neighboring state and we cannot change that reality, and the GCC states do not want our region to be one of tension.”²⁷ Not surprisingly, speaking of King Abd Allah’s proposal for Gulf unification, Oman’s foreign minister, Yusuf Bin Alawi, likewise, noted that “in our view, the energy that was put into the

[original] framework of the GCC is still the foundation and we have not developed to where we are thinking of anything else...The situation around us does not require [anything else] and neither do we; maybe the next generation might be able to accomplish that.”²⁸

Dubai, one of the constituent emirates within the UAE, with its long-standing economic relationship with Iran, too, has expressed a less alarmist view of Iran than that projected by Saudi Arabia. For example, Shaykh Muhammad bin Rashid Al-Maktum, the ruler of Dubai, remained unconvinced as late as 2011 that Iran was developing nuclear weapons, as he noted in an interview with CNN, “Iran is our neighbor, they are Muslim and we lived next to each other for thousands and thousand years. I don’t believe that Iran will get a nuclear weapon, I don’t think so. What can Iran do with the nuclear weapon? Will they hit Israel? How many Palestinians will die? And do you think if Iran hit Israel, Iran will be safe? They will be gone the next day.”²⁹ Significantly, an analyst from the UAE, while acknowledging the need for a nuclear deterrent, apparently did not view Saudi Arabia as the only option, as he posited as early as 2009 that such a deterrent “could be local, Arab, or international, or even by means of a [broader] nuclear umbrella for the defense of the Gulf.”³⁰ He even openly expressed a willingness to “accept in principle a nuclear umbrella from a country such as the United States.”³¹ In fact, advocating nuclear weapons for Saudi Arabia too visibly by Saudi spokesmen in neighboring countries may sometimes be sensitive. Thus, a Saudi political analyst’s scheduled appearance on a Kuwaiti TV program was cancelled after his views, fervently in favor of a Saudi nuclear deterrent, were previewed by the show’s producers.³²

Sensitivity to Saudi Hegemony

Second, there are suspicions in some GCC states of creeping Saudi hegemony under the guise of unification and of offers of a nuclear umbrella. As part of the process of proposed unification, Prince Turki Al-Faysal called for the unavoidable need to compromise some national sovereignty by member states.³³ However, the Saudis appear to have been surprised by the lack of enthusiasm they have encountered, despite their portrayal of the looming Iranian threat, and Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faysal found it necessary to allay fears of Saudi domination, assuring

Gulf audiences that “it must be clear to all that union will not violate in any way the sovereignty of any of the member states.”³⁴

No doubt seeking to counter concerns on that score from some of the other GCC states, the Saudi media has sought to dispel potential doubts that some have apparently voiced about the wisdom of unification. One Saudi editorialist taxed as “not correct” the apprehension of some states to the effect that “unification may end their independence.” He stressed that states could still retain their individual domestic policies, even as he compounded GCC fears by noting that “strategic projects” such as roads, electric power, railroads, the petrochemical industry, the import and export sectors, energy, and arms purchases would be “subordinated to greater coordination.” In particular, he emphasized “the nationalization of [the petrochemical] industry and other sources of energy, whether nuclear or other” and that the transition from present-day cooperation to unity would lead to “a strong entity.”³⁵ However, as a Saudi editorialist acknowledged, some – albeit, as he saw it, a minority – in the GCC were “unenthusiastic” about union, citing the small states’ fear of losing relative influence.³⁶

Usually, those wary of greater GCC unification have expressed concern officially in indirect terms, as did Shaykh Muhammad bin Rashid Al Maktum, ruler of Dubai and the UAE’s Prime Minister and Vice President, who emphasized such terms as “cooperation and complementarity” in a communiqué released as he arrived in Riyadh for the December 2011 GCC summit, rather than union.³⁷ Likewise, Fahd bin Mahmud Al Said, Oman’s Deputy Minister for Cabinet Affairs, noted after the same summit that the experience of the European Union showed that monetary unification should not be hasty, and that the Saudi-promoted expansion of the GCC with the proposed admission of Jordan and Morocco “requires time” and “many preliminary steps.”³⁸ Later, the Omani foreign minister was quoted as concluding curtly that “There is no union.”³⁹ Even a pro-Saudi Kuwaiti politician admitted to the Saudi press that one could explain recent Kuwaiti accommodation to Iran, at least in part, as “a reaction to what [Kuwaitis] consider ‘Saudi interference’ in [Kuwait’s] internal affairs and its efforts to recruit the tribes.”⁴⁰

While Bahrain, understandably due to the minority Sunni regime’s need for Saudi support, has continued to second Saudi proposals energetically, elsewhere in the GCC support for union has remained limited. A Bahraini academic, writing in a Saudi newspaper, was appalled

by the prevailing attitude at a conference of Gulf intellectuals in November 2012 dealing with a potential GCC union. As he noted, the presenters began with the potential benefits but “then suddenly switched to doubts about [the union’s] success and to laying out the obstacles,” while commentators “criticized extremely bitterly the direction and achievements of the GCC over the past three decades, and even ridiculed the very idea of union.”⁴¹ At the GCC summit in Bahrain the following month, while the Bahraini foreign minister noted blandly that “not one state said it did not want to enter a union,” he also admitted that progress might appear slow, since “every state’s views must be considered.”⁴² Despite the Saudis’ positive “spin” on the summit, the final communiqué, while acknowledging the Iranian nuclear threat, spoke pointedly of “cooperation” more than once, not of union.⁴³

Saudi Arabia may conclude from its disappointing experience with the GCC that translating its talk of a nuclear threat and of its own nuclear – or implied nuclear – clout and its offers of a future nuclear umbrella into influence is not necessarily an automatic process. It is uncertain whether the outlook in the smaller GCC states would change if and when Iran actually acquired nuclear weapons, and in what direction – whether it would move them toward greater cohesion with Saudi Arabia or in a centrifugal pattern, with accommodation of Iran. In the end, however, the smaller GCC states’ views would not be likely to sway Saudi Arabia’s own views on nuclear weapons.

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CHAPTER 12

The Rouhani Era in Iran: The Potential Impact and Implications

Assessing President Rouhani

The result of the June 2013 presidential elections in Iran, in which Hassan Rouhani emerged victorious, has raised hopes in the international community for a resolution of the Iranian nuclear impasse. However, Saudi views have been considerably less sanguine. Although official circles have been noncommittal, Saudi media commentary was uniformly negative or at least skeptical about Rouhani. Even before the elections, Saudis had not been optimistic that there would be genuine change on the nuclear issue no matter who won.¹

Pundits in the Saudi media often argued that while some see Rouhani as a reformist, that may be true only in relative terms by comparison to his predecessor and that despite his peaceable personality and initial moderate statements and reaching out to Saudi Arabia, Iran's policies of expansion and quest for nuclear weapons are part of that country's enduring national strategy dating back to the Shah's era.² As one journalist asked rhetorically, "is there anyone who can be considered a 'moderate' president in Iran?"³ The Saudi media accused Rouhani of practicing a policy of *taqiya*, or religious dissimulation, although that is a Shia religious term, in concealing his true objectives, and attributed to Iran "skill at deception in all its dealings."⁴

Any potential change was seen as only one in style, intended to improve Iran's public image, and the Saudi media often set long lists of litmus tests for Rouhani by which to prove he is really a moderate, stipulations that would entail a wholesale reversal of most of Iran's long-standing national policies, of which opening the country to full-scale IAEA supervision of its nuclear sector was only one criterion.⁵ In the end,

Saudis argued that it was Iran's Supreme Leader, Sayyed Ali Khamenei, who held the real power in the country and that he would continue the existing policies.⁶

Adapting to New Developments in Iran's Policy

Although there was very limited official Saudi commentary on Rouhani's outreach to the United States and the visible political progress that was developing in the fall of 2013, the Saudi media indicated a guarded and still suspicious attitude. Most Saudi media commentary mirrored Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faysal's cautionary welcome of any change in Iran's policy in October 2013, but demanded concrete action from Tehran. Otherwise, he warned, "if it is not translated into deeds [the Iranian outreach] will remain just empty words and have no impact."⁷ The Saudi media interpreted Tehran's new-found flexibility and decision to seek a diplomatic solution, or dovishness (*hama'imiya*), to a desire to have the potentially destabilizing economic sanctions lifted and to avert a possible U.S. military strike following the experience in Syria. And, Saudi observers also interpreted Iran's more cooperative approach as a desire to take advantage of what they termed President Obama's accommodating "weakness and indecisiveness."⁸ In fact, the Saudi media labeled Iran's outreach in such distrustful terms as "putting on its sheep's clothing," using "soft language," and adopting "finesse."⁹ In using what one commentator termed simply "different means," the ultimate objective was still seen by the latter as the intent by Iran to preserve the gains it had already made in the nuclear field.¹⁰

The media also reiterated an unease that Saudi Arabia and the GCC continued to be excluded from the negotiating process, fearing that it would be "the Arabs" or "the Gulf" who could pay the price of a U.S.-Iranian or even of an Iranian-Israeli deal. The frequency of this theme in the media suggested that it reflected official thinking, even if the authorities would not voice such concerns publicly.¹¹ While Oman's role as the initial go-between in delivering messages between Washington and Iran was accepted, the media also reflected its annoyance, stressing that it was Saudi Arabia, not Oman with its "passive" foreign policy style, who should be the one playing the key role in any negotiations.¹²

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CHAPTER 13

Conclusions

This study suggests several conclusions and potential implications applicable not only to Saudi Arabia but, at least in part, more broadly to the issue of nuclear proliferation.

A Saudi Nuclear Option Would Be Likely...If...

First, there is a strong likelihood that Saudi Arabia would seek to acquire nuclear weapons when and if Iran did so. As one Saudi pundit put it, “There is one thing on which we will not disagree...and that is that the Gulf will be a nuclear one.”¹ Of course, predicting categorically whether a state will go nuclear, much less the timing for such a move, is difficult, and even more so the further out one tries in terms of time. All one can do is forecast the likelihood based on an analysis of available data against an analytical background of a country’s strategic culture.

The sheer quantity of hints, overt warnings, and analyses from senior policymakers and from those writing in the civilian and military media indicates that Saudi Arabia would indeed seriously consider acquiring nuclear weapons under certain circumstances. This vector in Saudi Arabia is not a phenomenon attributable to a single driven leader or even to a small nationalistic core, but seems to reflect a wider consensus. Although it is difficult to judge definitively, the limited evidence available suggests that there is probably broad-based public support for the official depiction of the foreign threat and for pursuing a nuclear capability in relation to that threat, and that there is little opposition even in dissident circles to such an option. At the same time, since state-society relations involve an interactive process to some extent, the media, while functioning as an information mechanism that the decision-makers can use, also can heighten demand and generate pressure on the decision-maker to actually

produce on the expectations that have been actively encouraged from above. A failure by policymakers to actually fulfill expectations in this arena is feasible, even if Iran did decide at some time to develop nuclear weapons, of course, given the closed decision-making process and lack of public accountability in Saudi Arabia, but such a failure to follow through would nevertheless entail a loss of some prestige and credibility.

In particular, the country's religious establishment's at times strident support for the acquisition of nuclear weapons would put pressure on the Saudi decision-makers and opens up the latter to charges of being remiss if it fails to do so as a way to protect the Umma, especially since the threat is portrayed as emanating from Shia Iran, as well as from Israel, countries that clerics can depict as enduring threats from a religious perspective.

In Saudi Arabia's case, the decision-makers' assessment of the threat posed by the blatant challenge that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose to Saudi Arabia's vital interests would very likely override other considerations. Decision-makers may interpret threats not only in strictly speaking military terms, but also in terms of the fear the impact of nuclear weapons would have on the regional political balance, which the Saudis appear to view as primary. According to one Saudi military writer, in fact, the quest for "political and economic blackmail and [the ability] to impose [one's] political conditions both nearby and further afield" can be a key motivator for a country's acquisition of nuclear weapons.²

More broadly, this case study reinforces the assumption that a state's interpretation of its national interests and reading of the threat environment can be expected to be a decisive consideration and will outweigh outside admonitions or pressures against acquiring nuclear weapons if – as seems to be the case with Saudi Arabia – it feels its vital interests are at stake and that it has no other reliable means to fulfill that requirement. For example, justifying Riyadh's purchase of the CSS-2 after the missiles had been discovered, King Fahd had maintained that "Our country's orientation is determined by our national interests; we are not with anyone, but only with our interests."³

Of course, it should be underlined that such policy trends in Saudi Arabia are not irreversible. Ultimately, the key variable in Saudi decision-making on the nuclear issue is the perceived threat from Iran, and a reversal in Iran's nuclear policy would likewise almost assuredly translate into a drawdown of Riyadh's current preparations to very likely follow

suit on acquiring nuclear weapons. Given the relatively limited domestic accountability for policy, the national leadership could change course. In that case, however, one would expect to see an accompanying media campaign supporting and justifying any policy reversal.

International Leverage May Sometimes Be Limited

Second, the case of Saudi Arabia suggests that in some instances the international community's leverage to prevent nuclear proliferation may be limited if a country feels that its security is at stake. As Sagan points out, the choice of the model which one believes is the most appropriate one to explain nuclear proliferation will have a bearing on what counter proliferation policies are selected.⁴ However, in general, to be able to deter proliferation requires an overmatch in tools such as political, economic, and credible military leverage and, ultimately, the ability to convince a country that to forego a nuclear capability will yield greater security and greater benefits than pursuing it – a daunting task in most instances, and especially so with Saudi Arabia.

Admittedly, Saudi Arabia may be a special case, due to its unique position in the international oil market. However, other countries as well, whether for political or economic reasons, may also be able to resist outside pressure or avert it altogether. In fact, Saudi policymakers probably expect that the international reaction to Riyadh's acquisition of nuclear weapons would be muted, and they may quite possibly be correct, some of which may depend on the timing. Since Saudi Arabia would likely take such a momentous step only if Iran actually acquired a nuclear weapon, international opinion at that point might be so incensed against Iran and understanding of the need of other countries to respond for self-defense that there might not be an outcry, as one might expect otherwise. In any event, as one Saudi academic has posited, based on what he believed was Washington's more accepting attitude toward civilian nuclear projects in the Arab countries, "the United States in the past used to prohibit the Arab countries from developing nuclear technology, but now has become more open to such an option, out of fear that Iranian influence will increase, potentially leading to a sort of hegemony over political developments in the region."⁵ What is more, the Saudis may argue that if Iran, for whatever reason, one day does announce a nuclear

breakout, they would have given the international community a fair chance to do something to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, and that Riyadh had taken a decision to go nuclear only after the international community had failed to meet its implied obligations to act effectively.

In part, the Saudis may also believe that a reaction by the United States, in particular, would be influenced by the latter's political ties with the proliferating country and that Saudi Arabia could rely on Riyadh's close relationship with Washington and other countries in the West for a limited reaction. As one senior military officer writing in the SANG journal posited, the United States was willing to exercise a selective double standard on proliferators, depending on its political relationship with the country, thus condemning North Korea's nuclear program while accepting those in India and Pakistan.⁶ Likewise, an editorial in *Al-Riyadh* also concluded that the West opposed the nuclear programs in North Korea and Iran principally for political reasons, that is because those two countries were outside the West's orbit, whereas it accepted Israel's nuclear program.⁷

What is more, given Saudi Arabia's unique position in the world oil market, with no credible alternative source able to replace its production without major and perhaps fatal disruptions in the international economy, significant sanctions would simply not be realistic. In particular, if the smaller oil and gas-producing Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar were unwilling to replace even part of any lost Saudi production, either out of solidarity with Riyadh or due to the latter's pressure, any threat of effective economic sanctions against Saudi Arabia would be untenable, certainly unless a potential shale-oil revolution in the international oil markets became a reality. In addition, Riyadh may be hoping that its substantial conventional arms purchases, which are usually accompanied by significant numbers of foreign civilian advisers, may strengthen security and political bonds with seller countries and reduce the impact of potentially negative reactions when and if it actually does acquire nuclear weapons.

Moreover, as noted earlier, the Great Powers' credibility may be limited, and that handicap may translate into a reduced ability to exert moral suasion in any attempt to persuade Saudi Arabia not to pursue a nuclear option. There is the Saudi perception that the Great Powers view

nuclear weapons as being useful for themselves and as wishing to retain a monopoly in order to maintain their power relative to that of other countries. In addition, the Saudis resent what they see as a double standard on the part of the United States and the West with respect to their acceptance of Israel's nuclear arsenal while denying similar weapons to the Arabs.

Modifying the Threat Environment Can Help

Modifying the regional threat environment perhaps can be key in alleviating the pressure to proliferate. This case confirms the significance of a country's threat perceptions in stimulating and legitimizing the need to acquire nuclear weapons. What the international community can do in such cases is to try to remove or diminish the source of perceived insecurity. Ultimately, of course, if the international community can convince Riyadh that it has been able to stop Iran's progress toward nuclear weapons, such an outcome would preclude the need for Riyadh to also follow suit and acquire a corresponding nuclear capability.

If the on-going diplomatic process with Iran succeeds in diverting the latter from taking the final steps toward developing further and weaponizing a nuclear capability, Saudi Arabia would clearly also not proceed further along the nuclear path. What is more, a resolution of the Iranian challenge would likely stem even more extensive proliferation for, if Saudi Arabia then followed suit and acquired nuclear weapons, that could well have been the prelude to an additional, even if not immediate, spate of proliferation in the region, with consequences that may be difficult to foresee. Turkey, Egypt, or Algeria – for various reasons of their own, not always tied to an Iranian threat – might also have been tempted to follow Saudi Arabia's lead, especially if the international community appeared to express understanding for or acceptance of Riyadh's actions in light of Iran's threat.

Even a positive outcome from the current negotiations with Iran, however, would have to be enduring and carry solid guarantees. That is, even if Iran does forgo producing a nuclear device at this time, there need to be safeguards that it would not develop the components that could be used to for a breakout in the future if there were another change in policy in Tehran. If there should be a future Iranian nuclear breakout, Saudi

Arabia would again be faced with the same security dilemma as it has up to now. In fact, as one Saudi editorialist worried, in his view Iran was already on the threshold of a nuclear weapon, having all the necessary components, and that in itself “will put the region on the threshold of hell,” as Iran could then already possess “an enormous tool to blackmail the states in the region.”⁸ However, unlike in the past, Riyadh now has or will have developed all the components of legitimacy (popular, military, religious, and regional), doctrinal thinking, and a support establishment to follow suit quite rapidly if it felt it had to do so.

Even if an agreement between the international community and Iran should result only in a delay of a few years for any breakout, such a respite could still be very useful in preparing international security and political safeguards for other countries in the region. Moreover, during such a delay, selected countries in the international community could also help develop relevant expertise in allied and partner nations, with an emphasis on technical issues, such as the safety risks associated with nuclear establishments, the instability of deterrence, and the perils of proliferation. Visits to U.S. academic and scientific institutions, participation in seminars, diplomatic contacts, scientist exchanges, or as part of coursework in professional military education for military officers can all contribute to such an effort. Given a potential gap in credibility, perhaps an indirect approach through academia or private firms might be more effective than an effort emanating only from official sources. Such educational efforts may be directed to and tailored for the academic, technocratic, religious, media, and military sectors – players who would shape any proliferation process over the long term by translating guidance into policy on safety or operational military doctrine.

Saudi Arabia: Commonalities and Uniqueness

Finally, in terms relating to broader theoretical considerations, the Saudi case offers some empirical data to test some assumptions. At first glance, Saudi Arabia would appear to constitute a classic example of the realist security model, acting in response to a perceived nuclear threat and in light of an assessment that there is no credible alternative, including its doubts about reliable foreign support. Arguably, the Saudi perception of an unacceptable potential nuclear threat that cannot be countered except

by an equivalent nuclear capability is perhaps the most widely-held common variable at play when states consider whether or not to pursue nuclear weapons.

However, such threat-based realism must be evaluated within the parameters of the Saudi political and ideological system. That is, while Saudi Arabia shares commonalities with some other cases on certain aspects of this perspective, one has to be cautious to not conclude that there is a deterministic response by all countries faced by a similar security threat. For example, even though all the GCC states face a similar, though not identical, security threat from Iran, their responses have not necessarily been the same as that in Riyadh, given the differences in their situations, whether in terms of their limited human resources, severe geographic constraints, complex demographic composition, or definition of national interest. The multiplicity of responses to a shared threat in the GCC underlines the importance of understanding the specific characteristics of a country's socio-political system and of its decision-making process. Identifying and understanding such aspects as threat perceptions, the interpretation of lessons learned from other cases, the calculus of perceived costs and benefits, assumptions about the envisioned modes of employment of nuclear weapons (political and military), and the legal/ethical considerations involved, as well as each country's strategic culture and political decision-making process are key in understanding and evaluating how actual and potential regional nuclear powers make decisions on the nuclear issue.

Moreover, Saudi thinking has clearly also been tied to domestic considerations of systemic legitimacy, as well as to narratives about the country's essential identity. The more expansive "nuclear mythmaking" model need not conflict with the realist model in the Saudi case, but may instead enrich and help explain the Saudi analysis and the decision-making process on the nuclear issue. However, the "nuclear mythmaking" approach, too, bears adjustment to specific countries, some of which may not be amenable to all the components normally associated with this approach. For example, it would be difficult to recognize in Saudi Arabia a key step in Lavoy's model, namely that in which a country's national elites (or, as he terms them, the "nuclear mythmakers") seek "to convince senior decision-makers to accept and act on these views," that is to adopt a nuclear option.⁹ In the Saudi system, it is more likely that the promotion of

such a dynamic would be the result of a top-down process, with national elites – not easily defined in this case in any event given the overlapping of personal, family, and institutional allegiances – as the executors rather than the initiators of such policies generated by the decision-makers.

In addition, the Saudi case does not seem to conform to certain aspects or assumptions of some other models, which indicates that while some variables in such models may be applicable, others may be irrelevant for understanding certain countries. For example, one model which proposes indicators (or “stages”) to determine when countries are proceeding toward becoming nuclear powers includes as one of the four stages to monitor that of a country’s “substantial efforts to develop weapons.”¹⁰ Yet, there probably would be little development to detect if the judgment is correct that Riyadh would most likely bypass attempts at development and, instead, acquire such weapons outright by purchase. In this case, there appear to be at least ample verbal indications and warning, but in some cases even that may be missing, as in Libya’s attempt to acquire the atom bomb from China or, as noted above, if King Fahd had accepted the Ukrainian government’s offer in 1994 to help Saudi Arabia acquire nuclear weapons.

Moreover, the same model also proposes a set of “explanatory variables,” including a country’s industrial capacity index, its economic interdependence, and exposure to the global economy.¹¹ Yet, in Saudi Arabia’s case, while some of the variables used are applicable, others are not, and negative results could suggest misleading conclusions. For example, Saudi Arabia has no real industrial infrastructure, as is assumed to be a variable by this model, while the country is, at the same time, highly integrated in the international economy and heavily dependent on the latter, even though this factor may not serve as a retardant in Saudi Arabia’s case as the model would suggest. The outcome of calculating such variables, which would indicate that Saudi Arabia is highly unlikely to acquire nuclear weapons, however, may be questionable and a decision need not really be dependent on the results stemming from applying the variables in that model.

Nor would a focus on the psychology of individual decision-makers be very informative in Saudi Arabia’s case, given the group-based decision-making characteristic of the political system, despite the fact that, as is true in any human collective, the Saudi royal family contains

members who may be outspoken and assertive, and others who are retiring and reticent. Moreover, the “oppositional nationalist” approach is not likely to be useful, as this type is the antithesis of the country’s cautious royal elite taken as a whole, who display continuity over time and where a diffuse consensus-making process is not necessarily dependent on any one individual or on changes of individual position holders.¹² The current monarch in Saudi Arabia, 90-year old King Abd Allah, in particular, is a modest, cautious, and pragmatic individual far from the stereotypical hard-line strident personalities one has come to identify with oppositional nationalists, such as Saddam Hussein.¹³ Neither does the heir apparent, 77-year old Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Prince Salman, fit in the oppositional nationalist mold.

Ultimately, the Saudi case, in many ways, may conform most closely to Sagan’s concept of “multicausality.” As such, it reinforces the perception that searching for a single theory of proliferation that will explain the complexity of the phenomenon for all cases may be impractical, given the numerous unique features that Saudi Arabia’s socio-political system and processes illustrate. Instead, it may be more productive to accept the reality of a multiplicity of potential factors and, rather than expecting a single theory to provide ready-made answers, to accept that not all theoretical constructs or constituent elements may be applicable or relevant to every case.

As in Karl von Clausewitz’s conception of war, with the phenomenon of nuclear proliferation, too, perhaps there may be questions to ask related to the phenomenon’s “nature” – unchanging, general shared attributes – but also recognition that each case has an individual “character” – that is distinctive features that are unique and not mere replications with minor differences of other cases. Multiple theoretical constructs, of course, are useful tools in the toolbox, and provide a variety of questions to ask that one can select as appropriate to particular cases. The only commonalities as causes for nuclear proliferation to look at may be such general truisms as that a state faced by a nuclear threat will seek to maximize its national interest, that it will strive to provide for its security, and will work to ensure that its government is able to project an appearance of success, which can then be applied to specific cases, to be weighed against costs (political, economic, and alternative defense options). Individual motivations or causes, as well as the calculus for these common factors

may vary considerably from case to case and must be understood within each country's context. As such, the analyst's overall experience and knowledge of an individual case and of the subject country's perspectives are indispensable in selecting and applying the appropriate models and questions as guides and, most importantly, in developing the answers.

Notes

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3. Interview with King Fahd by Ahmad Jar Allah, "Al-Fahd: Anayt ka-ma law ann al-ta'ira al-makhtufa saudiya" [Fahd: I Was As Concerned As If the Hijacked Aircraft Had Been a Saudi One], *Al-Siyasa*, 28-29 April 1988, 7.

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5. Salih Abd Al-Rahman Al-Mani, "Al-Tiqniya al-nawawiya fi Al-Khalij" [Nuclear Technology in the Gulf], *Ukaz*, On-line, Internet, 16 December 2006, available from www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20061216/PrinCon2006121671686.htm.

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9. Lavoy, "Nuclear Proliferation," 435.

10. Sonali Singh and Christopher R. Wray, "The Correlates of Nuclear Proliferation: A Quantitative Test," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *xlviii*, 6, December 2004, 866.

11. *Ibid.*, 867-70.

12. Jacques E. C. Hymans, "Theories of Nuclear Proliferation; The State of the Field," in Peter R. Lavoy, ed., *Nuclear Weapons Proliferation in the Next Decade*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 27.

13. On Saddam Hussein, see Jerrold M. Post and Amatzia Baram, "'Saddam Is Iraq, Iraq Is Saddam' (Until Operation Iraqi Freedom)," in Barry R. Schneider and Jerrold M. Post, eds., *Know Thy Enemy; Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Culture*, (Maxwell Air Force Base: USAF Counterproliferation Center, July 2003), 163-220.

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