A Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East: Myth or Reality?

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The debate over Iran's nuclear program has intensified since the early 2000s. The United States and several European countries, among others, accuse Tehran of seeking to build nuclear weapons, or seeking the capability to build them. Iran denies these accusations and claims that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. In recent years the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Canada have imposed strict economic sanctions on Iran to force it to stop uranium enrichment. Meanwhile, diplomatic negotiations have failed to achieve conclusive results.

This growing uncertainty about Tehran's nuclear program has raised many questions: Is Iran making nuclear weapons? When will it have the bomb? How will the United States and/or Israel react? Will Iran's nuclear program trigger a regional nuclear arms race?[1] The first three questions are better addressed by intelligence services. In this essay I seek to address the last concern — how regional powers are reacting to the increasing ambiguity regarding their giant neighbor. Since the mid-2000s several Middle Eastern states have expressed interest in establishing peaceful nuclear power programs. The list includes Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

It is not clear how many of these proposals will come to fruition. What is

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[1] For an analysis of regional responses, see Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbors," *Survival* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 111–28.

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clear, however, is that this growing interest in nuclear energy is, to a great extent, in response to Iran's nuclear program. Furthermore, given the blurred line between civilian and military uses of nuclear power, these proposals are seen as a potential sign of a nascent nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Indeed, many policy makers and military analysts have warned against such an arms race. Joseph Cirincione argues that Iran's nuclear program could lead to a "Middle East with not one nuclear-weapons state, Israel, but four or five."[2] Hans Blix, former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, suggests that failure with Iran "could create serious risks of escalation and long-term domino effects in the region."[3] Nabil Fahmy, Egypt's former ambassador to the United States, echoes this warning: "If Iran's lack of transparency continues unchecked it will likely fuel an arms race in the Middle East."[4]

In this essay I argue against this widely accepted assumption. An Iran with nuclear weapons capability would certainly further destabilize the Middle East. However, such a development, if it happens, is not likely to trigger a regional nuclear arms race. The experience of the past six decades suggests that the rise of an acute security threat is a "necessary—though not a sufficient—condition for a country to start a new weapons program."[5] Israel is widely believed to possess nuclear weapons,[6] and Turkey, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization member, is under the "nuclear umbrella" of the alliance. A nuclear Iran, if it materializes, would not pose a serious enough threat to Arab countries for them to pursue a nuclear weapons option. Furthermore, given the heavy political and financial price for pursuing a nuclear weapons program, Arab countries are not likely to engage in a nuclear arms race with Tehran.

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[2] Joseph Cirincione, "Cassandra's Conundrum," *National Interest*, 1 November 2007, national interest.org/article/cassandras-conundrum-1844.

[3] Hans Blix, "Weapons of Terror: The Report of the WMD Commission One Year On," *Disarmament Diplomacy*, no. 85 (Summer 2007): 26.

[4] Sammy Salama and Heidi Weber, "The Emerging Arab Response to Iran's Unabated Nuclear Program," Monterey Institute for International Studies, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 22 December 2006, www.nti.org/e_research/e3_83.html.

[5] Peter R. Lavoy, "Nuclear Proliferation over the Next Decade: Causes, Warning Signs, and Policy Responses," *Nonproliferation Review* 13, no. 3 (November 2003): 434.

[6] For a detailed analysis of Israel's nuclear weapons, see Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Gawdat Bahgat, "Israel and Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 113–33.

In the following section I briefly discuss some theoretical perspectives on nuclear proliferation and how they apply to the Middle East. This will be followed by a close examination of two case studies — Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Together they hold massive cultural and strategic leverage. In the final section I summarize the main findings of the study, including how Arab countries might react to a nuclear Iran.

Theoretical Perspectives

The extensive literature on proliferation motivations or the so-called proliferation puzzle provides several theoretical models. The decision to go nuclear is a complex one. It cannot be explained by a single model. Rather, the following motivations reinforce each other.

Leadership/cognitive and psychological approaches: Any attempt to explain nuclear proliferation should take into consideration the perception and belief system of policy makers. A major drawback to this approach is that these leadership/cognitive factors are difficult to quantify and can provide only limited explanations of nuclear dynamics.

Internal dynamics and domestic politics model: Adherents to this model argue that in order to explain the decision to acquire nuclear weapons the state should not be seen as a rational and unitary unit. Instead, they argue that the decision to go nuclear is the outcome of bureaucratic interests and parochial priorities. This model, however, underestimates the impact and influence of regional and international system dynamics.

National pride and prestige: The behavior of nation-states cannot be explained merely by cold calculation of their economic and strategic interests. Nonmaterial factors such as the search for status and respect do influence the choices states make. In the Middle East, the acquisition of nuclear weapons has held the promise the fulfilling several psychological aspirations, including national pride, political independence, and technological superiority. The fact that only Israel is considered a (undeclared) nuclear power in the Middle East has further deepened Arab and Iranian sense of inferiority and vulnerability. A major drawback of this model is that international norms change. The original nuclear powers gained political leverage in the 1950s and early 1960s. In contrast, a country seeking nuclear weapons in the 1990s and beyond is portrayed as a "rogue" or "pariah" state. Libya gained respect and prestige in 2003 by renouncing, not pursuing, its nuclear program.

Security: Probably more than any other reason, the Arab-Israeli conflict and instability in the Persian Gulf have provided motivation to a number of Middle Eastern states to seek military nuclear capabilities. These decades-long conflicts underscore the strong connection between security and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Indeed, the extensive literature on proliferation focuses intensely on security. In order to ensure their survival, states try to maximize their military power, including pursuing nuclear weapons. A key motive for a state to pursue military nuclear capability is its adversary's acquisition of such capability.

In the Middle East, the animosity between Israel and its Arab neighbors since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948 has provided strong motivations for the two sides to pursue nuclear weapons. The existential threat Tel Aviv faced in its first decade was the underlying reason for its nuclear drive. On the other side, the Arabs resented Israel's nuclear monopoly and military superiority. This large gap in conventional and nonconventional military capability between Israel and its Arab neighbors explains, at least partly, the efforts of Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and probably Libya to acquire nuclear weapons. In the gulf region, Iran feels threatened by the US military presence on almost all sides. Iranian leaders understand that their country's conventional capabilities are no match for US military superiority. Within this context and from an Iranian perspective, acquiring nuclear weapons might deter the United States from attacking Iran.[7]

Despite the obvious strength of the security model, the pursuit of security does not explain differences across space or changes over time. True, all nuclear powers faced security threats that drove them to acquire nuclear weapons, but it is also true that not all insecure countries seek military nuclear capabilities. In short, no single model explains why a country chooses to go nuclear and another country chooses not to. Each case is unique.

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[7] Kurt M. Campbell, "Nuclear Proliferation beyond Rogues," *Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2002–03): 7.

Nuclear Proliferation: Egypt

Egypt's nuclear posture is an interesting case. Certainly, Egypt has strong incentives to go nuclear. In the three decades following the Second World War, the Egyptian government perceived Israel as a sworn enemy and engaged in major military confrontations with Tel Aviv in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. Besides these major wars, the two sides were involved in other military skirmishes and broad economic and diplomatic warfare. These security concerns were further heightened by the fact that Israel was developing a nuclear weapons capability.

Another important motive for Egypt to pursue nuclear weapons concerns leadership and prestige. Egypt is the most populous country in the Arab world and has always claimed, with strong justification, a leadership role. This perception is based on demographic, political, economic, and cultural factors. This claimed leadership status has been challenged by Cairo's nuclear inferiority to Israel and, to a lesser degree, to other regional potential proliferators, such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Iran since the early 2000s.

At least for these two powerful reasons — security concerns and prestige — Egypt should have vigorously sought to acquire nuclear weapons. This, however, is not the case. Rhetoric aside, there are no indications that the Egyptian leaders have ever made a strong commitment to pursuing such an option. Building a nuclear weapon program takes a long time and requires substantial financial and human resources. These investments have to be backed by a determined political will. The Egyptian case suggests that this necessary political determination was lacking. Instead, it seems that the Egyptian leaders (Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak) have never been convinced that acquiring nuclear weapons would serve Egypt's national interests. Consciously or otherwise, it seems that the Egyptian leaders have reached the conclusion that a nuclear option is too costly and the benefits too small. Accordingly, after some unsuccessful efforts to build a nuclear weapons program in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Egyptian leaders abandoned this strategy.

Instead, the Egyptians have pursued several other options that might improve their security and enhance their national prestige. These include building a strong conventional weapons capability and championing the call for making the entire Middle East a nuclear-weapons-free zone. Furthermore, Egyptian leaders have always asserted that they would acquire nuclear weapons if the need arises.

Several factors can explain Egypt's failure to acquire nuclear weapons in the decade prior to the 1967 war. In addition to economic constraints and lack of technological infrastructure, the Egyptian leadership had never made the strong commitment necessary to carry out such a huge undertaking. Human and financial resources have never been adequately mobilized to achieve this goal.

Finally, foreign powers rejected Egypt's request to buy nuclear devices. Furthermore, the foreign assistance Egypt received from Russia in the early 1960s was not adequate to lay the foundation for a vibrant nuclear program. Acknowledging these hurdles, Egypt decided to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in July 1968, hoping to put pressure on Israel to follow suit. Egypt, however, delayed ratifying the NPT as leverage in arms-reduction negotiations in the Middle East. After making peace with Israel and adopting a pro-Western foreign policy, the Egyptian leadership decided to ratify the treaty in February 1981. This step was also taken to enhance the country's chances of receiving foreign technology needed to expand its civilian nuclear program. Despite its accession to the NPT, Egypt's access to foreign nuclear technology remained limited, suggesting that other reasons may have been behind the slow progress in the country's nuclear program. Lack of funding and safety concerns in the aftermath of the 1979 Three Mile Island accident in the United States and the 1986 Chernobyl accident in the Soviet Union were cited as reasons for the slow down.

The discussion of Egypt's nuclear program suggests three conclusions. First, despite acceding to the NPT, Egypt has refused to join the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and has been a vocal opponent of its Additional Protocol on the ground that it imposes more restrictions on peaceful nuclear programs. Egypt has been strongly critical of the international community, and particularly the United States, for not exerting pressure on Israel to join the NPT. Second, although Cairo has had a peaceful nuclear program since the mid-1950s, it has achieved very modest progress. Its nuclear infrastructure and capabilities remain limited. Third, in the mid-2000s there were allegations that the Pakistani nuclear scientist Abd al-Qader Khan visited

Egypt on several occasions and reports of clandestine nuclear cooperation between Egypt and Libya. None of these allegations has been substantiated. There are no indications that Egypt has violated any of the obligations it has undertaken as a signatory of the NPT.

Nuclear Proliferation: Saudi Arabia

Despite the fact that no evidence points to Saudi acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, some analysts argue that the kingdom has both the strategic incentive and the financial capability to pursue a nuclear option.[8] Saudi Arabia is an important player in the volatile gulf region and the broader Middle East, and powerful neighbors have the capability to threaten Saudi national security. In short, Saudi Arabia is rich and vulnerable. Under these circumstances, nuclear weapons would deter aggression and provide Riyadh with a retaliatory capability if this aggression ultimately materializes. Saudi Arabia's stand on major nonproliferation treaties is mixed. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia, like most Middle Eastern states, signed the Chemical Weapons Convention in January 1993 and ratified it in August 1996; signed the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention in April 1972 and ratified it a month later; and signed the NPT in July 1968 and ratified it in August 1970.[9] On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has not signed the CTBT. In June 2005, Saudi Arabia signed the Small Quantities Protocol. The protocol allows states considered to be of low risk to "opt out of more intensive inspection regimes in return for a declaration of their nuclear activities."[10] The protocol also allows signatories to possess a small quantity of natural or depleted uranium and plutonium.

Two geostrategic characteristics have played a significant role in shaping Saudi Arabia's security environment. First, the kingdom is the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula and one of the largest in the Middle East. This vast country, however, is mostly uninhabited sandy desert; indeed, the Saudi population is smaller than that of its rivals in the gulf region — Iran and Iraq. Second, with approximately 25 percent of the world's proven oil reserves, the kingdom is by far the dominant power in the global energy market. The combination of these two characteristics suggests that the kingdom is seriously vulnerable to threats from its more populated, but less affluent neighbors (Iran and Iraq).

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[8] See, for example, Yana Feldman, "Country Profile: Saudi Arabia," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, www.sipri.org/research/disarmament/nuclear/researchissues/past_projects/issues_of_concern/saudi_arabia/saudi_arabia_default, accessed 9 January 2011; Michael A. Levi, "Would the Saudis Go Nuclear?" *New Republic*, 2 June 2003; Roula Khalaf, Farhan Bokhari, and Stephen Fidler, "Saudi Cash Joins Forces with Nuclear Pakistan," *Financial Times*, 4 August 2004.

[9] Dany Shoham, "Does Saudi Arabia Have or Seek Chemical or Biological Weapons?" *Nonproliferation Review* 6, no. 3 (Spring–Summer 1999): 127.

[10] For more information, see the Center for Defense Information's Web site at www.cdi.org.

Saudi Arabia and Iran

Saudi Arabia and Iran are two major Middle Eastern states located on opposite sides of the gulf. The nature of the relations between Riyadh and Tehran — rivalry versus cooperation — has always had a significant impact on the security of the entire Middle East. The two nations share important similarities and have differences that have shaped their relations for the past several decades. These include foreign policy orientation, Islam, oil, regional security, Iraq, and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

First, under the regime of Iran's Mohammed Pahlavi, both Riyadh and Tehran shared similar foreign policy and security orientations. The two nations were close allies of the United States and together sought to contain Soviet penetration of the Middle East and resist radical Arab nationalism led by Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Despite this close cooperation, Saudi Arabia was always "suspicious of the Shah and never endorsed any formal security system with him."[11] Second, while Saudi Arabia is a leading Sunni state, the birthplace of Islam, and the site of Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities in Islam, Iran claims the leadership of Shiite Islam. During most of the 1980s, leaders on both sides questioned each other's religious credentials.

Third, Riyadh is the world's leading oil producer and exporter and the leading holder of excess oil-production capacity. Tehran holds the world's second-largest natural gas and second-largest oil reserves and enjoys a geostrategic location between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Saudi Arabia and Iran are the largest and second-largest oil producers in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), respectively. The two nations, along with Iraq, Kuwait, and Venezuela, created OPEC in 1960 to defend their interests as major oil-producing countries. Since then, Saudi and Iranian oil policies have not always been identical. Fourth, Riyadh and Tehran have pursued different strategies on a number of regional issues, such as the dispute between the latter and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over three islands—the Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa. These three islands are located in the gulf between Iran and the UAE, and each of them claims sovereignty over the islands. For the past several years the leaders of the UAE have successfully sought the backing of the GCC and the Arab League against Iran on this matter.

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[11] Gwenn Okruhlik, "Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations: External Rapprochement and Internal Consolidation," *Middle East Policy* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 115.

Fifth, neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran recognizes Israel and both have close relations with Palestinian organizations, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. While the Saudis have declared their willingness to normalize relations with Tel Aviv if Israel withdraws from Arab territories it occupied in the 1967 War and allows the establishment of a Palestinian state, the Iranians have adopted a more militant stand.

To sum up, the record of Saudi-Iranian relations is mixed. The two nations agree on some issues but strongly disagree on others. Since the mid-1990s, relations between Riyadh and Tehran have substantially improved and a military confrontation between them is unlikely. Still, the Saudis are alarmed by Iran's growing status and influence in the region as a result of developments in neighboring Iraq.

Saudi Arabia and Iraq

For most of their history, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq have been characterized by mutual hostility and suspicion. Originally, relations were shaped by the rivalry between the Al Saud and the Hashemite ruling families in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, respectively. This rivalry continued until officers in the Iraqi army carried out a coup d'état and overthrew the Iraqi monarchy in 1958. The removal of the Hashemite dynasty from power in Baghdad, however, did not improve relations with Saudi Arabia. Indeed, relations went from bad to worse due to the radical stand the successive Iraqi regimes adopted from 1958 until the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in March 2003.

Five parameters have shaped tense relations between Riyadh and Baghdad for most of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. First, successive Iraqi governments adopted radical nationalist and leftist agendas in both domestic and foreign policies. Iraqi leaders allied themselves with the Soviet Union and sought to champion Arab unity. Iraq signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Moscow in 1972 and provided financial and political support to revolutionary leftist movements to overthrow conservative Arab governments in the 1960s and 1970s. Second, Iraq has been one of the strongest Arab opponents of the Jewish state since its creation in 1948. The Saudi stand on the Arab-Israeli conflict has been more flexible, and since 1980 Riyadh has proposed a broad regional settlement of the conflict that would include recognition of Israel.

Third, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran represented a serious challenge to both Saudi Arabia and Iraq and provided them with a common enemy. Both Riyadh and Baghdad were concerned about the impact the Iranian revolution would have on their Shiite populations. The Iran-Iraq War was meant, at least partly, to neutralize the "Iranian threat." Arab states on the gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, provided massive financial and political support to Iraq during its war with Iran. Fourth, the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 pushed Iraqi relations with most of the Arab world to a new low. The Saudi army participated in the war to liberate Kuwait, and Iraqi missiles hit targets in the kingdom. In the following twelve years, US and British planes flew out of military bases in Saudi Arabia to monitor the no-fly zone in southern Iraq.

Fifth, the 2003 war in Iraq provided the Saudis with both opportunities and challenges. The removal of Saddam Hussein and the prospects of a stable Iraq rejoining the international community are both developments that would contribute to regional stability and would be welcomed by Saudi Arabia as well as the rest of the world. However, the reconstruction of the Iraqi political system and the empowering of the Iraqi Shiites have been viewed with a great deal of suspicion in Riyadh. Indeed, the post-2003 Shiite-led governments in Baghdad have not had warm relations with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and Yemen

Yemen is the most populous and second largest country (after Saudi Arabia) on the Arabian Peninsula. It occupies a strategic location on the Strait of Bab al-Mandab. The strait connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, one of the world's most active shipping lanes. Closure of Bab al-Mandab could keep tankers from the Gulf of Aden from reaching the Suez Canal and the Sumed pipeline complex and divert them around the southern tip of Africa (the Cape of Good Hope). This would add greatly to transit time and cost. Yemen's strategic significance is further enhanced by the location of its deep-water port of Aden. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen have not always been good and have reflected both regional polarization and domestic changes within Yemen. In the early 1980s, the two countries were engaged in a series of border clashes that led to the signing of the Treaty of Taif, which delineated parts of their shared border. Yemen has long contested Saudi Arabia's claim of three Red Sea islands and parts of the Empty Quarter, a vast desert region with potentially lucrative oil deposits. Border disputes between the two nations increased concurrently with the rise of Yemeni proven oil reserves and production. In June 2000 they signed an agreement to end these border disputes.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and Yemen's sympathy for Saddam Hussein represented one of the lowest points in relations between Riyadh and Sanaa. As a result, hundreds of thousands of expatriate Yemeni workers were expelled from Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s. The annual remittances these workers sent home were the single largest source of Yemen's foreign exchange.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Yemen's president Ali Abdullah Saleh allied his country with the United States in the war on terror. Saudi efforts to contain militant Islam have brought Riyadh and Sanaa closer. The long borders between the two countries, economic dependence, and Yemen's strategic location suggest that developments in Yemen will always be of great concern to Saudi national security. Riyadh played an important role in supporting Sanaa in 2009–10 fighting against insurgents in the north.

The analysis of regional security threats to Saudi Arabia suggests three conclusions. First, for the past several decades Saudi Arabia has been involved in some military clashes with its neighbors. Furthermore, internal developments in Iran, Iraq, and Yemen have influenced domestic stability in the kingdom. Still, these regional challenges do not pose an existential threat to Saudi Arabia. Second, confronting new security parameters in the aftermath of the 2003 war in Iraq, the Saudi leaders have sought to enhance their country's and the region's security by consolidating security ties with other members in the GCC and engaging Iran, Iraq, and Yemen. Third, despite some crucial disagreements with US policy in the Middle East, relations with the United States remain a fundamental pillar in Saudi foreign and security policies.

Analysts of Saudi Arabia's security policy must consider a number of issues related to potential Saudi nuclear ambition. If Riyadh were to consider a nuclear option, it arguably would likely buy a nuclear device, not build one. This scenario is based on the fact that, unlike North Korea, Saudi Arabia has the financial resources to purchase a nuclear bomb. Furthermore, buying instead of building would save the kingdom from potential preemptive strikes on its nuclear facilities. Pakistan is often mentioned as the most likely seller since it created a so-called Islamic-bomb. There are no "Christian" or "Jewish" bombs. Pakistan made the bomb to counter its archenemy India, and is not likely to sell it to any other country. Simply stated, since the dawn of the nuclear age in 1945, experience has shown that nuclear weapons are not for sale.

The Israeli approach to acquiring nuclear weapons capability has been mentioned as a potential model for the Saudis to follow. Despite Israel's close ties to the United States, it decided to create nuclear weapons. There are many differences, however, between the Israeli and the Saudi cases. A fundamental one is the existential threat the Israeli leaders perceived to their country. As the analysis in this essay indicates, Saudi Arabia does not face such a threat.

Some analysts assume that the Saudi military is no match for the Iranian or Iraqi armies. Richard Russell asserts that Saudi Arabia is "destined to fall short of conventional military parity with Baghdad and Tehran."[12] Similarly, Thomas Lippman argues that the Saudi armed forces "could not defend their country against an all-out assault by Iran or Iraq."[13] These assertions overestimate Iranian and Iraqi military power and underestimate the Saudi's. Assuming that an Iranian or Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia is a realistic scenario (highly unlikely), indigenous Saudi military power and resistance should not be ruled out. True, Iran has made great progress in building its military capability, but for possible assistance from Russia, China, North Korea, and a few other countries, Iran is restrained by limited military cooperation with the rest of the world. Iraq has a long way to go to rebuild its armed forces. The main mission for the newly created Iraqi army is to fight insurgents, not to invade another country. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has few restrictions, if any, on its arms deals.

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[12] Richard L. Russell, "A Saudi Nuclear Option?" *Survival* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 71.

Finally, US commitments to defend Saudi Arabia against external threats are solid and are not likely to weaken in the foreseeable future. The unofficial US-Saudi alliance is built on shared interests. Saudi oil is crucial to the prosperity of the American and world economies, and oil is projected to remain the main source of energy in the next few decades.

Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East: What Lies Ahead?

The analysis in this essay focuses on a fundamental question: How would Arab countries react to a nuclear Iran? Obviously, any attempt to predict the behavior of a nuclear Iran would be speculative. Still, it is important to underscore key security facts. The value of nuclear weapons needs to be reassessed. With its presumed nuclear capability, Israel was not able to bring the 2006 war against Hezbollah to a decisive end. Furthermore, for most of the second half of the twentieth century the Arab-Israeli conflict was the prominent feature of the Middle East. Despite frequent military confrontations with Israel and claims of Arab leadership, Egypt has refused or failed to engage in a nuclear arms race with the Jewish state. A war between Iran and either Egypt or Saudi Arabia (or any other Arab country) is highly unlikely. Finally, both Cairo and Riyadh enjoy very close security and strategic ties with the

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[13] Thomas W. Lippman, "Saudi Arabia: The Calculations of Uncertainty," in *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices*, ed. Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 126.

United States. Washington is strongly committed to the security of its Arab allies. In recent years the United States has agreed to sell missile defense systems to a number of Persian Gulf states.

To sum up, an Iran with nuclear weapons capability is likely to further destabilize the Middle East, but it is not likely to ignite a regional nuclear arms race.

A Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East: Myth or a Reality?

Gawdat Bahgat

Since the early 2000s Iran's nuclear program has been a major focus of international and regional policy. Many policy makers and scholars have expressed their concern that if Iran "goes nuclear" other Middle Eastern countries, particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, will follow suit. This author argues against this conventional wisdom. As a NATO member, Turkey is a special case. The analysis suggests that security is the main reason why countries pursue nuclear weapons. Egypt and Saudi Arabia (along with other Arab countries) have learned how to live with a perceived nuclear Israel. Iran with a nuclear capability, if it happens, would not pose a security threat to either Cairo or Riyadh. In short, the author argues that an Iran with nuclear capability will further destabilize the Middle East and will be a negative development, but it is not likely to make Egypt and Saudi Arabia "go nuclear."

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