commentaries

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The Perils of the US-Saudi Nuclear Deal

by Riccardo Alcaro

- The recently announced US-Saudi civilian nuclear cooperation deal is meant to serve US strategic and commercial interests by keeping Saudi Arabia within the US nuclear orbit and generating major contracts for American companies.
- By possibly allowing uranium enrichment and moving away from established international verification standards, the deal risks weakening the global non-proliferation regime and setting a precedent that other nuclear suppliers may follow.
- The deal may further complicate efforts to end the war with Iran by strengthening Tehran's negotiating position, making a new US-Iran nuclear agreement harder to achieve and prolonging instability in the Gulf.

The newly announced **civil nuclear cooperation deal** between the United States and Saudi Arabia has stirred a heated debate. The initiative offers strategic advantages to both parties. However, it also raises concerns about its implications for the international non-proliferation regime as well as for its potential to further 'entrap' US foreign policy in Middle Eastern geopolitics and in the never-ending contest with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Any assessment of the deal should start with the caveat that there is much we do not know about its contents, as in typical Trumpian style the US Administration's communication is short on details. The agreement should eventually result in the building of nuclear power plants in Saudi Arabia and generate contracts worth billions of dollars for the US nuclear industry, in particular Westinghouse.

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The US government seems ready – though there is still much confusion about the point – to allow Saudi Arabia to develop a full fuel cycle nuclear industry, thus including the capability to enrich uranium. Enrichment is traditionally regarded as the most sensitive part of a nuclear programme because of its dual nature: while a low level of enrichment is needed to fabricate the fuel for nuclear reactors, a higher level leads to the production of the fissile material for a warhead.

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Another point of contention concerns the adequacy of the mechanisms to verify the solely peaceful nature of a nuclear programme. The text of the deal that was made public makes no mention of decades-old and well-tested international verification mechanisms. These are usually included in the civilian nuclear cooperation packages offered by the United States under the so-called '**123 agreements**' (the name derives from the corresponding section of the 1954 Atomic Energy Act, which regulates the matter). Instead, it only speaks of yet-to-be-defined bilateral arrangements. The deal thus constitutes a step (or two) back from the nuclear cooperation agreement the United States struck with the United Arab Emirates in 2009, generally considered the **gold standard** of such arrangements due to the Emirates agreeing not to enrich on their soil.

In the eyes of the US Administration the deal serves at least three goals. First, it secures lucrative contracts for US companies. Second, it eliminates the risk that Saudi Arabia turns to alternative suppliers of civilian nuclear technology, namely Russia or China, which would deprive the United States not only of financial returns but also of a degree of control over Saudi nuclear activities. Third, the deal should restore some trust in the Trump Administration in Riyadh, irked by President Donald Trump's disregard for its security interests when he launched the war against Iran.

Probably, the US Administration also hopes that the agreement restarts the normalisation process with Israel that Saudi Arabia had frozen after the destruction of Gaza by Israel following Hamas' 7 October 2023 attack. In fact, in a **Truth Social post** released after the deal had been announced President Trump insisted that one depended on the other while also making clear that no enrichment would be involved. Whether this reflects the terms agreed with the Saudis remains very much in doubt, as the text published by the US Department of Energy does not mention the normalisation accords with Israel known as the Abraham Accords.

The re-consolidation of the historically close relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, combined with the multi-billion **business deals** between the Saudi dynasty and Trump's family (most notably his son-in-law Jared Kushner) should provide assurances against any military diversion of the Saudi nuclear programme. Indeed, proliferation risks are close to non-existent at the moment given that the Saudis do not have much to gain from building a nuclear arsenal, even more so against the wishes of the United States.

Things may change in the future, however. The Islamic Republic of Iran, still enmeshed in a war with no end in sight, might eventually decide that the time has come to build a nuclear arsenal as a deterrent. Should that happen, the Saudis would have strong incentives to emulate their rivals across the Persian Gulf. Courtesy of the deal with the United States, they would have at least some of the capabilities and know-how needed. To curb Saudi ambitions, the US government could feel compelled to extend to Riyadh binding security guarantees, thereby conditioning US foreign policy on the alliance with a foreign country with a distinct strategic outlook. Nor can it be ruled out that a future Saudi government drifts away from the United States or that the House of Saud could be replaced by anti-American forces, however remote that possibility may seem today. Were that to happen, the new Saudi government would find at home a nuclear programme built thanks to US aid, as was the case with the Islamic Republic that replaced the rule of the pro-US shah of Iran Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in 1979.

The potential spill-over of insecurity of the US-Saudi nuclear deal is not limited to such long-term and frankly still speculative scenarios. The deal sets a worrying precedent of a civilian nuclear cooperation arrangement in which verification standards are agreed bilaterally rather than on the basis of internationally recognised standards. Russia and China, which so far have broadly abided by those standards, would be tempted to follow the US lead in devising special arrangements with their customers. In theory, nothing prevents bespoke agreements from including stringent non-proliferation clauses. But the emergence of a patchwork of different arrangements would undoubtedly weaken the international non-proliferation regime, whose authority and legitimacy ultimately lie in its universalistic nature.

Equally troubling is the potential impact of the US-Saudi deal on the ongoing war in the Gulf, which President Trump continues to attributes to Iran's nuclear ambitions. Even though the June 2025 US-Israeli bombing campaign seriously damaged Iran's nuclear programme, it remains **active** and could still be weaponised. Any prospect for lasting peace therefore depends on a new nuclear agreement between Washington and Tehran. If a renewed ceasefire – a big 'if' indeed given the ongoing military escalation – were to lead to a negotiation, the Iranians would consider the terms of the US-Saudi deal as the baseline.

Iran's position on uranium enrichment would not be affected, as it has long made clear that mastering the entire fuel cycle is a non-negotiable red line. But the deal would certainly shape Iran's expectations of how far limits to its enrichment work – something it has always been open to – can extend and how intrusive the inspection regime would be. In a nutshell, Iran would hardly agree to anything less than the Saudis have obtained. Since the Trump Administration is unlikely to make significant concessions, especially on the enrichment front, there is a case for arguing that the US-Saudi deal may put insurmountable obstacles on the already very steep path towards a US-Iranian nuclear agreement.

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No doubt this is a matter of little concern to some in Washington, who see the deal with the Saudis as a step towards recreating a US- and Israeli-led coalition whose ultimate goal remains the destabilisation of the Islamic Republic. The deal with Riyadh was, after all, announced just a few days after a **meeting** between the heads of Mossad and the Central Intelligence Agency. On the very same day, the US House of Representatives narrowly approved a **measure** providing for unprecedented levels of integration between the US and Israeli defence industrial bases as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2027. Taken together, these developments may well be viewed in Tehran as further proof of President Trump's fundamental unreliability and susceptibility to pressure from those in the United States, Israel and elsewhere who believe there can be no alternative to a regime-change policy towards the Islamic Republic. As a result, Iran's stance is likely to become even more rigid and uncompromising.

Sure, there is no certainty that the US Administration really sees the Saudi Arabia deal as part of a grand plan. It is entirely plausible that the logic behind the deal reflects less ultra-hawkish geopolitical considerations than they do the single-minded pursuit by Trump of deals from which he can profit financially and politically. In addition, Congress may reject the deal with the Saudis, which would weaken Trump's hands even if he could still exercise his veto power to make the deal happen anyway. Finally, there is no guarantee that the House's version of the NDAA will pass the Senate's test, as **protests** against the perceived merger of the US and Israeli industrial complexes are mounting on the grounds that it would amount to an unacceptable limitation of US sovereignty.

But all this may well be beside the point. Whether the result of a grand strategy or more transactional instincts, the US-Saudi nuclear deal has more dark sides than bright ones. It risks weakening non-proliferation norms, extending further the range of US military obligations, and reducing further the already slim chances of a US-Iranian nuclear deal. The deal is therefore likely to tie the United States even more closely to a region from which strategic common sense suggests it should disengage in order to focus on the more consequential challenge posed by China.

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