Prospects for Proliferation in Saudi Arabia

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Speculation regarding the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been percolating for at least several decades. To date, there is no reliable evidence that any attempt has been made to either purchase such weapons or to begin a process to produce them. In addition, most of the speculation has been made by observers who either have little understanding of the KSA beyond the headlines or have an ideological ax to grind—or both.

While there remains a possibility of Saudi Arabian proliferation—no matter how remote as viewed at present—the decision to take that path is made difficult by both the complicated structure of Saudi society and politics (which runs contrary to popular wisdom) and the complex matrix of variables that the Saudi leadership must consider. While some of these are purely political, a rich variety of cultural determinants also factor in the mix.

Regarding KSA intent, a number of fundamental points need to be kept in mind. First, although the kingdom is an authoritarian monarchy with ultimate power resting with the king, various actors within KSA possess a variety of contributory roles and carry variable importance and weight in any debate over Saudi domestic and foreign policies, including nuclearization. Decisionmaking in KSA is tightly controlled within a small central

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elite and public input is limited to diffused perception of public opinion, generally through traditional filtered means. There is no single view or homogeneity of opinion on many issues. Furthermore, leadership, elite, and public opinion may evidence opposing viewpoints. The multiplicity of issues bearing on nuclear attitudes is likely to make KSA decisionmaking unclear. With regard to the impact on the United States, it should be noted that for some years, KSA-US relations have been strong and troubled at the same time. This underlying factor introduces ambiguity into relations as well as lessens the range of options available regarding a single issue.

Background on Saudi Nuclear Interest

Contentions that the KSA has been developing nuclear capability, including delivery systems, geared particularly toward weapons capability can be dated back more than 30 years. A key assumption in these allegations relates to the kingdom's purchase a quarter of a century ago of Chinese missiles. KSA acquired some 50–60 CSS-2 "East Wind" ballistic missiles from China about 1987. These were theoretically nuclear-capable but they had been modified to carry non-nuclear warheads. Their purchase and installation were kept completely secret, especially from the United States. A strongly worded American official complaint provoked Saudi reaction, ending with the US ambassador to Riyadh Hume Horan being declared *persona non grata*.

One of the earliest of the contentions that KSA was seeking nuclear capability occurred in 1994 when KSA diplomat Muhammad al-Khilawi sought asylum in the United States with allegations that KSA had been seeking to share Iraqi nuclear technology for 20 years and that in the 1970s KSA had bankrolled the Pakistani bomb project. Additional documents asserted by Khilawi claimed that KSA had tried to buy nuclear reactors from China. He subsequently claimed that KSA had two undeclared research reactors but offered no proof. Khilawi's allegations were never backed up by hard evidence.[1]

Then in 1999, according to journalist Simon Henderson, the KSA's minister of defense Prince Sultan bin 'Abd al-'Aziz allegedly visited Pakistan's Kahuta uranium enrichment and missile assembly factory. This was said to prompt a formal diplomatic complaint from the United States.[2] A few years later (2003), Britain's *Guardian* newspaper reported that KSA was carrying out a strategic review, including the acquisition of nuclear

weapons, in response to allegations of an Iranian nuclear program. Options being considered were said (1) to acquire a nuclear capability as a deterrent, (2) to maintain or enter into an alliance with an existing nuclear power that would offer protection, and (3) to try to reach a regional agreement on having a nuclear-free Middle East.[3]

Around the same time, journalist Arnaud de Borchgrave reported that KSA and Pakistan had concluded a secret agreement providing KSA with nuclear weapons technology in exchange for cheap oil. This was said to be arranged by Crown Prince 'Abdullah during his 2003 trip to Islamabad and President George H.W. Bush was said to have confronted Pakistan's prime minister, Pervez Musharraf, over the Saudi nuclear issue at Camp David in the same year. The allegation was denied by both the US and Saudi Arabian governments.[4] It should be noted that many of these allegations were made or promoted by individuals and organizations that were hostile to KSA, and thus their veracity is of considerable doubt.

In 2005, reports surfaced that the KSA was about to sign a "small-quantity protocol" with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that would restrict IAEA inspections of the kingdom's nuclear status. Although the protocol had been arranged for many developing countries, the United States sought to persuade the KSA to withdraw their protocol request and to submit to independent verification of its nuclear status on a voluntary basis. Riyadh declined and its request was approved. This attention emerged despite the fact that there still was no evidence that Riyadh was indeed pursuing a nuclear weapons strategy of any sort.[5]

These reports circulated at a time when it became known that KSA was in fact interested in pursuing a nuclear energy program, as was the case with a number of other Arab states. Indeed, the kingdom had established an Atomic Energy Research Institute as early as 1988.[6] The KSA joined the IAEA's board of governors on 20 September 2007 and the KSA and the United States signed a memorandum of understanding on civil nuclear energy cooperation on 16 May 2008.[7]

Hints that the kingdom was continuing its interest in civil nuclear energy continued through the following years. The KSA minister of water and electricity declared in 2009 that the kingdom was thinking about building a pilot plant, apparently with French assistance. Nevertheless, the realization of any plans remained a long time off.[8] To this end, nuclear cooperation agreements were signed with the United States (2008), South Korea (2011), China (2012), and Jordan (2014) and discussions were underway with another six to eight countries.

In the midst of this more general concern about nuclear energy and possible weaponization, fears that Iran was seeking to produce nuclear weapons acquired prominent attention. Saudi Arabia has been one of the most vocal opponents of Iran's acquisition of such weapons and this factor has in turn raised concern about Saudi intentions. These were stoked by the comments in 2011 of Prince Turki al-Faysal, a former Saudi head of intelligence and ambassador and the brother of the then-foreign minister:

> We are committed to a Middle East Zone Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction, but if our efforts and the efforts of the world community fail to bring about the dismantling of the Israeli arsenals of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the prevention of Iran acquiring the same by failing to construct such a Zone, then why shouldn't we at least, and as a duty toward our nations and our peoples, study, seriously, all of the available options, including acquiring WMDs so that future generations will not blame us for neglecting any course of action that will keep looming dangers away from us?[9]

This led *The Times* of London shortly afterward to declare that the KSA planned, in case of an Iranian nuclear test, to immediately launch a twin-track nuclear weapons program by purchasing weapons and converting its civil nuclear program, with hints of upgrading the kingdom's aging Chinese missiles.[10] Two years later, the BBC reported on the possibilities that the KSA had arranged with Pakistan to hold nuclear weapons for release to the KSA on demand, together with rumors that Pakistan had delivered Shaheen mobile ballistic missiles to KSA but without warheads. The BBC followed up its story by declaring that the KSA embassy in London had refused to deny the story while lamenting the failure of the UN to make the Middle East a nuclear-free area [read Iran] and warning that the "lack of international action has put the region under the threat of a time bomb that cannot be refused by manoeuvring around it."[11] Saudi concerns were echoed by the words of Prince Turki al-Faysal in South Korea in 2015: "Whatever the Iranians have, we will have, too." This was said to be same message given to President Obama at Camp David.[12] Jamal Khashoggi, a well-known and connected Saudi journalist, added that "I think Saudi Arabia would seriously try to get the bomb if Iran did. It's just like India and Pakistan. The Pakistanis said for years they didn't want one, but when India got it, so did they."[13]

The effect of the Iran nuclear threat was to spur the KSA into more focused action regarding nuclear energy. Multinational discussions with Iran renewed KSA frustration with the "stalled" 123 nuclear agreement with United States, which had been foundering on US insistence on forbidding the KSA to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium. As an apparent consequence, the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KA-CARE) announced a deal with Russia for help in building the 16 nuclear reactors.[14] In another seeming signal of Riyadh's intention to develop alternative nuclear arrangements, a letter of intent was signed with France just a few days later on 24 June for the construction of two nuclear reactors, as part of a larger arms deal.[15]

All of this material fed into Saudi—and Gulf—reactions to the signing of the JCPOA. A report out of Russia claimed that the KSA might be the first foreign purchaser of a Russian missile system capable of carrying nuclear warheads.[16] According to the *New York Times*, before the May 2015 Camp David summit with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leaders, the KSA indicated that it wanted a formal "defense treaty with the US pledging to defend them if they came under external attack."[17] Jamal Khashoggi contended that oil exports would immunize the KSA from any international pressure over nuclear plans.[18] Abdullah Al Shayji of Kuwait University wrote that the Iran deal "will not calm our fears. On the contrary it could be even more a destabilizing factor in our region. GCC states need to forcefully make the argument and insist that their fears and skepticism should be addressed both strategically and militarily."[19] In large part, the Gulf fears of Iranian nuclear intentions formed just one aspect of a larger threat perception. As a Saudi columnist wrote, "Probably the most important question is whether our problem with Iran is limited to the nuclear deal. Many feel that the problem has its roots in Iran's political policies in the region. Tehran seems to insist on intervening in internal Arab affairs and inciting sectarianism in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen."[20] The Gulf worried in particular about the absence from the JCPOA of any mention of missile systems. This was expressed at the US-GCC foreign ministers summit in August 2015, when the six states endorsed the JCPOA deal.[21] This was thought to be in return for additional military equipment, especially missile defense systems. There has been some fear that KSA aggressiveness in its campaign in Yemen (assisted by four of the five other GCC members) is a direct result of its perception of Iranian interference in Yemen and its encirclement of the GCC.

Saudi and Gulf reactions in turn fueled American concerns over possible Saudi intentions. For many, Saudi comments constituted a blustering intended to force America's hand vis-à-vis Iran. For example, former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in an August 2015 speech that the Iran deal "will provoke other countries in the region to pursue equivalent nuclear capabilities, almost certainly Saudi Arabia."[22] The discussion reached a nadir, however, with a silly column by Fareed Zakaria in the *Washington Post* that snorted "Oh, please! Saudi Arabia cannot build a nuclear weapon. Saudi Arabia has not even built a car ... Saudi Arabia can dig holes in the ground and pump out oil but little else."[23]

The JCPOA was certainly a major spur driving King Salman to Washington in September for talks with President Obama, only a few months after he had declined an invitation to join his fellow GCC rulers at Camp David. During the meeting, the JCPOA and Iranian activities in the Middle East were prominent topics of discussion, along with the situation in Yemen and Syria, terrorism, Lebanon, global climate change, and bilateral relations—but seemingly remained a low-key topic. Obama's only spoken reference to the JCPOA came in his opening remarks: "We'll discuss the importance of effectively implementing the deal to ensure that Iran does not have a nuclear weapon while counteracting its destabilizing activities in the region." King Salman did not mention Iran in response. The joint statement was similarly low-key: "The two parties affirmed the need to continue efforts to maintain security, prosperity and stability in the region and in particular to counter Iran's destabilizing activities. In this regard, King Salman expressed his support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5 + 1 countries, which once fully implemented will prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and thereby enhance security in the region."[24] The downplaying of the issue may have been due to such factors as Obama's difficulty in getting Congressional approval for the deal, the KSA's acquiescence already (as signaled in the earlier GCC approval), the US sweetening the sting by offering new arms deals and assistance to the KSA in Yemen, and US silence on domestic reforms in the KSA.

An interesting development was the seeming emergence of a tacit alliance between the KSA and Israel regarding the Iranian threat. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasized Arab opposition as an argument against Congressional approval of the Iran deal, suggesting a new front of common interests between Israel, the KSA, Egypt, and

Jordan. However, any movement beyond common rhetoric seems unlikely as long as Israeli-Palestinian relations remain unsettled.[25]

Saudi Perceptions of Threat and of the United States as Partner

Threats Through the Saudi Perceptual Lens

While there would be multiple rationales behind any Saudi impetus to acquire nuclear capability, undoubtedly the principal driver would be the panoply of external threats that the kingdom perceives surrounding it in what has been referred to as an encirclement syndrome. Some perceived threats are regarded as more serious than others. Security perceptions are inevitably colored by the defensive nature of the Saudi regime's attitude. KSA leaders and elites display an easily provoked prickliness about a wide range of issues. Reasons for this may include the fact that the KSA was never colonized and so retains a strong sense of unfettered independence. At the same time, its religious origins—in particular the puritanical Wahhabi or *salafi* interpretation of Islam—combine with its guardianship of Islam's Holy Places to provide the KSA—in self-perception—with an unchallengeable voice of legitimacy. This may lead to actions that on the surface may appear high-risk or even counter-productive. Examples include the secret purchase of Chinese missiles in the 1980s, economic threats to Britain whenever a dispute arises over treatment of British citizens in the KSA, or the KSA's lobbying for a seat on the UN Security Council and then abruptly rejecting it when offered.

Yemen has long been seen as a source of insecurity and the KSA has taken the lead in the fighting there. But the nature of the threat is more one of spreading instability and the influx of Yemenis seeking work as well as radicals and terrorists; it is not an existential threat. Nor is that true of the Horn of Africa, another source of worry; particularly Somalia's fragmentation and Eritrea's weakness.

To the northeast, Israel has been a source of worry for more than a half-century due to the continued antagonism resulting from the never-ending Arab-Israeli conflict. The KSA opposes Israel's occupation of the West Bank and decries its treatment of Palestinians. Mutual antagonisms persist because of (from the Saudi point of view) the gradual shift in Israeli politics to the right, personified in the leadership of Ariel Sharon and now

Benjamin Netanyahu, with its rejection of a Palestinian state, unwillingness to share Jerusalem, and continued strife with Palestinians in occupied territories. Beyond this, however, there is also a fear, no matter how sublimated, of the Israeli nuclear threat.

Still, the most serious threat perception by Riyadh (and its fellow GCC members), by far, is that posed by Iran. Officially expressed KSA concerns about Iran date back at least to the 1979 Iranian revolution but have intensified in the last four years. There are a number of layers to this concern, which is voiced particularly by Saudi elite but is also shared to a large extent by the country's citizenry. The most fundamental factor in the two countries' shared antipathy is probably the long cultural/political antagonism between Persians and Arabs, stretching beyond the Islamic era. There is a history of Persian expeditions to and occupation of territory on the Arab side of the Gulf that reverberates in the Arab popular imagination today and gives added emphasis to imagined Iranian designs on Bahrain and indignation at the extension of Iranian control over the disputed islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs near the entrance to the Gulf. The islands, along with final demarcation of the Iranian-Iraqi border, were the last boundary disputes between the two littorals, thus removing what had been a contentious subject.

Beyond that, the new Islamic Republic of Iran's revolutionary Islamist rhetoric and its actively threatening the status quo in the Gulf and the Middle East complicated Arab perceptions in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. Sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shi'ah had always existed but were of relatively minimal significance in the pre-1979 atmosphere. But the Iran-Iraq War deepened sectarian as well as political divisions and created Sunni popular suspicions of a Shi'ah expansion of influence and of indigenous Shi'ah elements of the population as a potential or real fifth-column. This was particularly true in the KSA, where the prevailing creed of Wahhabism reflected a deep antipathy to the heterodox Shi'i strain of Islam. Spontaneous outbursts of dissidence in the Shi'ah areas of the KSA's Eastern Province, inspired in 1979–1980 by the Iranian revolution, were put down with ferocity. The kingdom's long and deep hostility toward Shi'ism combines with a suspicion of Iranian imperialism in its antagonistic relations with its trans-Gulf neighbor.

In recent years, the hostility of the Iranian revolutionary regime toward Sunni Arab regimes—real and perceived—and support for dissident movements has pushed a quickening war of rhetoric. Apart from the hostilities in Syria, this rivalry was amplified in the Saudi-Iranian proxy war in

Yemen.[26] Saudi enmity reached a crescendo with its warnings about Iranian nuclear ambitions and Riyadh fought hard with Washington against the JCPOA agreement. But, failing to achieve their goal of disruption, the Saudis gamely acquiesced in its implementation, albeit while continuing to press for increased US defense arrangements.

A final driver revolves around an emerging intensification of the old encirclement fears, particularly as the immediate region seems to descend into chaos. Diffuse threats emanate from numerous sources, including both hostile states and even more hostile movements. The Huthis of Yemen and their allies are in the forefront of KSA foes at present but they are hardly capable of striking seriously at the kingdom—nor do they seem to have any desire to expand hostilities beyond defense of their home area. A far more potent threat is posed by Da'ish (also known as ISIS or ISIL) in Syria and Iraq. While a Da'ish assault on KSA territory does not seem likely, there is a real threat that has been partially realized already of Da'ish teams carrying out terrorist actions within the kingdom.

Contrary to much Western opinion, the KSA regards both al-Qa'idah and Da'ish as serious threats.[27] It follows that the greater the danger of extremism is to attracting Saudi youth—as well as the blowback to terrorist activities within the KSA—the more Saudi leadership will be inclined to act against extremist groups with whatever means at its disposal. Recent Saudi activism in the Yemen campaign might just possibly signal a greater resolve to act unilaterally against Da'ish centers in Syria and Iraq.

Following on from the perception of encirclement, the KSA can also be quite protective of the smaller Gulf States, an attitude engendered partly because it is vulnerable to a soft underbelly along the Gulf and even more because in Saudi eyes, these states should have been incorporated into the Third Saudi State but were prevented from doing so because of the British presence. This has led to KSA peremptory attitudes and pressure vis-à-vis its fellow GCC members (as well as taking such controversial stances as sending troops to Bahrain in the aftermath of the 2011 demonstrations). As a consequence of this overbearing attitude, the other five GCC members have generally been reticent to strengthen GCC political functions for fear that it would increase Saudi domination.

The above movements of course do not constitute a threat against which nuclear weapons capability would be of any use. But they do contribute to a broader and more diffuse uneasiness that more specific state-derived threats help to provoke. In this sense, Saudi perceptions of the general situation may parallel the Pakistani example: Islamabad's push to

create nuclear weapon capability seemed to be prompted generally by its perceived location in an uncertain neighborhood and specifically by Indian proliferation.

As remarked above, the KSA does have an ancillary desire and legitimate aspiration because of its expanding requirements for electricity and fuel for utilities to acquire nuclear energy facilities and has taken opening steps toward such an end. It is certainly not outside the realm of possibility that the kingdom might expand that goal to include nuclear weapons capability either overtly or covertly as a consequence of its perception of the direct and diffuse threats outlined above.

Perceptions of the United States

Real enemies or serious external threats from nearly all compass points are present and are perceived by the KSA as becoming increasingly serious. This fuels the citizenry's suspicion of outsiders and leads to widespread stereotypes. Northern Arabs are suspect because they believe themselves to be culturally superior, they are in the KSA only to earn money and leave, and they promote dangerous ideologies (secular radicalism in the past; Islamist extremism at present). Westerners are suspect because of lax morals and imperialist designs. Asian expatriates are perceived as being little more than menial laborers and threaten cultural contamination.

Attitudes to the United States are mixed. On the positive side, the two countries enjoy a long-standing economic partnership based on a number of key factors. The foundation factor was the exploitation of oil for decades by an American company that also played a pivotal role in early development; the company, although Saudiized, still exists as Saudi ARAMCO (Arabian-American Oil Company). The oil company connection was then strengthened by the development role of the US government from World War II on, first in providing loans when sorely needed and then through a wide range of development assistance. The two countries continued to share common interests in preserving the international oil structure and, as the KSA began to build a surplus from its oil revenues, it heavily invested it in US Treasury bonds. The KSA and the United States remain major trading partners.

More positive attitudes revolve around political and security cooperation. The United States and the KSA have tended to share worldviews: anti-Communism, anti-Islamist extremism, a laissez-faire global economy. For decades, the KSA has relied upon huge purchases of American

weapons and other military purchases of US goods and services. This is often seen as a quid pro quo for the extension of a US security umbrella over the kingdom and its GCC neighbors. It also includes the exchange of security and political information on common issues. But it is debatable whether these common outlooks would be strong enough to provide the KSA with sufficient assurance of security and to dissuade it from acquiring the bomb if it looks as though Iran did.

In some respects, a cultural affinity has developed as well. A voracious appetite exists for American media, fashion, fast food, and so on in Saudi Arabia. A pro-American attitude is commonly retained by many Saudis who have studied in the United States.

However, there are a multitude of negative reactions to the United States. These can be grouped into several clusters. One revolves around religious and moral objections. There is a deep belief among many or most Saudis that Western culture is immoral and does not respect the family (Saudi students en route to the United States receive lectures from religious figures on this subject, thus reinforcing the antipathy of some). Religiously conservative elements may display a disdain for non-Muslims. Anecdotal observation indicates that perceptions are widespread and growing that Americans are anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. These perceptions grow with the reaction of some Americans to every terrorist attack worldwide by expressing increased hostility toward Muslims in the United States, which is widely reported in the United States and the Middle East. Beyond that, there is a deep belief that the US acts as an imperialist power, imposing its will on others and carrying out policies that serve its interests while indiscriminately harming others.

Some of these attitudes relate more directly to security concerns and the belief that the United States is not a reliable partner in security matters. This can be expressed in the observation that when the going gets tough, the United States gets going—and the examples of American involvement in and then quick retreat from Lebanon, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan are brought up. Many Saudis remain strongly perturbed by the American-led invasion of Iraq, an act that devastated the country and put radical Shi'ah in power. More recently, the United States has failed to take effective action in Syria and seems to be content to allow Bashshar al-As'ad to remain in power. Finally, there is chafing over the impression that the United States regards the KSA as a very much junior partner and is not sufficiently attentive to the kingdom's needs and priorities.

More directly, there is frustration throughout most of Saudi society over core Middle East concerns. The United States is seen as not objective on Arab-Israeli matters. Second, the United States seems too willing to deal with Islamist (not extremist) movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Thirdly, the nuclear agreement with Iran threatens Saudi security directly and the United States' role in seeking it and accomplishing it demonstrates its indifference to Saudi concerns.

Key Players and Decisionmaking Norms

Decisionmakers

Clearly, the king is the actual decisionmaker, including in the nuclear arena. He has the final say in establishing all policies and his decisions cannot be challenged by anyone. But it is a mistake to call him, as is often done in the West, an absolute monarch. The Saudi monarchy is built on its tribal ethos, which in its pure form demands access, consultation, and feedback. Even though the KSA has evolved into an authoritarian monarchy, these principles still play a significant role in the modern state. The long-term legitimacy of the regime depends heavily on building and maintaining consensus on major issues. Of course, the value of such consensus varies on the importance of the constituent group with whom the king and his advisers interact.

Not surprisingly, the top-most and most important elite in consensus-building consists of the senior members of the royal family. Despite internal differences and rivalries, they form a corporate group that maintains the survival of the royal family and the regime. Their overriding credo may be said to be, in paraphrasing Benjamin Franklin's words, to hang together instead of hanging separately. Some individuals—such as those of the same mother (e.g., the so-called Sudayri Seven who produced Kings Fahd, 'Abdullah, and Salman) or sons (most notably recently, Muhammad b. Salman, son of present King Salman who has named him minister of defense and heir apparent)—may carry considerable weight with the king. Alternatively, internal rivalries within the family may isolate individuals, especially when combined with their personality. Pertinent examples include Talal b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (a son of the modern kingdom's founder but outspoken in the past and present) or Bandar b. Sultan (son of a late crown prince who served as the KSA's ambassador to the United States for more than a decade but has been banished to the political wilderness).[28]

Some mention also should be made of the role of the other members of the extensive royal family. Most do not hold government positions and many are engaged in commerce. They may not be actively involved in decisionmaking except for issues that involve the royal family as a whole. But they certainly may unite to oppose a decision that seemingly threatens the position of the family or the "Saudi" in Saudi Arabia.

Perhaps next in importance to the senior royal family is the senior bureaucratic elite. This sector can be considered more or less non-ascriptive since its members increasingly receive their positions because of competence and education. This can even hold true for those members who are also from the royal family, such as the late Sa'ud al-Faysal, the country's foreign minister for decades. Although the members of the elite do not make major decisions themselves, they play an influential role in shaping policy (particularly in the economy and some aspects of foreign affairs) by framing policy alternatives and consequences for the actual decisionmakers.

The religious establishment constitutes another ring in the circles surrounding the supreme decisionmaker, the king. This group, the *ulama*, is not composed of direct decisionmakers because the role of the religious establishment in the centuries-old partnership with the Al Sa'ud has been to safeguard the morals of the people rather than oversee policy (as is the case in Iran). Although they are not the decisionmakers themselves, they do play a major role in the decisionmaking process because the state depends on them to rubber stamp policies via *fatwas* (religious opinions) and to vouchsafe the religious legitimacy of the regime. As a consequence, few major decisions are taken without considering the collective opinion of the clerics. Any government decision that contravenes clerical wishes (expressed before decisions are made and nearly always in private) is almost inevitably accompanied by another decision that meets with clerical approval.[29] The backing of the religious establishment has remained of key importance because of such factors as the need for the *ulama* to sanction the presence of Christian troops in the country before and during the 1991 Kuwait War, the emergence of a "loyal opposition" of independent *ulama* in the 1990s, and the emergence of first al-Qa'idah and then Da'ish that both deny the Saudi monarchy's religious legitimacy and actively attempt to undermine the government through terror campaigns within the KSA.

In many countries, the military establishment plays a strong and constraining role vis-à-vis the government, even where it does not control it.

This is not the case in Saudi Arabia. All senior military officers are selected by the inner circle of the regime and the organization, placement, and use of the armed forces is directly controlled by the king and his advisers. While most of the senior positions are held by commoners, the Al Sa'ud has been careful to sprinkle members of the royal family and its cadet branches throughout the services as a check on other officers and to keep the family informed.

Decision Influencers

It can be argued that the previous groups could equally be called decision influencers. The difference, for the sake of argument here, is that the first groups generally play some more or less direct role in shaping or steering policy while the following groups provide feedback that the ruling elite interprets and considers.

The commercial elite has enjoyed something of a symbiotic relationship with regime. Although, generally speaking, of lower social standing than decisionmakers (since prominent merchant families rarely possess impeccable tribal genealogies), it forms an important part of the increasingly complex contemporary social milieu. Collectively, the merchants hold enormous economic weight. Individually, they are close to various senior figures in the regime.[30] It should be noted as well that members of merchant families also constitute a considerable cross-section of educated cadres and the bureaucratic elite. In earlier years of the oil age, merchant families had an edge in education over other members of society and a broader worldview because of travel and family "internships" abroad (such as India). When the kingdom began to fashion a modern government, members of merchant families were ideally placed to hold senior positions first. They remain well-represented in government circles.

The middle class continues to grow in size and importance. Increasingly, it forms the backbone of the new Saudi society and proportionally the most non-ascriptive sector. Prominent subsectors include mid-level government officials, intellectuals (including university faculty), small merchants, professionals, and military officers. The support of the middle class in regard to public opinion is an essential building block of KSA's rulers. While the class enjoys virtually no formal participation (apart from appointments to the Majlis al-Shura and elections to local councils), it does exercise considerable influence or restraint as a key source of public opinion. It

is no over-statement to say that middle-class support is essential for the regime in both the short- and long-run.

Another key sector in the formation and leading of public opinion is that of the dissident clerics (particularly the Sahwah movement). It is important to note that they have been dissident but not disloyal. The state can and has co-opted prominent figures (most notably Salman al-'Awdah), as well as placating some by modifications of policy and also punishing recalcitrants. In contrast to state-supported clerics, dissidents keep the state grounded in perceived moral values and force the regime to defend and modify certain policies.

Intellectuals are capable of drawing international attention to controversial issues but they are essentially powerless to exact meaningful change (except perhaps over the very long-term given receptive monarchs). Public attitude to their stances and actions, particularly those often misleadingly characterized as "liberals," seems largely neutral or indifferent.

The most-feared segment of the future is that of the burgeoning legions of youth. The KSA has a huge and growing problem with restless youth, many of whom are unemployed and chafing against societal restrictions. Not surprisingly, it is the segment of the population that is most susceptible to extremist recruitment. Altogether, these groups have the potential to help shape national attitudes on nuclear issues or, at the very least, to coalesce public opinion in opposition to nuclear decisions.

Regime Opponents

Some mention should be made of regime opponents. In decades past, these would have been secular leftists, whether Arab nationalist or Marxist. In the past decade or two, however, opponents are essentially restricted to members of or sympathizers with Islamist extremist groups. The Saudi role in the formation and operation of al-Qa'idah is well-known—and equally well overstated. It is no secret that many of the rank and file of Da'ish are also Saudi. Equally overstated and simplified is the contention that the Saudi dominant creed of Wahhabism created Islamist extremism, whether the Taliban, al-Qa'idah, or Da'ish. Al-Qa'idah and Da'ish are sworn enemies of the Al Sa'ud regime: the former carried out a pervasive campaign of terrorism within the KSA during 2003–2007 and Da'ish has begun in the last few years to commit its own acts of terrorism. The goal of both groups is to create instability in the country that will cause the Al Sa'ud to fall. There is a direct security impact to their actions but as they

are not states but groups, straightforward military action is not an option. Their role as decision influencers is justified by their ability to influence the opinion of conservative and disaffected sectors of citizenry, to recruit among disaffected youth, and to collect funds from sympathetic citizens.

Decisionmaking Norms

Whether decisionmakers or decision influencers, actors within Saudi society tend toward a common set of norms in state decisionmaking. A principal approach to politics is consensus-building. For this reason, it often seems to take very long to reach any decision. Generally, criticism or outspokenness is not accepted within the family, and therefore it is not accepted within society. Consequently, it is vastly preferable to achieve consensus within whichever circle is involved rather than risk confrontation.

Consensus and respect for authority form the foundation at the heart of the KSA's legitimacy. Most policies are enacted by the king after a consensus has been established among sociopolitical elites. The initial approach to disobedience and dissidence is to seek to "reform" the individual and bring him or her back into the fold and re-integrate them into harmonious society, as has been done with both clerical and liberal dissidents. But refusal to cooperate can provoke severe responses. The attitude to the Shi'ah is (mostly) benign neglect, owing to Sunni (and particularly Wahhabi) negative perceptions of Shi'ah. As a consequence, most Saudis are politically quiet. Few demonstrations occur, partly because participants face quick prosecution and partly because it contravenes the principles above.

Tradition and conformity are overwhelmingly desired attributes. Whatever an individual does or says is observed and known throughout his/her social circle. Negative talk or behavior brings shame on the family as well as the individual. As a consequence, personal relations are the glue that holds society together. Inability or unwillingness to cooperate risks exclusion and personal hardship. While this social reality certainly has its negative aspects, it also serves to bind society together and create a near uniformity of support for the state.[31] Consequently, open opposition to a state nuclear policy is very unlikely apart from dissidents abroad.

One of the fundamental tenets of Saudi politics and society is the legitimating requirement for access, consultation, and feedback. This follows on from the shared tribal ethos of the society, as perpetuated by the state.

Nearly all senior members of the royal family, many senior government officials, and most major merchants hold a regular *majlis* or gathering, often weekly, at which anyone generally can appear and take part in the discussion of the evening. While many of these *majlis*es have no political focus, they provide a forum where diverse subjects of interest and issues of the day can be discussed. Information or feedback is thus permitted to flow up to the country's leadership.

While it is very unlikely that the question of whether the KSA should pursue nuclear weapons acquisition would be broached in a *majlis*, it is far more possible that discussion of Iran's nuclear program would be the subject of discussion. In this way, national leadership would have an opportunity to ascertain popular views pertaining to nuclear weapons, their utility, and desirability. While such views may have a political aspect, they are even more likely to display sentiments, whether culturally or religiously based, regarding the moral, as well as practical, implications of ownership and use of nuclear weapons. Either in or outside of a *majlis*, there may be some opportunity for educated Saudis and senior bureaucrats to articulate their positions on weapon of mass destruction (WMD) as part of an informal consultation process, in supplement to their formal roles.

Social status in the KSA at present is both ascribed and mobile. At the top, the ruling family (and ancillary families) forms a virtual caste, which is enforced through marriage restrictions. In the last few decades, social status has been increasingly infiltrated by wealth (through commerce) and education (through government service). The traditional elite of the Al al Shaykh and religious notables is increasingly seen by growing numbers of citizenry (and probably most of the ruling family) as a still-necessary nuisance. Intellectuals are not well respected: they tend to be seen as either essentially irrelevant or as suspect dissidents. Another traditional elite comprising tribal leadership has lost position as tribes matter less in active political and many social affairs, despite the continuing fact that tribes retain social importance and identity.

The social hierarchy, although buffeted, still prevails. There is still tremendous respect for authority, which remains stirred but fundamentally intact. It is not acceptable to publicly question one's elders but one must defer to their judgment. This may be one result of a learning-by-rote education: traditional norms are instilled and questioning is frowned upon. In this regard, much or most of the population undoubtedly would passively accept a decision by the government to acquire nuclear weapons.

The influence of the royal family is enhanced further by its quasi-monopoly of the media (television and radio are state-owned while the private sector in media, both local and international, is owned by the elite and supports the government). Pro-government attitudes are constantly reinforced, both in media (TV, radio, and newspapers) but also in education (political, cultural, and religious indoctrination). The state is the source of all authority and therefore "truth." The majority of citizens accept the state's stated rationales, at least in foreign affairs. The "correct word" of the state is reinforced repeatedly in all media. Furthermore, a prominent historical myth promoted by the regime invokes the glory of the Arabs and the manifest destiny of the KSA led by the Al Sa'ud. Nearly all deviation from the accepted view is kept private. Disagreement with government policies and attitudes in public is generally viewed by citizenry with indifference or ostracization. Religious figures may receive more public attention and approval, therefore, government responses to vocal opposition tend to be more careful at first. In the event of a decision by the leadership to acquire WMD, very little public opposition might be expected, even if disquiet should exist.

Values and the Paradoxes in Saudi Society

All the strategic arguments for or against nuclear acquisition must be tempered with cultural considerations in a society such as Saudi Arabia. One primary concern of the royal family from the very beginning has been adhering to the precept of ruling in a just and Islamic way. The precept may have been nibbled around the edges and even flouted in certain cases, but the ethos remains intact. As a consequence, cultural factors must be regarded as a significant determinant in Saudi intentions.

It remains very much true in the KSA and the other Gulf monarchies that corporate identity is still valued far above individual identity. Central to this is the concept of honor and its opposite, shame. Saudi society is extremely transparent and every action by an individual is noted and reflects positively or negatively on one's corporate group.

Society is still often posited as a family writ large and the country continues to reference a bedouin ethos. The head of the tribe was regarded as the father of his tribe. It was his responsibility to protect the collective interests of the tribe (such as defense of territory, conducting warfare against tribal threats, presenting the tribe's needs to the ruler), to adjudicate in tribal disputes, and to look out for the needs of individual members

of the tribe and families. The same concept is at the heart of the Saudi national identity: the king is regarded as the father of the national family and his role carries the same obligations and responsibilities. Of course the parallel is not completely true. The Saudi nation is far larger than a tribe, the personal ties (always so important in Saudi society) do not exist to anywhere near the same degree, and certainly not all Saudis trace their origins back to noble tribes. But in the recesses of the mind, the concept still retains relevance for a majority of the population.

In part, the idea of a supreme father figure rests on the belief that age and status are highly valued. Deference to the head of family is virtually unchallenged. Consequently, deference to authority is also very deeply ingrained.

Social mobility has been a visible hallmark of the oil era. The emergence of the middle class has incorporated disparate elements from nearly all sectors of pre-oil society. Some of the wealthiest individuals come from mean backgrounds (or even were originally not Saudi). Against this, it should be kept in mind that an under-current of social classification remains vibrant. It remains very rare for women from noble tribes to marry outside the tribe or tribes of equal status. At the top, of course, the Al Sa'ud forms an impenetrable caste.

The regime seems to play upon the value placed on a harmonious society. In the first place, it is a generally accepted precept in Sunni Islam that it is better to obey existing authority, even if that may be a tyrant, than to oppose and thereby create more harm and chaos. The oil era has brought prosperity to most Saudis and citizens of the Gulf States, highly welcomed in contrast to the extreme poverty of the area before the 1940s to 1960s. This has created what seems to be an overly materialistic society. The regime constantly but subtly reminds its people that life is good in the KSA, even without political participation, compared to what transpired during the revolution in Iran or has happened to Iraq and Syria. The lesson of the trade-off is not lost on most people.[32]

Not surprisingly, the KSA displays a number of aspects of a rentier state. A dependence on the state to provide nearly everything has been created in the last few decades. In addition, there is an expectation that the state will organize the domestic economy and politics and it will handle foreign relations as it sees fit. Consumerism has become a major feature of society, and along with it the desire to maintain the good, comfortable, life is a major reason for acceptance of the state as it is. There is a real fear of the unpalatable alternative posed by chaos in neighboring states, a fear that

the regime has continued to emphasize. It may also be said that the Iranian system is perceived by most of the population as a threat to Saudi values and way of life, in addition to comprising a security threat.

Saudi Arabia in many ways presents a paradox. It is, officially and superficially, a very traditional society. This is certainly how the regime, and beyond it the religious establishment, likes to declare it—and it is true that millions of Saudis have never traveled abroad, speak few or no foreign languages, are religiously devout, and place considerable trust in their government. At the same time, however, there is a sizable sector of society that is more cosmopolitan and demands more of its political system. American and Western movies and television programs are widely watched through satellite television, video games are ubiquitous, and the kingdom—with 22 million users—ranks among the top 50 or so countries in Internet penetration. This creates a dialectic between the desire to remain unchanged and the drive for change, even radical change. The government in many ways is caught in the center.

The KSA, as a one-commodity producer, is particularly vulnerable to oil price fluctuations. The years of plenty with prices around $100/barrel have turned to prices of only $40 a barrel, and have fallen at times to less than that. The government is facing budgetary pressure to decrease current expenditures but will resist as long as possible, probably by borrowing and drawing down assets in its equivalent of a sovereign wealth fund. Typically, the government will seek to pacify an unruly population by continuing lavish spending on social services, salaries, and even direct payouts. For reasons of national pride and employment, it is unlikely the economic constraints will force a reduction in military purchases or size of force. It is more likely that efforts to achieve such capability will be postponed for financial reasons.

The economy, in large part because most income comes from oil revenues, remains stubbornly dirigiste despite government attempts to encourage the private sector. This factor gives the government a significant edge in leading its people to accept the purpose and rightness of their policies, including a possible nuclear weapons acquisition program.

This combination of factors presents the KSA with a burgeoning problem from its youth. The youth of the country must contend with persistent high levels of unemployment. But their employment, when jobs become available, is often resisted by employers who question the quality of their education and their work commitment. It can be contended that the youth of the KSA possess a broader worldview than their parents.

Among educated youth from elite families, Western pop culture is avidly followed while many are educated in English and are less competent in formal Arabic. Among non-privileged youth—the greatest part of the demographic range—there is growing anomie and resentment of the system, which is felt to have forgotten them. They are less likely to accept the situation as it is, and they are more likely to be recruited by Islamist extremists, in which case they may be more likely to favor WMDs.

Factors in Nuclear Decisionmaking

Drivers

Cultural factors cannot be separated from strategic factors. Influences on the decisionmaking process regarding whether to pursue nuclearization are myriad. In the first instance, it must be recognized that the national leadership will be doing the actual decisionmaking; therefore, the personalities and conviction of those leaders are major determinants. Is a leader thoughtful and contemplative, or is he impetuous and hotheaded, driven by emotion more than logic? More globally, it can be assumed that the status of the relationship between the KSA and the United States would be a major driver: a deterioration in ties and confidence would undoubtedly spur greater Saudi resolve to pursue an independent security course. This may be influenced by existing or near-term KSA capabilities to pursue a nuclear program: if at least preliminary work had been done in achieving such capability, it is more likely that leadership would consider it a viable alternative and public opinion would be more receptive. The latter of course would particularly hold the more the citizenry feared existentialist external threats.

The role of prestige may also play a significant role. Nuclear capability would enhance the KSA's leadership status among Arab and Islamic nations and raise its standing on the global stage. This would be particularly effective among elites and other educated sectors of the population (including within the royal family) who share a more globalized outlook, although the majority of citizens may also regard it as a patriotic plus. More to the point, a nuclear policy may be regarded as an assertion of the KSA's national right, and the kingdom has always been very assertive of its perceived rights. At the same time, both leadership and citizenry may express an inability to comprehend why the nonproliferation regime should apply to the KSA.

Factors holding influence against proliferation may be economic, particularly relevant in the period of 2015–2017 when oil prices plummeted and the KSA's budget went into serious deficit. But religious and cultural norms against the possession and use of nuclear weapons undoubtedly would play a part in the decisionmaking process as well.

In part, this is due to the inordinately important role that the religious establishment plays in directing or at least constraining domestic policies. At the same time, this establishment has been given great latitude in carrying out a foreign policy that parallels—and sometimes conflicts with—the official foreign policy. For the question of nuclear acquisition, it is certain that the approval or at least acquiescence of the Islamic authorities in the KSA would be required. Such acquiescence would seem to depend on Islamic authorities' views on such points as waging war in defense, waging war against other Muslims, the moral right to possess nuclear weapons, and whether threats to the state would permit such a course of action.

Quranic injunctions that any combat engagement must distinguish between the innocent and the guilty while applying the minimum amount of force to achieve the objective and sparing the lives of noncombatants would seem to limit the acquisition and use of WMD.[33] At the same time, an argument has also been advanced for possessing nuclear capability as a deterrent.[34] At least one prominent conservative Saudi Arabian cleric has argued that WMD should not be used if victory can be achieved by using less powerful weapons but its use is permissible otherwise, particularly if it is suspected that the enemy might do so.[35] Another has used the analogy of early Islamic armies' use (including by the Prophet Muhammad) of catapults against enemy cities to justify WMD in extremis.[36]

Any clear-cut distinction within the religious establishment between religious justification of acquisition and religious abhorrence is likely to be distorted by the establishment's relationship with the country's secular authorities. The KSA's special perception of its role as protector of the Holy Places and thus serving as the guardian of Islam (as reflected in the king's other title, "Custodian of the Holy Places") gives its clerical establishment a certain power to establish the norm as regards Islamic injunctions concerning nuclear weapons.

Triggers

Triggers for acquisition are likely to be prompted by such causes as a concern over regional disintegration, Israeli provocation, KSA perceptions of regional and wider power status to be gained, and, especially, continued Iranian belligerence and involvement in regional crises. Proliferation may then be triggered by the deterioration of the JCPOA or evidence of direct Iranian provocation or interference in domestic affairs, such as has been claimed by Kuwait and Bahrain. Perhaps an even more compelling trigger would be the opening of a major breach in KSA-US relations. Still, it would seem that the actual use of nuclear weapons would remain restricted to perception of an existentialist threat to the KSA.

It is entirely possible—and unpredictably so—that one or more wildcards may play a significant role in distorting the picture outlined above. The emergence of a new king with a significantly different mindset and personality would of course be key. This may, for example, occur by way of generational change (as of 2015, all kings of Saudi Arabia since the death of 'Abd al-'Aziz have been sons of that king). The heir apparent, Muhammad b. Salman, is from the following generation of grandsons. Much has been made of the inflated role of Muhammad b. Salman in KSA decisionmaking in light of the seeming non-involvement of his father, King Salman. Muhammad, about 30 years old and with little experience in government or military affairs, has been regarded as the architect of the KSA's campaign in Yemen to restore a weak president to his capital by aggressively attacking the opposition forces, alleged in Riyadh to be actively supported by Iran. The war has been a quagmire; tens of millions of Yemeni civilians have been displaced and far more than 10,000 have lost their lives. He is also one of the main architects of the decision to besiege Qatar. If it were the decision of Muhammad to make, would he be less aggressive when it came to nuclear aspirations?

Another wildcard may well be a conservative backlash in public opinion against the possession or use of nuclear weapons. Public opinion does matter in the KSA, but for it to have an impact in this instance it would have to be uniformly and strongly presented in opposition to be taken seriously. On the other hand, it is within the realm of possibility that the opinion and influence of the non-royal-family elites and the middle class might coalesce as a voice for moderation.

US Policy Options

A full panoply of policy options is open to the United States to inhibit or prevent the KSA from acquisition and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Deterrents are probably the measures that come to mind first, but the KSA is not an enemy or a hostile state. Assurance may in fact be more effective since the KSA is not an adversary. This section will detail each of the dissuasion or assurance policy options in turn and assess their effectiveness.

Dissuasion

The least threatening move in an effort to dissuade the kingdom from nuclear acquisition may be presidential or (less provocatively) administration hints at US displeasure. But this tactic has featured in KSA-US relations for many years, dating back to the oil crisis of the 1970s and continuing in Arab-Israeli matters without much significant success. Such action is unlikely to have positive effect and it is more likely to stiffen KSA resolve.

Similarly, the United States could take diplomatic action, such as not naming an ambassador to Riyadh. But this would probably result in a tit-for-tat, thus resulting in some damage to relations without achieving a positive result.

The United States could threaten to withdraw military support or announce its refusal to sell arms to the kingdom. In such a scenario, the KSA undoubtedly would turn to other suppliers: for example, France for reactors, Russia (and the European Union) for arms, and China for missiles. Riyadh has pursued a policy of diversification in economic and military goods and services for quite some time and this development would simply accelerate an existing trend. As a consequence, the United States would run the risk of losing political and moral influence in Riyadh and thus its ability to monitor KSA activities would be degraded.

The United States could threaten to enact sanctions or take other similar action against the KSA. But such an attempt would likely be disregarded by other states who are dependent on Saudi oil and desiring to maintain good relations with Riyadh, and could provoke KSA rhetoric and considerably impair direct relations.

This would of course be even more true if the United States actually attempted to apply sanctions. The question arises of what sanctions the United States could organize that would have serious impact on the

KSA. Would the United States be able to pressure Europe to join a sanctions regime? The KSA's reaction might well be to provoke it to an oil boycott of the United States. Even if the level of exports to the United States did not constitute a serious liability, the reduction in KSA crude production (a major part of global production) would affect the world as a whole and the global economy would undoubtedly suffer as it did in the 1970s.

The United States could make either public or covert attempts to interdict KSA-bound nuclear fuel and equipment. This may have some short-term success in impairing KSA nuclear abilities but it would also likely cause friction with the KSA's suppliers.

Assurance

Measures of assurance may well be more effective as long as US-KSA relations remain productive and friendly. The first cluster of options involves US official action vis-à-vis the KSA government. These may run from the provision of positive rhetoric supporting the security of the KSA to active support for and involvement in an effective nuclear-free zone in the Gulf. Another measure would be to rely on active assistance to the KSA in the acquisition of nuclear energy capability coupled with firm persuasion directed at the KSA government to abide by stringent international and American restrictions on nuclear activities. This might be accompanied by promises to provide more military support in both the short- and long-term. Independently or simultaneously, the validity of US assurance may well include an increase in the US military presence in the Gulf region. Stronger measures, applied as necessary, would involve a formal defense treaty or inclusion in a US-led alliance and, ultimately, basing nuclear weapons or fuel on KSA soil with limited KSA access but with a share in policy decisions, such as their storage or movement as well as protocols on use.

But measures need not be restricted to the official bilateral arena. The United States could appeal directly to Saudi opinion. In the first instance, this might mean reasoning with sympathetic members of the inner circle. This would include royal family members who can influence consensus-building, the bureaucratic elite who can present rational policy alternatives, military leaders who would be responsive to advising caution, and other elites who can present their views informally to senior members of the royal family. Beyond that, appeals could be made to public opinion,

either through a nuanced media campaign or by outreach to Saudi students in the United States and after their return home. While the utility of enlisting military leaders, given their subservience to political authorities, may be limited, it is not inconsequential. Bonds and common outlooks between American military personnel and their Saudi counterparts, many of whom have been trained in the United States and/or by Americans, are strong.

Finally, a more complex and fruitful approach might consist of the reassessment and a redirection of the overall US-KSA relationship. Particularly effective here would be a skillful, patient, and constructive mix of addressing pertinent issues, including KSA democratization, toning down or stopping its aggressive export of conservative Islamic ideology, and supporting growing KSA involvement on the global stage, balanced by more meaningful manifestations of strong US support for the kingdom in security and political matters.

Conclusions

There is no evidence at present of Saudi intention to acquire nuclear weaponry. But heightened Saudi suspicions of Iran and fears raised by an increasingly chaotic region may have prompted Saudi interest in procuring that capability. Such a path can follow either the acquisition of technology and scientific knowledge that will allow the kingdom to move beyond nuclear energy toward weapons, or it can seek to acquire off-the-shelf weapons from another country—almost by default that would have to be Pakistan. The conventional wisdom that Pakistan would in fact not be willing to provide a bomb or assistance to the kingdom may be overstated. Given the American tilt to India, it is conceivable that Islamabad may value nuclear cooperation with Riyadh because such a policy would seem to provide leverage with the United States.

The principal factors in an internal Saudi assessment of the possibility are likely to be strategically based in the first instance, resting on the ruling elite's view of the geopolitical scene.[37] But a wide panoply of cultural factors may also play an influencing if not deciding role in the process. Among these, a shared sense of being threatened exhibited by nearly all sectors of Saudi society might encourage leadership to act. Equally, a strong sense of national cohesion and desire for consensus might both condition the population to passively accept whatever path upon which the leadership

embarks and, more actively, to share the leadership's resolve and give its backing.

American policy options can involve either dissuasion or assurance but probably not both to any degree. The levers for dissuasion are limited in effectiveness, particularly since Saudi Arabia is not an adversary and the two countries have many strategic, economic, and political goals in common. While measures of assurance inevitably will appeal to strategic rationales, there is considerable scope for invoking cultural appeals.

Scott Sagan suggests that the "security" model explanation of "why states decide to build or refrain from developing nuclear weapons" may have been overstated and he makes an argument for advancement of "domestic politics" and "norms" models.[38] Many of the points advanced in the Background and US Policy Options sections of this paper elucidate rationales conforming to the security model. His emphasis within the domestic politics model on the role of bureaucratic politics and promotion by the scientific and military establishments does not apply in a significant way to the KSA where the authority of the king and his circle is overwhelming. Bureaucratic rivalries may indeed shape policy decisions but both the scientific and military establishments are clearly subordinate to tightly held policymaking at the top. Even his example of South Africa's decision to eliminate its nuclear arsenal does not seem to have a parallel in the KSA, where fears of an overthrow of the regime appear remote at present.

There is more scope for consideration of his norms model, "under which nuclear weapons decisions are made because weapons acquisition, or restraint in weapons development, provides an important normative symbol of a state's modernity and identity."[39] This is more likely to have an effect on the KSA's behavior. As noted above, the KSA places great pride in never having been colonized and in its custodianship of the holiest symbols of Islam. The expansion and creation of the kingdom in the twentieth century was accompanied by a belief in a Saudi divine mission that was limited only on most frontiers by the presence of British-protected states. Gradually through the following decades, the KSA developed its self-image as not only the most important state in the Arabian Peninsula but also a major power in the Middle East and Islamic world. Its ambitions and insistence on treatment as a world power have, if anything, accelerated to the present. It is not impossible to conceive that the KSA might in the near future, or already has, considered contingencies regarding nuclear weapons acquisition, particularly in consideration of an identity or national

pride driver. If so, it clearly does not yet believe that pursuing such a path outweighs the political costs in terms of international and American opposition and in raising the risks of a regional arms war, not to mention altering its self-perceived image as a defensive actor in its neighborhood and securing the full support of its population.

Jacques Hymans takes Sagan's arguments further by suggesting that "top state leaders are unlikely to push for the bomb unless they hold an 'oppositional nationalist' conception of national identity—in other words, a combination of profound antagonism toward an external enemy with an equally profound sense of national self-esteem."[40] This comes closest to describing the KSA, with Iran of course as the prime enemy. But the willingness of the Saudi leadership to act on this basis would probably require a combination of two prerequisites: Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapon technology and the emergence of a "wildcard" figure as king, perhaps such as Prince Muhammad b. Salman. As heir apparent in March 2018, Muhammad denied that Saudi Arabia wanted nuclear weapons but simultaneously emphasized that if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, the KSA would quickly follow suit. The actions of a "wildcard" king may well be conditioned by his perceptual lens of Iran as posing a fundamental and even existential threat, perhaps even without evidence of Iran's possession of nuclear weapons. But even in the case of such a "wildcard," it cannot be assumed that any king can act independently of cultural considerations, social constraints, and the lack of consensus within the royal family and other elites.

US policy options to discourage Saudi Arabia from undertaking steps toward nuclear weaponry are limited from a strategic security point of view. Cultural appeals will probably have at least somewhat greater success but they are unlikely to work in isolation. The best course of action would seem to be fashioning a revised strategy of engagement that would incorporate multiple strategies of cultural interaction with a view to influencing Saudi policymakers and public alike. It may not require a great deal of persuasion to prevent Saudi Arabia from actively seeking nuclear weapons since no burning desire to do so seems to exist. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly wiser to make the effort now than to risk a surprise later.

Notes

1. *Sunday Times*, 24 and 31 July, 7 Aug. 1994; *International Herald Tribune*, 8 Aug. 1994.
2. *New York Times*, 10 July 1999.

3. *Guardian*, 18 Sept. 2003. The report was categorically denied by KSA's London embassy and dismissed by the IAEA. Reuters, 18 Sept. 2003.
4. Arnaud de Borchgrave, in the *Washington Times*, 22 Oct. 2003; VOA News, 22 Oct. 2003. A few months later in early 2004, KSA refuted another report that it was interested in Chinese missiles and bankrolling Pakistan's nuclear program. Reuters, 16 Feb. 2004.
5. Reuters, 1 and 16 June 2005; AP, 1 June 2015. The German magazine Cicero alleged in March 2006 that Pakistani scientists were employed in Saudi Arabia to help develop a secret nuclear program. AFP, 29 March 2006.
6. Reuters, 4 Nov. 2006; http://www.kacst.edu.sa/en/about/institutes/Pages/ae.aspx
7. AFP, 21 Sept. 2007; White House, Office of the Spokesman, "Media Note," 16 May 2008.
8. *The Peninsula* (Doha), 21 Aug. 2009. A further hint of Saudi intentions came in 2011 when a consultant for the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (established 2010) said that the KSA intended to build 16 nuclear reactors by 2030. *Gulf News*, 30 Sept. 2011.
9. "Gulf and the Globe" Conference, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, hosted by the Institute of Diplomatic Studies and the Gulf Research Center, 5 Dec. 2011.
10. *The Times*, 10 Feb. 2012.
11. BBC News, 6–7 Nov. 2013.
12. *Independent* (London), 14 May 2015.
13. Reuters, 22 July 2015.
14. Reuters, 19 June 2015.
15. AFP and AP, 25 June 2015. The deal followed a series of nuclear-related accords between the two countries between 2011 and 2014. *World Nuclear News*, 26 June 2015.
16. *Times of Israel* blog, 25 Aug. 2015.
17. Cited in a Tristan Volpe blog for *The Hill*, "Calling Out the Saudi Nuclear Bluff," 25 Aug. 2015, available at http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=61095
18. Reuters, 22 July 2015.
19. *Gulf News* (Dubai), 7 Sept. 2015.
20. Mohammed Fahad al-Harthi in *Arab News* (Jiddah), 2 Sept. 2015.
21. US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, Media Note, "Joint Statement of the US-GCC Foreign Ministers Meeting," 3 Aug. 2015.
22. Quoted in Volpe, "Calling Out the Saudi Nuclear Bluff," 25 Aug. 2015.
23. *Washington Post*, 11 June 2015. Zakaria's arguments were thoroughly and comprehensively skewered by Jeffrey Lewis on ForeignPolicy.com Voice, "Sorry, Fareed: Saudi Arabia Can Build a Bomb Any Damn Time It Wants To,"12 June 2015, available at http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/12/sorry-fareed-saudi-arabia-can-build-a-bomb-any-damn-time-it-wants-to/

24. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Statement," 4 Sept. 2015. For analysis of the meeting, see the *Financial Times*, 4 Sept. 2015, and the *New York Times*, 4 and 5 Sept. 2015, as well as the reaction of the Gulf analyst Abdullah Al Shayji, *Gulf News*, 7 Sept. 2015.
25. The development is discussed by former Israeli ambassador Uri Savir on *Al-Monitor*, "Why it's time for Saudi Arabia to take the lead on Israeli-Palestinian peace process," 6 Sept. 2015, available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2015/09/palestinian-statehood-iran-agreement-regional-alliance.html
26. It should be noted that the proxy war was largely a construct of Saudi perceptions as material Iranian assistance to the Huthi rebels and their allies was minimal.
27. No systematic scientific opinion polling has ever been carried out in Saudi Arabia and the kingdom's media closely follows government positions. Consequently, many of the observations made in the following pages rely heavily upon material gathered during the author's numerous trips to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf over more than 40 years, diverse conversations with Saudis in the kingdom and outside, and close monitoring of Saudi media and government policy pronouncements, as well as the body of relevant scholarly literature.
28. The writing of this chapter was completed before the extensive arrests and detentions of members of the royal family, ministers, and prominent merchants in November 2017.
29. The classic example is the government's decision in the 1960s to enact compulsory education for girls. The trade-off involved the creation of a General Presidency for Girls' Education that was placed under the supervision of the *ulama*.
30. A pertinent example dates from 1986 when a royal decree imposed an income tax on expatriates working in the kingdom. There was a general outcry among merchants who complained in the *majlis*es of provincial governors, government ministers, and royal family members, contending that either expatriates would leave in droves or their employers would end up paying the tax through higher salaries. Less than 24 hours later, another royal decree suspended the first and no personal income taxes have ever been imposed in the KSA.
31. In recent years, the kingdom has sent around 100,000 Saudi students to the United States each year. The fact that all return home after the education may in part reflect economic opportunities in the KSA but it also validates the closeness of Saudi society.
32. Of course not all Saudi citizens have benefitted equally. Discrimination against the Shi'ah creates resentment but it does not seem to have mobilized a majority of the population into seeking an uprising. Similarly, the

segregation of women has disenfranchised them from many aspects of public life, yet it is not clear that most Saudi women are willing to take to the streets to demand equal rights.

33. Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, *Islam and the Bomb: Religious Justification For and Against Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2010), pp. 23–24. Mowatt-Larssen adds that Islamist extremists attempt to justify nuclear action as legitimate when used in retaliation. Ibid., pp. 25–26.
34. Ibid.; Faiqa Mahmood, "Islam and the Bomb," Arms Control Wonk website, http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1200516/islamand the bomb/, 25 Nov. 2015.
35. Norman Cigar, *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons* (London: Routledge, 2016); UCLA Center for Middle East Development Series, pp. 87–88. Cigar also notes that "Quite apart from the justification for acquiring nuclear weapons based on security concerns, the Saudis also routinely have raised the issues of justice and effectiveness in thinking on proliferation." Ibid., p. 220.
36. https://archive.org/stream/NasirAlFahd/NasirAl-fahd-TheRulingOnUsingWeaponsOfMassDestructionAgainstTheInfidels_djvu.txt. It should be noted that neither of these two clerics, A'id al-Qarni and Nasir al-Fahd, is representative of the country's religious establishment and that the latter apparently remains under detention and may have indicated his support for the so called Islamic State.
37. A comprehensive analysis of the strategic factors in Saudi Arabia's nuclear thinking, including discussion of Saudi reaction to the JCPOA, appeared after this chapter was written. See Op. cit. Cigar, *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons.*
38. Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996/97), pp. 54–86, quotations from p. 55.
39. Sagan, "Why Do States Build," p. 55.
40. Jacques E.C. Hymans, "No Cause for Panic: Key Lessons from the Political Science Literature on Nuclear Proliferation," *International Journal*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (2014), pp. 85–93; quotation from p. 87.

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