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When Saudi Arabia Gets the Bomb



Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead

On Tuesday, the House Oversight and Reform Committee revealed that, based on the testimony of “multiple” whistleblowers, the Trump Administration has been attempting to rush through a transfer of “highly sensitive U.S. nuclear technology” to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia without Congressional approval in violation of federal law.

Before the Committee’s revelation on Tuesday, we knew that since 2017, the Trump Administration has been in negotiations with the kingdom over a “123 agreement” which would allow American corporations such as Westinghouse to transfer technology to the

Saudis for the construction of two nuclear power plants.[1] These agreements are permitted under the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, subject to Congressional approval.

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“Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible.”

—Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman

This alarming remark from the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia came during an interview with the prince which aired on the March 18, 2018 “60 Minutes.”

After Venezuela, Saudi Arabia sits on the largest oil reserves on the planet. Why does it need nuclear power? The Saudis give several reasons. Under his ambitious “Vision 2030” plan, MBS, as the crown prince is known, is out to diversify the Saudi economy and make the kingdom less dependent on oil. The clock is running out on the oil age and the Saudis know it. As the use of renewables increases worldwide the kingdom intends to export as much oil as it can while demand still exists. Nuclear power will also help the kingdom meet its own burgeoning demand for energy which is climbing at the brisk rate of 6 to 8 percent per annum. In addition, Saudi Arabia has environmental concerns. Saudi Arabia ranks ninth in the world in air pollution. Plus, as Defense One notes, “warming in the Middle East is expected to exceed twice the world average, making the region uninhabitable by mid-century.” Saudi Arabia needs to get off oil—and fast.

These uses of nuclear power aren’t what’s most troubling.[2] It’s the possibility that the Saudis will build a bomb. According to Vox, “some skeptics think the whole energy argument coming out of Riyadh is merely a cover for its military ambitions.”

Even peaceful uses of nuclear power come with proliferation hazards. As Robert Gleason writes in *The Nuclear Terrorist* (2014), nuclear power plants are tantamount to factories for making nuclear bomb fuel. Enriched to 4%, uranium can power a nuclear reactor. Enriched to 90%, uranium can be used to make a nuclear bomb. Along with reactors, the Saudis want the tech that will enable them to enrich uranium. Never mind that the Saudis would find it far cheaper to purchase nuclear fuel from outside the country. Further, Saudi Arabia refuses to permit “UN inspectors to look anywhere in the country for signs that the Saudis might be working on a bomb....”[3]

The capacity for enrichment and reprocessing will allow “nuclear hedging” by Saudi Arabia against archenemy Iran.[4] Once it has enrichment and reprocessing facilities, the kingdom can quickly repurpose a peaceful, civil nuclear program to building a bomb.

This is guaranteed to happen if the Saudis believe (or claim they believe) that Iran has resumed work on nuclear weapons.

Other than Iran's nonexistent nuclear weapons, Trump is alarmingly unconcerned about nuclear proliferation. Candidate Trump said in 2016 that it was inevitable that Saudi Arabia (and South Korea and Japan) would obtain nuclear weapons. (The really scary thing is that Trump may be right.)

Call the Midwife

On May 24 of last year, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Trump Administration wants a so-called "gold standard" agreement which would prohibit the Saudis from enriching or reprocessing fissionable material. However, in February 2018, Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, who is heading up the negotiations with the Saudis because Trump has been unable to find anyone less qualified to do so, was considering a deal which would allow the Saudis to enrich uranium after 10 to 15 years.

Even before Tuesday, it was unlikely that Congress would approve a 123 agreement with the Saudis. Both sides of the aisle have cooled appreciably toward the Saudis following Jamal Khashoggi's murder. In October, five Republican—Republican!—senators wrote to President Trump asking that he end nuclear talks with the Saudis. In December, Senators and Representatives from both parties introduced the No Nuclear Weapons for Saudi Arabia Act which mandates the gold standard and reaffirms Congress' prerogative under the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 to veto transfer of nuclear tech to the Saudis. A resolution introduced in the senate on February 12 by members of both parties also prohibits enrichment and reprocessing. It seems that the Administration realized it could not get an agreement past Congress, and so decided to cut Congress out of the picture.

If there is no agreement with the US, the kingdom will have to take its business elsewhere. Besides the US, Russia, China, South Korea, and France have submitted bids to build Saudi Arabia's first nuclear reactor.

Trump's indulgence toward Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions contrasts sharply with his unrelenting hostility towards Iran. The Trump Administration sees Iran as intent on developing nuclear weapons, even as Iran continues to abide by Obama's 2015 nuclear deal which Trump abandoned on May 8, 2018. However, the Trump Administration's tightening stranglehold on Iran through economic sanctions may have the effect of driving the Iranians out of the Obama agreement. That would hand the Saudis the excuse they

need to build a bomb. Years from now, we may look back on Donald Trump as the midwife of a Saudi nuclear bomb.

It is imperative that Saudi Arabia not be allowed to get nuclear technology. Commenting in December on the proposed transfer, Representative Brad Sherman, Democrat of California, connected the transfer with the Saudi murder of Jamal Khashoggi, saying: “A country that can’t be trusted with a bone saw shouldn’t be trusted with nuclear weapons.” Exactly.

Notes.

[1] According to the New York Times, the Saudis have shelved earlier plans to build “as many as 16 nuclear power plants over ... 20 to 25 years at a cost of \$80 billion.”

[2] Of course, anyone who remembers Fukushima or Three Mile Island is unlikely to be wildly enthusiastic about nuclear power.

[3] “Moreover, Saudi Arabia has argued that a legal pledge to forgo ENR [enrichment and reprocessing] represents ‘an unacceptable infringement on its national sovereignty.’” Nicholas L. Miller and Tristan A. Volpe, *Abstinence or Tolerance: Managing Nuclear Ambitions in Saudi Arabia*, WASHINGTON QUARTERLY, (Summer 2018), pages 36 and 44 n.51. Saudi Arabia is a firm believer in national sovereignty, as anyone in Yemen will tell you.

[4] Miller and Volpe, *Abstinence or Tolerance*, pages 27-29.