

# SAUDI ARABIA: STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT AND NUCLEAR SECURITY

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## ABSTRACT

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This article aims to discuss the possibility for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to develop nuclear weapons to balance Iran, should the Persian state become a nuclear power in the Middle East region. Thus, the research was developed based on the statement by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who said his country would develop a nuclear bomb if Tehran took the first step in this direction. In addition, it was sought to work with an approach as close as possible to the internal vision of the Saudi Arabian government, with statements from Saudi political personalities and government officials. This work addresses the Saudi regional context; the Iranian threat; Saudi Arabia's deterrent alternatives; and, finally, the Kingdom's capabilities in developing its own nuclear program.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia; Iran; Nuclear Weapons.

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## INTRODUCTION

On March 19, 2018, in an interview to the American broadcast television *CBS*, when asked if Saudi Arabia would need nuclear weapons to contain Iran, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman replied that “Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran develops a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible”.

It was not the first time that a representative of the Saudi monarchy issued such a statement. In February 2010, during an official visit of the former Secretary of State of the United States (US), Hillary Clinton, to Riyadh, *WikiLeaks* reported that King Abdallah, in a conversation with a General from American Armed Forces referred as General Jones, stated that “if Iran succeeded in developing nuclear weapons, everyone in the region would do the same, including Saudi Arabia”.

One year later, in June 2011, Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, former head of Saudi intelligence, declared in a meeting with military officials from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that if Iran develops nuclear weapons untold and dramatic consequences could happen in the Middle East region. According to an article written for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, a senior official from Saudi government close to the prince said Turki’s message was clear and amended saying “We cannot live in a situation where Iran has nuclear weapons, and we don’t. It’s as simple as that,” and continued “If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, that will be unacceptable to us and we will have to follow suit.”

These declarations from Saudi royal family members may contribute to the interpretation that Riyadh has plans for the development of nuclear technology for military purposes. Despite this, in his interview to *CBS*, the heir to the throne of the House of Saud disregarded the Persian state as his country’s military rival, stating that “Iran is not a rival to Saudi Arabia. Its army is not among the top five armies in the Muslim world. The Saudi economy is larger than the Iranian economy. Iran is far from being equal to Saudi Arabia”.

Although the words of the future monarch have been somewhat paradoxical in relation to Iran, it is not possible to analyze the Saudi move around the interest of developing its nuclear program without understanding how Riyadh perceives Tehran as a threat to its national security and, to a lesser extent, to its position in the Muslim world,

especially among Sunni monarchies in the Arabian Gulf.

In addition to the issue involving Iran, Saudi Arabia seeks to develop technology for the construction of nuclear reactors, in order to diversify its energy matrix based on fossil sources, mainly oil and natural gas. According to data from the *British Petroleum Statistical Review of World Energy 2021*, the Saudis are the largest consumers of oil in the Middle East in the entire 21st century and the fifth largest consumer of oil in the world for more than a decade.

The method employed in this article was based on data analysis; review of specialized bibliography; examination of interviews with Saudi officials; and verification of official documents. In order to define Saudi Arabia's area of interest in the Middle East, the concept of "strategic environment" was used as a methodological tool to better situate the most important geopolitical areas of the region for Saudi Arabia in this analysis. However, it is important to mention that this term is not officially used by the Saudi government.

That said, this research is organized in four sections as follows: In the first section, some characteristics of Saudi Arabia as a country in its regional context are discussed. Moreover, it also defines what is understood as its strategic environment. The second part introduces the areas of friction between Riyadh and Tehran in the Saudi strategic environment and discusses the perception of the Iranian threat by the Saudis in the national, regional, and religious spheres. This second section also analyses if Saudi Arabia should balance a possible nuclearized Iran to avoid other states in the Middle East to bandwagon with the Iranian side. The following section discusses Saudi Arabia's deterrence options, considering both nuclear defense by allies and the possibility of producing, domestically, weapons of this type to ensure their own security. Finally, the last part of this article discusses the technical capabilities of the country for the feasibility of developing its nuclear program.

## SAUDI ARABIA AND THE REGIONAL STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a Sunni Islamic absolutist monarchy whose contemporary state was founded by the king Abdulaziz Al Saud in 1932. It is also the second largest Arab country in territorial extension, surpassed only by Algeria.

Regarding the economy, Saudi Arabia owned the largest Gross

Domestic Product (GDP) among the countries from the Middle East and North Africa between 2001 and 2020 (THE WORLD BANK, 2021). Much of its revenue comes from oil and gas sector, accounting “for about 50 percent of gross domestic product, and about 70 percent of export earnings”, with oil is the main product in its exports basket (ORGANIZATION OF THE PETROLEUM EXPORTING COUNTRIES, 2021).

Saudi Arabia is internationally recognized for its leading role in the global oil market. According to *BP Statistical of World Review 2021*, the Saudis appear behind the US with the world’s second largest oil production since 2014, with a share of 12.5% of the world total in 2020. With regard to world oil reserves, this Arab country holds the second largest one as well, with Venezuela occupying the first place since 2010. The country is also the largest world exporter of crude oil with an estimated average of 349.1 million tons barrels in 2020. Russia, the second placed, exported about 260 million tons on the same year. These characteristics give Saudi Arabia the role of a political leadership in international organizations (IOs) such as Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC).

Saudi Arabia is one of the world’s largest oil consumers, ranking fifth in this category from 2009 to 2019, only behind US; China; India; and Japan. In 2020, it became the world’s fourth largest oil consumer, taking over from Japan. They are also ahead of Russia and Brazil in oil consumption. It is noteworthy that among the mentioned nations, Saudi Arabia is the only one with less than 100 million inhabitants, with a population estimated at 34.8 million people in 2020 (THE WORLD BANK, 2021). Low cost of domestic oil production, investment in water desalination plants, desert biome, and heat – something that raises the consumption of air conditioning in the Kingdom – makes Saudi Arabia the country with the largest share of electricity consumption due to air conditioning in the entire planet in the year 2018 (ENERDATA, 2019). These are some reasons for the huge energy expenditure of the Arab state.

The large domestic consumption of energy is one of the main reasons for the Kingdom to invest in nuclear energy, as its energy matrix is mainly composed of oil and natural gas. In 2011, Chatham House published an article which warned that there was a possibility that Saudi Arabia could become a net oil importer by the end of the 2030s if the pace of consumption continued the same.

Saudi Arabia's energy consumption pattern is unsustainable. The country currently consumes over one-quarter of its total oil production – some 2.8 million barrels a day.<sup>2</sup> This means that on a 'business as usual' trajectory it would become a net oil importer in 2038 (...). No one is suggesting this is the most likely outcome but the possibility does signal the urgency of the need for change. More oil reserves may be discovered and production raised, population growth may decline and new policies and technology may change consumption patterns, but in the absence of such events and with the country's high dependence on oil revenues the economy would collapse before that point (LAHN; STEVENS, 2011, p. 2).

In 2011, Saudi government announced plans to build 16 nuclear power reactors by with the aim of generating electricity in the Kingdom, alleviating domestic consumption of oil and natural gas and, thus, exporting surplus production, increasing national revenues (WORLD NUCLEAR ASSOCIATION, 2021).

In addition to the leading role in international oil markets, Saudi Arabia is also a religious leader in the Arab and Islamic worlds. The fact that the two main holy cities of Islam, Mecca, and Medina, lie under the sovereignty of Riyadh, gives the Saudis an important role in influencing the religious field, especially in the *hajj* period, when Muslims from all over the world go on pilgrimage to Mecca. Not surprisingly, since the reign of King Fahd Al Saud (1982-2005), Saudi monarchs also receive the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (AL-RASHEED, 2010, p. 144), which contributes to Riyadh converting religion into political capital in the region that we will delimit as its strategic environment.

When considering the concept of strategic environment, this article uses the ideas of border sharing; geographic position; economic, religious, and cultural ties; as well as threats perceived throughout the history of the Kingdom since its foundation as a modern state in 1932. In this context, Riyadh's strategic environment encompasses the entire Arabian Peninsula and the Arabian Gulf ; the Levant; the Horn and the eastern portion of North Africa; and Pakistan. Figure 1 shows an illustration of what is considered Saudi Arabia's strategic environment.

Figure 1



Source: Own elaboration with image captured from Google Maps<sup>2</sup>

In the Arabian Peninsula, with the exception of Yemen, all of them are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an IO aimed at integrating its members into various sectors (economy, culture, tourism, etc.). GCC has also a military arm known as the Peninsula Shield Force, which in Article 2 of its creation agreement establishes that any attack or threat to any of the members is an attack or threat to all the others (QATAR, 2022). The Shield has already been activated in situations such as the 1990-91 Gulf War, when Iraq invaded Kuwait; in the 2003 Iraq war (also for the defense of Kuwait), but without direct participation in the conflict; and in the 2011 Bahrain uprising to counter the revolutionary wave of Shia groups, allegedly backed by Tehran, in the wake of the Arab Spring (NUNES; MEDEIROS; DELGADO, 2020, p. 74).

Yemen is another important state in the Arabian Peninsula. It forms the west shore of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, where part of the Gulf oil flows to the Mediterranean Sea. Yemen, as well as Jordan’s Hashemites, were the first perceived threats from the Saudi Kingdom in the 1930s. The first war involving both countries was over the possession of Asir, a region with important agricultural potential in Southwest Saudi Arabia (KOHN, 1934, p. 101).

<sup>2</sup> At: <https://www.google.com.br/maps/place/Saudi+Arabia/@21.5010943,26.0566879,4z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x15e7b33fe7952a41:0x5960504bc21ab69b!8m2!3d23.885942!4d45.079162?hl=en> [Accessed July 9, 2020].

Iraq, although not located on the peninsula, is a country that has already projected itself militarily into the Gulf in the past. The invasion of Kuwait and Iraq's Army incursion in Khafji, a Northern Saudi city, both in the early 1990s, are examples of this. Iraq has a Shiite population greater than Sunni, which for Riyadh makes the country more susceptible to the influence of Tehran since Saddam Hussein's fall. Some of the political strategies adopted by Saudi Arabia to recover space in the neighboring country are the support to the recovery of Iraqi national pride and Arab identity of the country and the financial support for national infrastructure reconstruction after years of civil war and occupation of its territory by foreigner forces as well as the Islamic State (SAUDI ARABIA..., 2018, p. 4-12).

The maritime part of the Saudi environment is also strategic because the country relies on the sea to export the hydrocarbons it produces. In addition, Saudi Arabia does not have direct access to the ocean, which makes it dependent on sea routes through maritime straits for exporting and importing activities – specially the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal – To maintain military presence near the straits mentioned above, the Saudi Navy has two fleet headquarters: one in the Gulf, with its main base in al-Jubail, and another in the Red Sea, based in Jeddah (NUNES; MEDEIROS; DELGADO, 2020, p. 84).

In eastern parts of North Africa, countries like Eritrea, Sudan, Djibouti, and Egypt are important because they share maritime boundaries with the Saudis. In Eritrea, Saudi Arabia manages a CCG military facility at the port of Assab, and in Djibouti Riyadh intends to build a military base since both countries concluded an agreement in 2016 (MELVIN, 2019, p. 13). Food security is also a concern. In 2009, Saudi Arabia began to invest in the acquisition of farms in Sudan and Ethiopia to ensure the country's food security and reduce its dependence on food imports (KLARE, 2012, p. 160-161).

Egypt, in turn, during the government of Gamal Abdel Nasser, was once considered an enemy of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh understood Nasser as a threat because he promoted pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism; had an anti-monarchist rhetoric; and because he intervened in the 1962 Yemeni Revolution fighting a proxy war against Saudis. Despite that, Egypt is part of Saudi Arabia's strategic environment because it controls the Suez Canal, the shortest route for oil produced in Saudi territory to reach European markets. This country does also manage the SUMED oil pipeline, a pipeline linking the port of Ain Sokhna, in the Red Sea, to Alexandria, in the Mediterranean, without the need to transport oil in tankers through



the Suez. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia share maritime borders with Sinai Peninsula and their territories form the shores of Straits of Tiran, that is entrance and exit to Israeli port of Eilat and Jordanian port of Aqaba.

In the Levant sub-region, in March 2016, Saudi Arabia and the GCC condemned the Shiite group Hezbollah as an Iran-supported terrorist organization in Lebanon (ARAB NEWS, 2016). In the Syrian civil war, started in 2011, the Kingdom initially opposed the maintenance of President Bashar Al Assad in power and financially favored some rebel groups fighting for his overthrow. A few years later, Riyadh changed its strategy and supported Assad to prevent the advance of Iranian and Turkish political interests in the country.

Still on the Levant sub-region, another important actor is Israel. Saudi Arabia does not recognize or possess diplomatic relations with Israel, but both countries have shown a discreet approach to contain the expansion of Iranian influence in the region. Some signs of this approach were: (1) a confidential meeting in May 2015 at the US embassy in Amman, Jordan, where representatives from Israel would have offered the Iron Dome missile defense system to Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait (SAUDI ARABIA..., 2015); (2) the first direct flight from Riyadh to Tel Aviv in May 2017, on the occasion of former American President Donald Trump's first official visit to the Middle East (TIBON; MELNITCKI, p. 2017); (3) the absence of a statesman at the December 2017 Organization for Islamic Cooperation emergency meeting in Istanbul, after the US declare recognition of Jerusalem as Israeli capital, when the vast majority of participating states were represented by their top leaders; (4) the opening of Saudi airspace for flights from India to Israel in March 2018 (CORNWELL; RABINOVITCH, 2018); and (5) an unofficial meeting in a Arabian Gulf capital involving senior intelligence officials from Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE. One of the objectives of the meeting was to discuss ways to marginalize the growing Iranian and Turkish influence in the Middle East (HEARST, 2019).

Pakistan, on the other hand, despite having a regional dynamic focused on South Asia, is one of Saudi Arabia's main military allies and in recent years have been engaged in joint military exercises with Riyadh such as the *al-Samsaam* and the naval *Naseem al-Bahr*. According to the former Pakistani Senator Sehar Kamran, "The Pakistani people have always felt a special reverence for Saudi Arabia as the land where Islam has grown" (KAMRAM, 2013, p. 6-9).



In the Saudi strategic environment, there are two countries with nuclear weapons: Israel and Pakistan. And a potential candidate for that capability: Iran. In addition, there are other extra-regional states with military presence in the region that have such weapons, like Great Britain, with a military base in Oman; the US, with Central Command bases (CENTCOM) in Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait; Russia with a naval base in Tartus; as well as China and France, both with bases in Djibouti.

## **THE IRANIAN THREAT: BALANCE TO AVOID BANDWAGONING?**

In this regional scenario with internal and external nuclear powers, Iran appears as the country with the highest aspirations to become the newest member of the club, and this factor could be the reason for Saudi Arabia to take the same path to balance Tehran. Moreover, if Israeli Jews and Persian Shiites were to have atomic bombs in their arsenal, the Sunni Arab state that holds the holy cities of Islam would also claim to have such a right, as it has already done.

In 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan used the term “Shiite crescent” to explain the advance of Iranian influence on Shiite populations in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, a fact “that would dramatically shift the geopolitical balance between Shiite and Sunni Muslims in the Middle East”, in particular the Gulf countries with non-Sunni populations. “Even Saudi Arabia is not immune from this. It would be a major problem”(WRIGHT; BAKER. 2004). Currently, following this logic, Shiite crescent would also embrace Palestine, because of Iranian financial support for Hamas; Yemen, where the Houthis militia, accused of being backed by Iran, has fired missile attacks on Saudi territory; Bahrain; and on a smaller scale Qatar. In September 2016, Prince Turki expressed concern about the Iranian siege to Saudi Arabia:

If you look at the whole range of Iranian interference, you look at Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, there's a whole host of problems for us. With Iran being the initiator and the instigator and the inciter of instability and negative issues in the area. (DROLLETE, 2016, p. 22).

In 2011, because of the Arab Spring movements, Bahrain's Shiite population (majority in the country), resented by sectarian social limitations such as not being able to hold government offices, for example, took to the streets in protests that were stifled by security forces of the government of the Sunni Emir Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. The Bahraini case can be interpreted as a proxy conflict between Riyadh and Tehran on the Arabian Peninsula considering that rulers in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain accused Tehran of manipulating the protests (MABON, 2012, p. 85-88).

Another case perceived by the Saudis as Iranian influence in the region was the Qatari crisis in 2017. In summary, the tension with Doha arose from a statement attributed to Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani to Qatar News Agency, in which he allegedly said there was no reason for hostilities between Arab countries and Tehran, accepting Iran as an Islamic power, in addition to admitting good relations with Israel, and to recognize Hamas as the official representative of the Palestinians. Although the Emir stated that such a declaration was not made by him, countries such as Bahrain, UAE, and Egypt followed Saudi Arabia's example and cut diplomatic ties with Doha (QATAR..., 2017).

The possibility of Iran establishing itself as a nuclear power would allow the Persian state to strengthen its regional influence and place it outside the bounds of conventional deterrence on the part of the Saudis. Cigar (2017, p. 44, 49) explains that the Saudis' initial estimate was that Iran could balance Israel's nuclear power, as it would have been the Israeli arsenal - whose existence was never officially confirmed - the main stimulus of the Iranian nuclear program. However, it was postulated that this would be an unlikely reality because of Tel Aviv's capacity for retaliation and, especially, its alliance with the US.

In *Why Iran Should Get the Bomb*, Kenneth Waltz commented that Iran in possession of nuclear warheads would offer a regional balance by breaking the Israeli nuclear monopoly because "Power, after all, begs to be balanced." Waltz still argued that this would not lead to a nuclear rush in the region, given that the Israeli case did not generate such an outcome even though it was considered an enemy of the Arab States since its founding in 1948.

However, the author made no mention of the fact that in the perception of some Arab states from the Gulf, Iran acts as an expansionist actor and, in the possession of nuclear weapons, could "export" their Islamic revolution easily, so that those who would most feel the danger

of Iranian nuclear weapons would be these states. In this way, a nuclear Iran would cause a disbalance in the Middle East and could receive some kind of support from Shia populations in Gulf monarchies, mainly those ruled by Sunni governors, and some countries could either face domestic uprisings and destabilization or bandwagon with Iran (KAHL; DALTON; IRVINE, 2013, p. 16).

In this case, an option to Saudi governors to avoid regional countries to bandwagon with Iran could be to balance Tehran nuclear pretensions by building its own nuclear weapon, as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated in his interview to CBS. Balance and bandwagon are two concepts used by authors of International Relations, especially those linked to the neorealist theoretical framework such as the aforementioned Kenneth Waltz and Stephen M. Walt.

The balance and bandwagon options are linked to the distribution of power, and in the case of Saudis and Iranians to the distribution of regional power. Consequently, in turn, issues surrounding the discussion of power are strongly influenced by the realist and neorealist aspects of International Relations. However, one of the main differences between these two theoretical strands is that while classical realists think of human nature as the foundation for national states to seek to increase their power, neorealists, on the other hand, understand that it is the structure of the anarchic international system that leads them to achieve that purpose (MEARSHEIMER. In: DUNNE; KURKI; SMITH, 2013, p. 77-78). Thereby, Waltz explains both concepts contrast each other as follows:

In a competition for the position of leader, bandwagoning is sensible behavior where gains are possible even for the losers and where losing does not place their security in jeopardy. Externally, states work harder to increase their own strength, or they combine with others, if they are falling behind. In a competition for the position of leader, balancing is sensible behavior where the victory of one coalition over another leaves weaker members of the winning coalition at the mercy of the stronger ones. Nobody wants anyone else to win; none of the great powers wants one of their number to emerge as the leader (WALTZ, 1979, p. 126).

First of all, it is important to note that when the author speaks of great powers in the above statement, he refers to the Cold War period and the bipolarity between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, for the purpose of contextualization with the theme of this article, we will work with that term to analyze the antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Thus, if Iran were to become a nuclear power, it would be reasonable to say that other countries in the Gulf - and in the Middle East - would join the Persian states to increase their power and avoid a possible destabilization of their internal order and thus, at the very least, maintain their status quo in the region?

According to Waltz himself, the answer would be no. For him, balance, not bandwagon, is the behavior induced by the system. In his analysis, this would occur more frequently because it would not be known to what extent the strongest state would act benevolently with the countries that allied with it. Therefore, joining the weaker state to compensate the regional balance of power would be a more rational option because countries more sensitive to the influence of the stronger would increase their status quo by forming a defensive alliance capable to resist the imbalance caused by the increase in the power of the strongest state (WALTZ, 1979, p. 126-127). In other words, in this logic, it would be possible to state that the Gulf monarchies would bandwagon with Saudi Arabia to balance the strengthening of Iran.

However, that argument alone is still weak. There are at least other five factors that would contribute to the Arab Gulf states to join Saudi Arabia to contain a possible nuclearized Iran. The first of these would be the fact that all countries on the Arabian Peninsula are Arab states and both their language and culture have more similarities than with the Persians. Other states who share borders with Saudi Arabia such as Jordan and Iraq are Arabs too. The second would be the fact that the elites of many countries, mainly the GCC members, are Sunni Muslims, except Oman which is Ibadi.

The third also has to do with the elites of these countries, who belong to long-standing monarchies. Al Saud family, from Saudi Arabia; Al Khalifa, from Bahrain; Al Thani, from Qatar; Al Sabah, from Kuwait, Al Said, from Oman and the royal families of the UAE's seven emirates - Al Nahyan, Al Maktoum, Al Qasimi, Al Nuaimi, Al Mualla, and Al Sharqi - are in power even before the founding of their respective modern states, so that any kind of internal revolt that threatens to take them out of the command of their nations is not accepted by any of them. As the Iranian

regime emerged from a revolution that overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy, bandwagoning with Tehran does not appear to be a reasonable option.

The only country on the Arabian Peninsula that is no longer a monarchy is Yemen. And even when it was a monarchical state, it was also a country that generated mistrust. In addition to the case already cited by the Asir dispute, Yemen has been a problem for the security of Saudi Arabia on other occasions, such as the internal revolution that led to the division of the country in the 1960s, the proxy war with Nasserist Egypt in that same period and, more recently, with the presence of the Houthis who, supported by Iran, promote attacks on Saudi territory and assets of its oil company Saudi Aramco.

The fourth factor has to do with the GCC itself and its armed arm the Peninsula Shield Force, which at its origin, during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, was already created to balance Iran. And the fifth, concerns the fact that usually the Gulf Arab countries share common interests. An example of this is the fact that even after many countries allied with Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic ties with Qatar, in 2017, Qatar itself did not fail to participate in Arab forums and international organizations, such as the Arab League. In addition, even though it has withdrawn its membership from OPEC, Doha has not withdrawn from OAPEC.

According to Mearsheimer, "structural realist theories ignore cultural differences among states as well as differences in regime type". He explains that "structural realists treat states as if they were black boxes: they are assumed to be alike, save for the fact that some states are more or less powerful than others"(MEARSHEIMER. In: DUNNE; KURKI; SMITH, 2013: 77-78). Although this statement is related to an elucidation as to one of the theoretical currents of International Relations, it cannot be taken so literally with regard to the theme of this research. Walt, who is also a neorealist author, writes about the logic of alignment with similar states, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

First, alignment with similar states may be viewed as a way of defending one's own political principles. After all, if statesmen believe their own system is inherently good, then protecting states with a similar system must be considered good as well. Second, states with similar traits may fear each other less, because they will find it harder to imagine an inherently

“good” state deciding to attack them. Third, alignment with similar states may enhance the legitimacy of a weak regime, by demonstrating that it is part of a large popular movement.<sup>50</sup> Fourth, the ideology itself may prescribe alignment (WALT, 1985, p. 20).

Although similar states share common values and are more likely to align, joining Saudi Arabia to balance Iran does not mean supporting the development of a possible military nuclear program for Riyadh. Especially because the Saudis could be perceived as a major threat in the same way, or even worse, than Iran.

Walt (1987, p. 150-151) also cites some occasions when the emergence of a power in the Middle East generated a union between other weaker states to balance it. The first was Nasser’s Egypt, which led the monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq to take a stand against this threat and form the Kings’ Alliance. The same happened when Cairo intervened in Yemen in the early 1960s and Saudis and Jordanians formed a compensatory alliance to contain the Egyptians. The second was when initially Riyadh and Baghdad and then the Gulf countries came together to create the GCC and Peninsula Shield Force to balance Iran after the 1979 Revolution and, also during the Iran-Iraq War. Other occasions, like the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 were also historical periods where alliances were formed to balance, or to combat, a regional power perceived as stronger than the others.

But in case of Iran becoming a nuclear power should Saudi Arabia really be the Arab nation who would balance Tehran or should it bandwagon an already established nuclear power? In the next two sections of this article, an answer to this question is discussed in more detail starting by Saudi’s alliances options.

## SAUDI ARABIA’S ALLIANCES OPTIONS

In order to combat the threat of a possible Iran with a nuclear arsenal and to discourage it from engaging in any kind of aggression against its territory, Riyadh basically has two options: to develop its own nuclear military program or to submit itself to the nuclear umbrella of allied countries.

In that sense, it is necessary to understand that the main concern

of the Saudis comes from Iran's ballistic missile program. According to the *Missile Defense Project* – linked to the *Center for Strategic and International Studies* in Washington D. C. – currently Tehran has a long family of short-range (SRBM) and medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM), as well as cruise missiles capable of reaching Saudi territory. Most of these armaments are not operated by the regular Armed Forces, but by the Revolutionary Guard (THE MILITARY BALANCE, 2021, p. 339).

Table 1 shows some of the operational missiles that this country already has in its arsenal and some that are still under development. It also estimates the range of each one of them.

Table 1 – Types of Iranian missiles

Missile	Class	Range	News
<u>Safir</u>	SLV	350 km altitude	Operational
<u>Khorramshahr</u>	MRBM	2,000 km	In Development
<u>Qiam-1</u>	SRBM	700-800 km	Operational
<u>Shahab-1</u>	SRBM	285-330 km	Operational
<u>Simorgh</u>	SLV	500 km altitude	In Development
<u>Koksan M1978</u>	Artillery	40-60 km	Operational
<u>Zolfaghar</u>	SRBM	700 km	Operational
<u>Emad (Shahab-3 Variant)</u>	MRBM	1,700 km	In Development
<u>Sejjil</u>	MRBM	2,000 km	Operational
<u>Shahab 2 (Scud C Variant)</u>	SRBM	500 km	Operational
<u>Shahab-3</u>	MRBM	1,300 km	Operational
<u>Ghadr 1 (Shahab-3 Variant)</u>	MRBM	1,950 km	In Development
<u>Fateh-110</u>	SRBM	200-300 km	Operational
<u>Tondar 69</u>	SRBM	150 km	Operational
<u>Soumar</u>	Cruise Missile	2,000-3,000 km	Operational (presumed)
<u>Ra'ad</u>	Cruise Missile	150 km	Operational

Source: CORDESMAN, 2019<sup>3</sup>

It is important to mention that because of the estimated range of some of these missiles, it is possible that some of them could reach countries even from outside Middle East.

Today, Iran's ballistic missiles are already capable of reaching the Arab Gulf states, Turkey, and Israel.

<sup>3</sup> At: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-missile-threat> [Accessed July 12, 2022].



Iran's ability to coerce and threaten states beyond its immediate neighborhood is also increasing. To respond with more missile defenses is at least partially useful but may prove insufficient (DELPECH, 2012, p. 99).

Although the above quote states that missile defense may be insufficient, the Saudis have wagered to supply the Royal Saudi Air Defense Forces<sup>4</sup> with the necessary means to establish a defense capable of containing a missile attack from Iran. Among them, the North American systems Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, also known as THAAD (US EMBASSY AND CONSULATES IN SAUDI ARABIA, 2017), and possibly the S-400 from Russia (SAUDI ARABIAN MILITARY INDUSTRIES..., 2017). But Nunes, Medeiros and Delgado (2020, p. 85) explain that the negotiations for the S-400 cooled down after pressure from the US, given that the S-400 is a system of countermeasures to military aviation of NATO countries and is also a competing system of THAAD.

Regarding the submission to the nuclear umbrella of allies, two countries can be analyzed for the case of Saudi Arabia: the US and Pakistan. As to the US, different governments have already argued that aggression against Gulf states would be countered with US military power. Two examples of this were the Carter Doctrine, when in a speech in January 1980 President Jimmy Carter stated that "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force" (THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 1980) and the July 2009 message from then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who warned of the possibility of an American nuclear umbrella for the Middle East in order to safeguard the region against Iran (LANDLER; SANGER, 2009).

Although the US has already demonstrated in practice the commitment to intervene in the Middle East in favor of Arab countries – and, logically, to safeguard its own interests in the region – as occurred in the case of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in the early 1990s, the Saudis already had reason to be suspicious of Washington. An example of this was the alleged abandonment of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak

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<sup>4</sup> Saudi Armed Forces are divided into five distinct branches: Royal Saudi Land Forces; Royal Saudi Naval Forces; Royal Saudi Air Force; Royal Saudi Air Defense Forces and Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Force.

in the early Arab Spring in 2011. Riedel (2018, p. 158) explains that if Mubarak was dropped so quickly by the government of Barack Obama, one of King Abdallah's biggest concerns was that if a revolution broke out in the Kingdom, who would receive US support: the insurgents or the House of Saud?

In addition, the relationship involving both countries have already shuddered at different historical moments, such as during the Arab-Israeli wars; in the 2003 Iraq War, when Riyadh hinted that Saddam Hussein's removal from government would destabilize the regional balance of power in favor of Tehran; and the commitment of the Obama administration to formalize the Iran nuclear deal in 2015, discarded by president Trump in May 2018 and resumed by the administration of President Joe Biden.

As for Pakistan, it cannot be said that it would respond to an Iranian aggression using its atomic arsenal in favor of the Saudis for fear of reprisals from India, but Islamabad and Riyadh are known to have military commitments that would work better as deterrent against Iran. The relationship between the two countries has advanced since 1998 when Saudi Arabia provided political and economic support to Pakistan after it received international sanctions for conducting nuclear tests.

In those critical times Saudi Arabia once again helped Pakistan by providing free oil facility for four years till 2003. For first two years 80,000 barrels per day were provided, while 40,000 barrels per day were provided for the remaining period. This facility was worth \$3.4 billion and accounted for 23 percent of Pakistan's oil imports. This facility helped stabilize Pakistan balance of payment crisis as well (AHMAD; FAISAL, 2018, p. 31).

The economic aid provided strategic gains for Riyadh. In 1999, former Saudi Minister of Defense and Aviation, Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, was the first foreigner to know a nuclear facility and some of the nuclear weapons in Pakistan. Six years later, his son Khalid bin Sultan, who served as Deputy Minister of Defense, was present on a Pakistani ground nuclear test (CIGAR, 2017, p. 91).

There is much speculation about the possibility of the Saudis buying up Pakistan's nuclear weapons to counterbalance Iran if it develops

such weapons. Even because, according to Mohammed Al Khilewi – a former first secretary of the Saudi Arabian mission to the United Nations who defected in 1994 to the US – Riyadh already tried to acquire this type of weaponry from Pakistan, and from the USSR, between 1975 and 1990. In addition, Al Khilewi also stated that Riyadh spent over seven million dollars on Pakistani and Iraqi nuclear programs (MIDDLE EAST QUARTERLY, 1998).

However, selling nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia might not be the best option for the Pakistani government due to the possibility of new international sanctions against Islamabad. On the other hand, Holloway (2016, p. 48) explains that it is not unrealistic to consider that benevolent Saudi financial support comes with the ties of nuclear support by the Pakistani government in case of need, especially after Kingdom officials know part of the country's nuclear arsenal in 1999 and 2005.

In addition to seeking allied nuclear umbrella security, it is assumed that a pre-emptive strike against some kind of critical Iranian nuclear infrastructure could at least delay the local program in a few years. This type of attack could start from the Saudi military itself, from one of the two allies previously mentioned, or even from Israel. Cigar (2017: 67, 68) indicates the likelihood of a scenario in which Riyadh would facilitate “any Israeli attack against Iran and, in fact, reports surfaced in 2013 that Riyadh and Tel-Aviv were coordinating operational support in case of an Israeli attack on Iran”.

Regarding this statement, Prince Al Waleed bin Talal (who despite being a Prince is a businessman who does not hold a government position), in an interview with Bloomberg in November 2013, said that “publicly, they [Saudi government] would be against it”, but “privately, they would love it”, because “the Persian empire was always against the Muslim Arab empire, especially against the Sunnis. The threat is from Persia, not from Israel” (GOLDBERG, 2013). In the same vein was the statement of the political analyst and former Saudi diplomat Abdullah Al Shammari. For him “Israel is an enemy because of its origin, but it is not an enemy because of its actions - while Iran is an enemy because of its actions, not because of its origin” (TROFIMOV, 2015).

However, it is possible to assume that the most effective form of deterrence for the Saudis would be to develop a nuclear program of their own to ensure its own protection. In this perspective, Cigar (2017: 90) argues that “realistically, it is probably not plausible that Saudi

Arabia would be able develop nuclear weapons relying on its own domestic capabilities in the foreseeable future, given its lack of physical infrastructure and cadres in this field". However, even the supposed removal of technical capacity did not prevent the creation of the Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Force (RSSMF).

RSSMF was created in 1986 and is responsible for the commissioning and operation of MRBMs. RSSMF currently operates Chinese-made Dong Feng (DF) missiles, such as DF-3, acquired in the late 1980s, with a range of up to 3,000 km and DF-21, purchased in 2007 with a range of approximately 1,700 km, lower than DF-3, but more accurately and capable of carrying nuclear warheads. According to Riedel (2018: 94-95), when these missiles were inspected in China they were equipped with nuclear warheads. But when Saudis received them, they were not anymore. Not to mention that the US only learned of their existence in 1988, through information from Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The importation of the 2007 Chinese missiles was apparently carried out with Washington's approval with an agreement that they should be inspected by CIA technical experts for confirmation that they would not have been designed to carry nuclear warheads. Still, this is no guarantee that some missiles could not be converted to gain that kind of capability (STEIN, 2014).

But instead of submitting to an ally's nuclear umbrella, or even the acquisition of Pakistani nuclear warheads or Chinese missiles, would Saudi Arabia have the capacity to have its own autonomy in this area by developing its own nuclear program capable of guaranteeing its security? A possible answer to this question is discussed in the following section.

## **THE KINGDOM'S TECHNICAL CAPABILITIES TO DEVELOP NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

In the Middle East, Iran appears as one of the countries with the highest aspirations to become the newest member of the nuclear club. Although Tehran defends that its nuclear program is peaceful in order to meet the internal demand for energy, the adoption of limited inspection policies by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has weakened this type of assertion and strengthened the interpretation that Iran intends to develop nuclear weapons. This could be the reason for Saudis to take the same path to balance Tehran and its political and military influence on Saudi strategic environment.

In the 21st century, one of the main events for Arab countries to invest in nuclear energy was the meeting of the Arab League in Khartoum, Sudan, in 2006, when its former Secretary General, Amr Moussa, encouraged member countries “to make use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes” (ARAB LEAGUE..., 2006). Also in 2006, GCC announced its intention for its members to invest in nuclear technology for peaceful purposes (COOPERATION COUNCIL FOR THE ARAB STATES OF THE GULF, 2006).

In 2010, a royal decree issued by King Abdullah set up King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KACARE), which has joined King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), created in 1977, as one of the Kingdom’s leading research, innovation, and development centers. In this context, with an ongoing nuclear program, could Saudi Arabia develop nuclear weapons to balance a possible Iran with this type of weaponry?

First of all, from a legal point of view, Saudi Arabia cannot develop nuclear technology for military purposes because the country is a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. In other words, its nuclear program must be geared towards peaceful activities. In addition, the Arab State has entered into a safeguards agreement with the IAEA, known as *Information Circular 746*, in which it undertakes to allow periodic inspections of its nuclear program facilities and to inform the Agency in advance of any transfer of nuclear material to within or outside its territory.<sup>5</sup>

Although Saudi rhetoric is about possessing nuclear weapons if Iran integrates such artifacts into its arsenal, as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated to CBS, Saudi Arabia is one of the leading countries advocating the establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East. In this way, if the NWFZ is to be established in a future scenario, Prince Turki defends two measures to make it viable in the region:

One is that countries that agree to be in the zone should get technical and financial help if they need it, to establish nuclear energy as a source of peaceful

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<sup>5</sup> To access full document, see: INFCIRC/746. Agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the IAEA for the Application of Safeguards in Connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Vienna, June 16, 2005. At: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/infcircs/2009/infcirc746.pdf> [Accessed March 31, 2020].

energy. And second, for the countries that do not agree to join the zone – or if they joined the zone and then develop programs to have nuclear weapons – that they should be sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, not only economically and politically but also militarily (DROLLETE, 2016, p. 21).

Nevertheless, defending a NWFZ in the region can be interpreted as a scientific incapacity on the part of the Saudis to increase a nuclear program aimed at military purposes. This idea was defended in an opinion piece published in *The Washington Post* on June 2015, in which author Fareed Zakaria stated, among other things, that Saudi Arabia could not build nuclear weapons because it had not even built a car<sup>6</sup> and that the Kingdom would not have enough skilled workforce or even where to train its scientists (ZAKARIA, 2015).

In response to Zakaria, Jeffrey Lewis argued that technology for the development of nuclear artefacts is quite different from that of car production and even countries that do not have a skilled auto industry like India, Pakistan, North Korea – and even USSR – progressed in the nuclear area. He also mentions KACARE, located in Riyadh for the purpose of developing nuclear energy and other alternative sources on Saudi territory to meet the goals of improving the national energy capacity in the strategic vision document *Saudi Vision 2030* (LEWIS, 2015).

Nawaf Obaid, a former adviser to the Saudi government, also defends Saudi Arabia's ability to develop nuclear weapons. According to OBAID (2015), countries need six components to develop a domestic nuclear program and Saudi Arabia has all of them, which are: "1) an adequate educational system, 2) skilled scientists, 3) financial means, 4) technological infrastructure, 5) belief there is a pressing security threat, and 6) the national will and leadership to do so". In addition, he also argues that many years before the creation of KACARE, Saudi nuclear physicists trained at renowned universities in Europe and the US have been carrying out research in this direction since KACST's foundation.

In this sense, international cooperation agreements were signed with countries such as Pakistan, China, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, South Korea, France, and Argentina (Cigar 2017: 129). Even the US signed

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<sup>6</sup> During this period, Meeya, the first line of locally manufactured automobiles by the Saudi and Malaysian automotive industry, was scheduled to hit the markets by 2017.

a memorandum of understanding with Riyadh, in 2008, in which they cooperate “to develop civilian nuclear energy for use in medicine, industry, and power generation and will help in development of both the human and infrastructure resources” (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2008).

In the Arab world, Jordan is one of the few partners of the Saudis. A partnership between KACARE, Jordanian Atomic Energy Commission and Jordanian Uranium Mining Company, in early 2019 sent Saudi scientists for staff training in the neighboring country to develop Saudi expertise in uranium mining (KACARE..., 2019).

One of KACARE’s main projects is to make feasible the use of nuclear energy to diversify Saudi Arabia’s dependence on fossil fuels, since the country is one of the world’s largest consumers of this type of energy source as previously mentioned. According to KACARE’s official website, nuclear energy would contribute to supporting the production of electricity and desalination, as well as multipurpose applications, including power generation, heat generation in the petrochemical industry and petroleum refining.

In order to operationalize a viable nuclear program to meet internal demands, it is necessary to consider the uranium supply. *Saudi Vision 2030* states that the country besides oil and gas is also rich in other resources like uranium but does not estimate reserves and production volume. It is known that this type of sensitive information is usually confidential, especially with countries like Iran and Israel in the vicinity. Even so, *Uranium 2020: Resources, Production and Demand* published by the IAEA and Nuclear Energy Agency does not include the Saudis among the main holders of this resource. However, it mentions the existence of significant unconventional resources, such as phosphates, in the country. Still with regard to uranium, during the Saudi Electricity Forum in October 2017, it was revealed that Preliminary studies have estimated Saudi Arabia has around 60,000 tonnes of uranium ore (WESTALL, 2017).

Should the Saudi program become feasible, it is possible for the country to reduce domestic consumption of oil and gas and thus to direct a larger portion of its production for export, aiming for greater profits in dollars. On the other hand, as warned by Cigar (2017, p. 133), with the Iranian perceived threat against the Kingdom, a peaceful nuclear program with advanced technology, infrastructure, and trained human resources could serve as an element support for the development of nuclear weapons, thereby increasing the risk of a nuclear race in the Saudi strategic environment and other parts of the Middle East.



## CONCLUSION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the Arab countries with the greatest prominence in the international and regional scenario because of its territorial extension, GDP, leading role in the oil market and for hosting the two holy cities of Islam, Mecca, and Medina, in its territory.

In its strategic environment, there are countries in which Saudi Arabia seeks to exercise political influence and others that dispute the position of regional power. In fact, the dispute between regional powers is something that Riyadh has faced at different times in its modern history. Currently, the Iranian nuclear program presents itself as another challenge to the Saudis, who have stated more than once that if Tehran develops nuclear weapons, they would follow the same path to balance the Persian country.

The possibility of a non-Arab country like Iran, with a long-range missile program at an advanced stage of development to possess nuclear weapons, is perceived by Riyadh as a serious threat to its national sovereignty and to its ability to influence other Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East region.

Therefore, this article sought to discuss whether balancing Iran would be a reason to Saudi Arabia to prevent neighboring countries from bandwagoning with Tehran by creating a regional hegemonic alliance capable of undermining its interests and, consequently, weakening its influence in the region. In this case, from a theoretical discussion based on the neorealist theory of International Relations, we concluded that if Iran becomes a nuclear power and if it be perceived as a regional threat by other Gulf countries, they would be more likely to bandwagon with Saudi Arabia to balance Iran, since they share common values as well as common security interests in this specific case.

On the other hand, we discussed the possibility of Saudi Arabia bandwagoning with other nuclear powers to balance Iran, such as the US, Pakistan and even Israel. In addition, the RSSMF was also mentioned because the Chinese missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads are some of the main deterrent options operated by the Saudis.

Furthermore, the current Saudi nuclear program has been approached by opposing views of experts who doubt or believe Riyadh's ability to develop an atomic bomb. In this context, we presented some of Saudi Arabia's main international partners and

the importance of mining uranium in its own territory to reduce dependence on imported raw materials.

Lastly, we conclude that the possibility of Iran becoming a nuclear power is the main motivator, but not the only one, of the Saudi interest in following the same path. Even if Iran develops its program only for peaceful activities, it is likely that Riyadh would seek some kind of parity, because much more than national security, the Saudis would seek to protect their honor and their preeminent position among Arab and Muslim countries from their strategic environment.

# ARÁBIA SAUDITA: ENTORNO ESTRATÉGICO E SEGURANÇA NUCLEAR

## RESUMO

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Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir a possibilidade de o Reino da Arábia Saudita desenvolver armas nucleares para equilibrar o Irã, caso o estado persa se torne uma potência nuclear na região do Oriente Médio. Assim, a pesquisa foi desenvolvida com base na declaração do príncipe herdeiro Mohammed bin Salman que disse que seu país desenvolveria uma bomba nuclear se Teerã desse o primeiro passo nessa direção. Além disso, buscou-se trabalhar com uma abordagem o mais próxima possível da visão interna do governo saudita, com depoimentos de personalidades políticas e autoridades governamentais sauditas. Este trabalho aborda o contexto regional saudita; a ameaça iraniana; alternativas de dissuasão da Arábia Saudita; e, finalmente, a capacidade do Reino em desenvolver seu próprio programa nuclear.

**Palavras-chave:** Arábia Saudita; Irã; Armas nucleares.

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