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Nuclear Weapons and Saudi Strategy

By Thomas W. Lippman

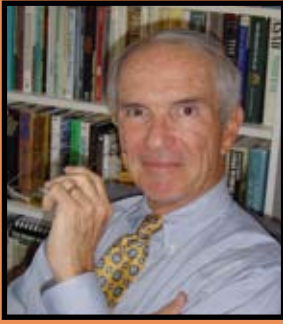
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Executive Summary

What would Saudi Arabia do if Iran acquired nuclear weapons? Many analysts in Washington and the Middle East assume that in the event of a nuclear breakout by Iran, Saudi Arabia would feel compelled to build or acquire its own nuclear arsenal. Given Saudi Arabia's vast wealth and strategic weakness, such a decision might seem logical, but that outcome should not be assumed. Saudi Arabia, a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, would face overwhelming technical, legal, and political problems if it sought nuclear weapons, and would antagonize its most important ally and protector, the United States. Lacking the industrial and technological base required to develop nuclear weapons on its own, Saudi Arabia would have to acquire them clandestinely from other countries, a destabilizing course that would position the kingdom as an international outlaw. The Saudis would much prefer an accommodation with Iran and progress toward its long-stated goal of making the entire region a zone free of nuclear weapons.

About the Author



Thomas W. Lippman is a former Middle East correspondent and a diplomatic and national security reporter for *The Washington Post* (1966-1999, 2003). He covered the war in Iraq for *The Washington Post's* online edition in 2003. He appears frequently on radio and television as a commentator on Middle Eastern affairs.

He is the author of several books about the Middle East and American foreign policy, including *Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (2004), *Madeleine Albright and the New American Diplomacy* (2000), *Egypt After Nasser* (1989) and *Understanding Islam* (1995). He has also written on these subjects for several magazines, including *The Middle East Journal*, *SAIS Review* and *US News and World Report*.

His latest book on the history of US engagement in Saudi Arabia and US-Saudi relations will be published in January 2008. Lippman is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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Middle East Institute
1761 N Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Tel: (202) 785-1141
Fax: (202) 331-8861

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It is widely believed among policymakers and strategic analysts in Washington and in many Middle Eastern capitals that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will feel compelled to do the same. In some ways this belief makes sense because Saudi Arabia is as vulnerable as it is rich, and it has long felt threatened by the revolutionary ascendancy of its Shi'ite rival across the Gulf. Moreover, some senior Saudi officials have said privately that their country's hand would be forced if it became known beyond doubt that Iran had become nuclear weapons capable.

The publication in late 2007 of portions of a US National Intelligence Estimate reporting that Iran had abandoned a program to weaponize nuclear devices in 2003 did not put an end to the speculation about a Saudi Arabian response; the NIE made clear that Iran was continuing its effort to master the uranium enrichment process, and could resume a weapons program on short notice.

It is far from certain, however, that Saudi Arabia would wish to acquire its own nuclear arsenal or that it is capable of doing so. There are compelling reasons why Saudi Arabia would not undertake an effort to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, even in the unlikely event that Iran achieves a stockpile and uses this arsenal to threaten the Kingdom.

Money is not an issue — if destitute North Korea can develop nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia surely has the resources to pursue such a program. In the fall of 2007, the Saudis reported a budget surplus of \$77 billion, and with oil prices above \$90 a barrel, Riyadh is flush with cash.

But the acquisition or development of nuclear weapons would be provocative, destabilizing, controversial and extremely difficult for Saudi Arabia, and ultimately would likely weaken the kingdom rather than strengthen it.

Such a course would be directly contrary to the Kingdom's longstanding stated goal of making the entire Middle East a nuclear weapons free zone. According to Sultan bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, the Defense Minister and Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, nuclear weapons by their nature contravene the tenets of Islam. Pursuing nuclear weapons would be a flagrant violation of Saudi Arabia's commitments under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), and would surely cause a serious breach with the United States. Saudi Arabia lacks the industrial and technological base to develop such weapons on its own. An attempt to acquire nuclear weapons by purchasing them, perhaps from Pakistan, would launch Saudi Arabia on a dangerously inflammatory trajectory that could destabilize the entire region, which Saudi Arabia's leaders know would not be in their country's best interests. The Saudis always prefer stability to turmoil.

SAUDI ARABIA AND THE NPT

Saudi Arabia, like Iran, is a signatory to the NPT and participates in the safeguard regime of the International Atomic Energy Agency. It signed the treaty only under duress, but its reluctance was not based on a desire to develop nuclear weapons. The Kingdom's position was that it would be happy to join the NPT system when Israel did so. But then in 1988 it was virtually forced to sign the NPT because of intense pressure from the United States.



Although it was a longtime strategic partner of the United States and a Cold War bulwark against communism, Saudi Arabia incurred the wrath of the administration of President Ronald Reagan by clandestinely acquiring at least 36 CSS 2 intermediate range ballistic missiles from China. (Some estimates put the number as high as 60.) The missiles, behemoths weighing nearly 70 tons with a range of about 1900 miles, were stationed in remote areas of the Kingdom and maintained by Chinese crews. Washington was not informed, and learned of the deployment only by accident. The Saudis declined to permit American officials to inspect the missiles.

From the Saudi perspective the acquisition made sense. Elsewhere in the Gulf region, the ballistic missile era had already arrived. The Kingdom's neighbors, Saddam Husayn's secular, anti-monarchical Iraq and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's anti-Saudi revolutionary Iran, were at the time hammering each other with missiles in their long war; Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and of course Israel also had surface-to-surface missiles. Saudi Arabia, always insecure and fearful of encirclement, had no comparable capability.

There was no prospect of purchasing intermediate range missiles from Saudi Arabia's preferred military supplier, the United States, because missiles that could strike Tehran also could reach Israel. The Saudis knew from the hostile reaction in Congress to their earlier efforts to acquire sophisticated weaponry that a ballistic missile sale would never be approved by Congress even if the Reagan administration endorsed it. China was under no such constraints as a vendor; and while the Chinese were communists and at that time not welcome even to visit vigorously anti-communist Saudi Arabia, they had no record of armed invasion of a Muslim country, as did the Soviet Union. As usual in Saudi Arabia, strategic self-interest trumped taboo.

From the American perspective, the Chinese missile deal appeared dangerous and destabilizing in several ways, even apart from the potential menace to Israel. It accelerated the Middle East missile race. It demonstrated a streak of independence and duplicity that Washington did not anticipate from Riyadh. It introduced China as an arms supplier to a country that had made opposition to communism a cornerstone of its long relationship with the United States. And most alarming, in all other known deployments, the CSS 2 carried nuclear warheads. Because of the CSS 2's inaccuracy, it is of little use in striking specific targets, and therefore has military value only as a delivery system for nuclear, chemical, or biological warheads, for which precision targeting is much less important than it is for conventional weapons. The arrival of such missiles in Saudi Arabia was seen in Washington as an indication that the Saudis might be secretly pursuing nuclear weapons — perhaps even planning to allow other Arab countries to use them to attack Israel, deploying the feared "Islamic bomb."

The Israelis warned that they might attack the missiles to preclude any possibility that they would face a nuclear-armed Arab foe — a serious concern for Washington, given that Israel had bombed a nuclear reactor (Osirak) in Iraq a few years earlier. American diplomats scrambled to pursue a complicated agenda with several moving parts: persuading the Israelis not to attack; making clear their displeasure with Saudi Arabia without disrupting an important strategic and commercial rela-



tionship; and persuading Congress not to cut off arms sales to the Saudis. According to the late Hume Horan, who was US ambassador in Riyadh at the time, “The Israelis told us, let it be known, that we better do something about those missiles or they would. We told the Saudis that there are nations in the area that are very concerned and threatening to take matters into their own hands.”¹

Discovery of the missiles ignited a predictable storm in Congress. Within a few weeks, bipartisan majorities in the House and the Senate had approved resolutions opposing the sale of ground support equipment for Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) planes the United States had sold to Saudi Arabia in 1981. The administration postponed formal notification to Congress of a new sale of \$450 million worth of military equipment. Secretary of State George P. Shultz traveled to Riyadh to seek a gesture that would quell the anti-Saudi clamor — namely, accession to the NPT.

The United States was “highly concerned” about Saudi deployment of the CSS 2, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Richard Murphy told Congress at the time, because “We had known it only in its nuclear capable mode in China.”

According to Murphy, who had previously served as US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, “The Saudis took what was available in deciding to join the group of missile-possessing states in the region that included Iran, Iraq, Syria, as well as North Yemen and Egypt, among others. Iran’s repeated use of missiles against Kuwait and the firing of a Scud missile at Kuwait’s oil facilities on April 20, 1988, as well as attacks upon Iraq and reports about possible attacks upon Saudi targets simply underscored the justification in Saudi eyes for their acquisition of a system to counter missiles in unfriendly hands.”

Murphy told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the Saudis “have assured us, at the level of the King, that they do not have and they have no intention of acquiring either nuclear or chemical warheads.” The assurances took the form of a letter from King Fahd to President Reagan, Murphy said. The decision to sign the NPT represented “a change in longstanding Saudi policy and a serious international commitment which should further assure neighboring countries of Saudi Arabia’s ultimate interest in stability in the region,” Murphy told the committee.²

The storm passed when Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to the United States, negotiated a deal: Saudi Arabia could keep the missiles provided it signed the NPT, which it then did.

The Saudis do not want a repetition of that angry confrontation with Washington. On the contrary, nearly two decades later, the policies of Riyadh and Washington on this issue seem to have converged. On July 31, 2007, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, including Saudi Arabia, along with the United States, Egypt and Jordan, issued a communique that said: “Recognizing the grave threat posed to regional and global security by weapons of mass destruction, and wishing to avoid a destabilizing nuclear arms race in the region, the participants concur that it is im-

1. Interview with author.

2. Testimony to House Foreign Affairs Committee, 100th congress, 2nd session, May 10, 1988.



portant to achieve the universality of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and for all parties to comply with it fully...The participants recognize the goal of a zone free of nuclear weapons on the Middle East.” That statement could have been drafted in Riyadh. The call for “universality” of the NPT could only have been aimed at Israel, the only non-signatory country in the region, and the call for full compliance was aimed at Iran.

RIYADH’S ATOMIC ENERGY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The same communique recognized the right of NPT members to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, as the Iranians now say they are doing. As the statement shows, Saudi Arabia is not opposed to nuclear development for commercial or scientific uses. The Kingdom has created an Atomic Energy Research Institute, which is based just outside Riyadh. Little has been written about this Institute in the mainstream press, but it is not clandestine; its research projects and the names and telephone numbers of its scientists are published on the web site of the King ‘Abd al-Aziz City for Science and Technology. I visited this institute in the late spring of 2004 and met with some of its scientists; they answered all my questions about their work, which relates to nuclear physics and nuclear materials, not to weapons, although of course some of the information would be relevant to a weapons programs. The institute was established in 1988, with this announced goal: “To adapt the nuclear sciences and technologies and utilize them in support of the economic, industrial, and agricultural plans of the Kingdom.”

The first objective listed is “drafting a national atomic energy plan and supervising the implementation of the plan.” Some of the research projects deal with topics that would be directly relevant should the Kingdom decide to move toward nuclear development for either civilian or military use, such as radiation monitoring and the transportation of radioactive material. Over the past decade, a handful of Saudi scientists have published peer-reviewed papers on such topics in professional journals and presented papers at international nuclear energy conferences, often in collaboration with scientists from Taiwan, a far more technologically advanced society. There has been no indication that these studies are anything more than academic exercises, or that Saudi Arabia has been importing nuclear scientists from other countries.

All that being said, a cardinal rule of intelligence and threat assessment is that one doesn’t know what one doesn’t know; it is theoretically possible that Saudi Arabia has a clandestine development or acquisition program that has eluded detection by the most rigorous analysts. As closely as Saudi Arabia has been linked to the United States for more than 50 years, there have been several episodes, in addition to the CSS 2 affair, in which the Saudis have been less than candid with the Americans and less than forthcoming with information. These include the investigation of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing and the initial response to the September 11, 2002, terrorist attacks. No possibility should be ruled out on the basis that no American has ever come across it.

There was a flurry of media speculation in 1999 when Saudi Arabia’s Defense Minister, Prince Sultan, became the first prominent foreigner to visit Pakistan’s missile factory and its nuclear weapons facilities at Kahuta. Neither country has ever



revealed full details of that visit, but Pakistan denied that it had anything to do with nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, such episodes have aroused concerns about possible nuclear ambitions because there is a certain plausibility to the idea that Saudi Arabia might aspire to have at least a small nuclear capacity as a deterrent to aggression.

There appears to be no possibility that Saudi Arabia — so long as it is ruled by the al-Saud family — would ever consider nuclear weapons for aggressive purposes because the Kingdom has not threatened any of its neighbors since the last border issues were settled decades ago, but deterrence is another matter. While the 2003 ouster of Saddam Husayn eliminated a hostile government in neighboring Iraq, the Kingdom's strategic weaknesses have not been ameliorated since the Chinese missiles were deployed in 1988, and its capacity to defend itself against the most powerful of its potentially hostile neighbors, Iran, has diminished.

STRATEGIC SHORTCOMINGS

With territory of more than 800,000 square miles, Saudi Arabia is a vast country, four times the size of France. Its capital, Riyadh, is in the center of the country, but otherwise its population centers and economic assets are concentrated along the Persian Gulf and Red Sea coasts. The oil installations that provide most of the country's revenue and the desalination plants that produce 70% of its drinking water are visible, vulnerable targets that could be devastated in short order by air assault or seaborne attack. Despite Saudi Arabia's large territory, it would be difficult for the population and the armed forces to retreat from the coasts and regroup in the interior because the interior is virtually uninhabitable; cut off from the coasts, the Saudis would be without food or water. Military supply lines would be severed. Moreover, Western military analysts agree that despite its multi-billion dollar purchases of military equipment over the past 30 years, Saudi Arabia does not have armed forces capable of defending the country against a large-scale attack.

So let us suppose that Saudi Arabia's currently testy relationship with the United States deteriorated to the point where the Saudis no longer felt they could rely on Washington's protection. If the Saudis could no longer assume that the armed forces of the United States are their ultimate weapon against external threats, might they not wish to acquire a different ultimate weapon? With that in mind, could not a reasonable case be made in the Saudis' minds for the development of an alternative security relationship, and perhaps a nuclear agreement, with another major power should relations with the United States deteriorate? A possible candidate for such a role would of course be China, a nuclear power that has a close relationship with Saudi Arabia's ally Pakistan and a growing need for imported oil. Sufficiently remote from the Persian Gulf not to pose a direct threat to Saudi Arabia, and no longer part of any international communist movement, China could theoretically be an attractive partner. This is not to say that Saudi Arabia is actually seeking such a relationship with any country other than the United States, but to be unaware of any such outreach is not to exclude it from the realm of possibility.

The Saudi Arabian armed forces have never developed a coherent national security doctrine that could provide a serious basis for acquisition and deployment



planning, let alone for a decision to acquire nuclear weapons. But to summarize the reasons why Saudi Arabia might pursue such a course: it is a rich but weak country with armed forces of suspect competence; outmanned by combat-hardened, truculent and potentially nuclear-armed neighbors; and no longer confident that it can count on its American protector.

Even before the Iraq War, Richard L. Russell observed in a 2001 essay arguing the case for Saudi acquisition of nuclear capability that “It would be imprudent, to say the least, for Riyadh to make the cornerstone of [its] national-security posture out of an assumption that the United States would come to the kingdom’s defense under any and all circumstances.”³ It might be even more imprudent now.

“From Riyadh’s perspective,” continued Russell, “the acquisition of nuclear weapons and secure delivery systems would appear logical and even necessary.” Those “secure delivery systems,” Russell argued, would not be aircraft, which are vulnerable to ground defenses, but “ballistic-missile delivery systems that would stand a near-invulnerable chance of penetrating enemy airspace” — namely, the CSS-2s.

Military experts say it is theoretically possible that the missiles could be made operational, modernized, and retrofitted with nuclear warheads acquired from China, Pakistan or perhaps, within a few years, North Korea. Any attempt to do so, however, would present immense technical and political difficulties — so much so that Saudi Arabia might emerge less secure, rather than more.

Even aside from the fact that such a nuclear program would place Saudi Arabia in the category of global nuclear outlaw along with North Korea and, by then, probably Iran, the acquisition of warheads would encounter strenuous opposition from the United States and Israel. Having watched Washington’s reaction to Pakistan’s nuclear tests in 1998, the Saudis are well aware that US law requires economic and military sanctions against nuclear proliferators. And whereas Pakistan and India had friends in Congress, willing to help them escape the network of mandatory sanctions, Saudi Arabia does not. If an angry Congress cut off Saudi Arabia from future purchases of US military equipment and Israel threatened a pre-emptive strike, the Kingdom’s position would be precarious to the point of untenability.

Moreover, confrontation and defiance are not Saudi Arabia’s style; the Saudis’ weapons of choice are cash and diplomacy. It is difficult to imagine the princes of the House of Saud deliberately positioning themselves as global outliers and inviting reprisals from countries capable of inflicting serious political and economic damage on them. With hundreds of billions of dollars of private Saudi capital and government funds invested in the United States, the Saudis would be ill-advised to risk an asset freeze.

To avoid such consequences, the Saudis could seek to acquire weapons secretly, as they did with the Chinese missiles. In the unlikely event that they could accomplish such a feat, the exercise could be self-defeating because nuclear weapons lose their deterrent value if their existence is unknown.

3. Richard L. Russell, “A Saudi Nuclear Option?” *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Summer 2001), p. 70.



Either way, covert or overt, acquiring nuclear warheads and installing them on modernized, retrofitted CSS 2 missiles capable of delivering them would require Chinese cooperation, which is unlikely to be forthcoming. Once a problem proliferator and the probable source of technology and material for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, China now has a higher interest in maintaining the nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States that went into effect in 1998, making possible US commercial sales to China's civilian nuclear power program. Having joined the NPT system in 1992, China is obliged "not in any way to assist, encourage or induce any non-nuclear weapon State to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other explosive devices, or control over such weapons or explosive devices."⁴ Under the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act of 1994, China would face revocation of the US nuclear cooperation agreement it worked so hard to secure, as well as economic sanctions, if it were deemed to have "aided or abetted" the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

With India as a strategic rival, the Chinese had some reason to help Pakistan acquire nuclear capability, and they continued to assist Pakistan's program even after adhering to the NPT. No such consideration prevails in the Middle East. Moreover, in the years since the SS 2 missile deal, China has become a major importer of oil and now presumably values stability in a region upon which it is becoming increasingly dependent.

Assuming that the Saudis would seek to acquire nuclear weapons despite all the potential negative consequences and that the Chinese would not cooperate, Riyadh would have to acquire a new fleet of nuclear-capable missiles for delivery in addition to the warheads themselves. This would greatly increase the cost, as well as the risk of detection, but it is theoretically possible. One source could be North Korea, which has been a prolific retailer of missiles and in the past would presumably have been willing to sell warheads or at least fissionable material. North Korea has now agreed to give up its nuclear weapons program, but the September 2007 air raid by Israel on a Syrian installation to which North Korea was reportedly suspected of shipping nuclear materials raised questions about Pyongyang's trustworthiness on this issue. In any case, doing nuclear weapons business with North Korea would put the Saudis so far outside the comfort zone of their relations with the United States, Europe, and Japan that it is difficult to imagine Riyadh taking such a step so long as the House of Saud reigns, regardless of the perceived threat.

A ROLE FOR PAKISTAN?

The other possible source would be Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has had a long and close relationship that survived Pakistan's multiple shifts from civilian to military rule and back.

Washington was alerted to the possibility of a Saudi turn to Pakistan for missiles and perhaps even nuclear warheads by Prince Sultan's 1999 visit to Pakistan's defense and nuclear facilities. It was believed to be the first time any outsider had been

4. Rodney Jones et al., *Tracking Nuclear Proliferation, 1998: A Guide to Maps and Charts* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 1998).



permitted to visit the Pakistani sites. By that time, Pakistan was openly in possession of nuclear warheads, having tested six the year before in response to tests by India, and was nearing production of a new generation of ballistic missiles with a range of 1,500 miles — a possible replacement for the CSS 2s in Saudi Arabia.

As conservative, Sunni Muslim nations with overlapping interests and complementary strengths, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had been considering formal security agreements since the 1950s. The appeal of such an arrangement was obvious: Pakistan had military knowhow, trained manpower, and experienced forces, but no money; the Saudis lacked military and industrial capability, but had plenty of cash. According to the United Nations' global compilation of treaties, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have a friendship pact dating to that era but no formal mutual defense agreement — indeed, Saudi Arabia has no formal defense agreement with any country, other than the loose arrangements of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and would be unlikely to enter such an arrangement with Pakistan out of fear of being dragged into the Kashmir conflict. But the security relationship between the two countries has been close since the late 1970s. After the tumultuous year of 1979 — the most stressful in modern Saudi history because of Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, the Iranian revolution, and the armed takeover by radical dissidents of the Great Mosque in Mecca, followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — a small contingent of Pakistani troops was deployed to Saudi Arabia. One unit was stationed at Khamis Mushayt, in the far south, the other in Tabuk, near the Jordanian border, far enough from the capital not to pose any threat to the ruling family. The Saudis, of course, footed the bill. These troops remained until 1987, when oil prices hit historic lows and the Saudis could no longer afford them.

In cooperation with the CIA, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia worked closely throughout the 1980s to recruit, train, equip and pay for the guerrilla war of Islamic resistance against the Soviet troops occupying Afghanistan. (Among the many Saudi individuals who participated in that conflict was Usama bin Ladin.) The Saudis congratulated Pakistan after its 1998 nuclear tests, and a few months later Crown Prince 'Abdullah, now the king, was received effusively on a visit to Lahore. In their joint statement about the visit, the two countries said that "Views were exchanged in an atmosphere of brotherhood and understanding in which prevailed mutual trust and compatibility of points of view which characterizes the Saudi-Pakistani relations." The statement said the visit symbolized the "permanent bond between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan."

There is little doubt that at least until recently Pakistan was pressing ahead with the development of additional nuclear weapons and the missiles by which to deliver them. In May 2002, Pakistan tested a new liquid-fueled missile known as the Haft-V, apparently based on North Korean technology, with a range of about 800 miles. That is less than half the range of the CSS 2s, but still easily enough to reach critical targets in Iran, Iraq, and Israel from Saudi Arabia. Later that year, the Bush administration revealed its concern that Pakistan was paying North Korea for its missile technology not in cash but in assistance to Pyongyang's nuclear program. The CIA reported in January 2003 that Pakistan has "continued to acquire nuclear-related equipment, some of it dual use, and materials from various sources — prin-



cipally in Western Europe.”

But times have changed and Pakistan is less likely now to undertake such a risky venture as helping Saudi Arabia develop nuclear weapons. The A.Q. Khan network of off-the-books proliferation, which supplied Libya and other countries, has been exposed and dismantled. Pakistan’s efforts to block a nuclear cooperation agreement between the United States and India would be undermined by its participation in a new proliferation arrangement. And Pakistan is in such a state of domestic political upheaval that it seems unlikely that anyone — including the embattled president, General Pervez Musharraf — would be willing or able to authorize such a deal.

Some US government officials believe that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have an understanding by which Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities would be made available on demand to Saudi Arabia if the Saudis found themselves *in extremis*, a guarantee purchased, in effect, by Saudi funding of Pakistan’s nuclear program. No known evidence supports this theory and some experts openly discount it. Among them is Gary Samore, a long-time student of Saudi Arabian security policy who was a senior arms control and nonproliferation specialist at the National Security Council in the Clinton Administration.

“I don’t believe there’s a deal that the Saudis already paid and could take delivery on demand and if I were the Saudis I wouldn’t trust the Pakistani to deliver on such a deal,” Samore said. “There’s no doubt the Saudis have delivered a lot of money to Pakistan, and some went to support the nuclear weapons program, but I don’t believe any such *quid pro quo* exists. What would be more likely would be that Pakistan would [again] station troops on Saudi soil, and those could include nuclear-armed forces.”⁵ These could be attack aircraft carrying bombs, missile squadrons deploying nuclear-tipped warheads, or ground troops, such as Pakistan previously sent to Saudi Arabia, now equipped with tactical — as opposed to strategic — nuclear weapons.

But against which potential foe of Saudi Arabia would Pakistan put its own interests at risk by deploying nuclear weapons in the Arabian peninsula? The Pakistanis know as well as anyone that the principal threats to the security and stability of Saudi Arabia are domestic and nuclear weapons have no value against these threats. They might actually stir up more trouble than they would alleviate.

In summary, there are some logical reasons why some senior Saudi princes might wish to pursue nuclear weapons in the event that Iran is known to have acquired them. Given the impenetrability of the Saudi decision-making process, it is impossible to know if such discussions have taken place in Riyadh. But on balance, the strategic, political and technological problems standing in the way of such a program make it unlikely if not impossible that Saudi Arabia would go down that road, no matter what happens across the Gulf.

5. Interview with author.