



# **Nuclear Peace in the Middle East: The Realist Case for Saudi Nuclearization**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper raises and refutes a number of counterarguments against Saudi nuclearization, and through an argument centred around Waltzian conceptions of neorealism, argues that it could stabilize the Middle East whilst fulfilling KSA's foreign policy goals in the event Tehran nuclearizes as well. It analyzes key details, such as the effect of nuclearization on the Gulf's immediate paradigm, the possibility of a nuclear cascade amongst other prominent Islamic nations, as well as the consequences of nuclearization on Saudi-American relations.

## Introduction

Nuclearization in the Persian Gulf has been a primary driver of Western foreign policy since the 1980s when Israel's bombing of the Osirak Reactor in Iraq sparked an inquiry into nuclear proliferation throughout the Arab Middle East (Wilson 1991, 11). International attempts to regulate weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) have largely focussed on Iraq and Iran, and the Second Gulf War is an example of Western states behaving irrationally due to fears of a nuclear Gulf. However, in the wake of America's unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a treaty designed by the US, UN, and EU to curb Iran's nuclear ambition, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS) stated that Saudi Arabia would pursue nuclear weapons if Tehran acquired them (Sabga 2020). This marks a stark departure from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) usually dovish foreign policy and forces a reconsideration of security paradigms in the Gulf (Michnik 2021). This paper argues that a nuclearized Saudi Arabia would stabilize the Middle East under the realist Nuclear Peace Theory. The essay will begin with an analysis of Saudi's current security paradigm and the routes through which it may acquire nuclear weapons. It will then define Nuclear Peace Theory and contextualize it in Middle Eastern regional power dynamics. This paper will address and refute counterarguments against Saudi nuclearization, grounded in their geopolitical context and neorealist theoretical frameworks.

## Nuclear Acquisitions

There are two routes toward developing a nuclear bomb for Saudi Arabia. First is creating a bomb using domestic enrichment plants –KSA's most logical path forward. This route would involve the purchase of enrichment infrastructure from pre-existing nuclear nations like France and South Korea to create reactors

capable of producing weapons (Crail 2008, 4). MBS publicly stated his intention to create these kinds of institutions in his Vision 2030 plan, announcing the development of nuclear power plants as part of his intention to diversify the country's energy sector with renewable sources (Sabga, 2020). Assuming MBS' plans follow their schedule, this would give KSA nuclear capabilities within the next five years (ibid).

The plan for local development is not without its issues. First, KSA's ability to develop nuclear weapons is regulated through a variety of international treaties. Saudi Arabia is a signatory to the Chemical Weapons Convention and has ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) (Bahgat 2006, 423). The development of WMDs would violate these treaties, incurring penalties and minimizing Saudi Arabia's recent efforts to integrate into the larger international community. Second, the development of nuclear facilities could prove a security risk for KSA, as Israel has a historical precedent of unilaterally attacking countries it believes to possess the potential to develop nuclear weapons (Ross 2005, 63). The likelihood of conflict is increased by Israel's perception of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic fanatic state, one that uses its massive resources to promote and fund hatred of the Jewish state (Bahgat 2006, 429). Although nuclear facilities would be constructed away from population centres, thus minimizing human costs, attacks from Israel would still place a financial burden on MBS' government, which would raise the already high costs of nuclear development. Finally, the creation of nuclear facilities plans to utilize Chinese funding, which would also hamper KSA's relationship with the United States (Chaziza 2022). The crux of Saudi Arabia's current deterrence strategy is its relationship with the US, the loss of which would force

a massive re-evaluation of military strategy (Bahgat 2006, 436-7).

The second option is the purchase of a nuclear bomb. This would prove highly advantageous to KSA as the kingdom possesses the financial means to buy one outright and would thus skip the logistic and financial headache inherent in developing one “in-house” (Bahgat 2006, 441). The purchase of a nuclear weapon would likely come from Pakistan, with whom KSA has –allegedly– already shared nuclear strategies and materials (ibid). However, this is unlikely for two reasons. First, Pakistan has a low supply of nuclear weapons and requires them for its ongoing conflict and persistent existential threat from fellow nuclear state India (Kristensen and Korda, 2021). Second, there is no precedent for nuclear weapons sales, and this would prompt huge re-evaluations of nuclear non-proliferation as a concept in nuclear states (Bahgat 2006, 442).

### **Security in Saudi Arabia**

Despite being the largest Gulf Nation in terms of landmass, the population of KSA is considerably lower than its neighbours, largely because most of the country is composed of an uninhabitable desert (Bahat 2006, 425). This has caused 85% of Saudi Arabia’s 30 million citizens to live in urban areas, prompting fear of invasion due to defensive blind spots in rural areas (Lackner, 2022). The huge amounts of empty land, combined with its economic potential as the dominant power in the global energy market and its 25% share of the world’s oil supply, have made Saudi leaders paranoid about foreign domination (Bahgat 2006, 425). This fear has been heightened by the hostile nature of Saudi Arabia’s neighbours and the shifting security paradigms, which have seen Iraq and Iran’s military threats rise and fall precipitously, thus creating an unstable environment (ibid).

First, to the north-west, KSA has a rivalry with Israel. Although it sympathizes with the plight of Palestinians and its roots in Arab Nationalism, Saudi Arabia differs from the rest of the Arab world in that its animosity towards Israel is derived from the latter’s control over the Al-Aqsa Mosque (ibid 427). This is due to KSA’s self-perception as the centre of religious Islam and definitive status as the centre of Sunni Islam, which it justifies through its control over the religion’s two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, and its vocal opposition to Iran’s endorsement of Shi’ite tenets. As such, Saudi Arabia refuses to recognize Israel while it controls Islam’s third holiest city, Jerusalem (ibid). In recent years, this has caused KSA to refute the increased integration of Israel into regional dynamics by holding out against the Abraham Accords and diplomatic normalization with Israel (Feierstein, 2022). This is not to say there has been no room for collaboration between KSA and Israel, as atheist communism and Arab secularism pose greater threats to the Muslim state than religiously motivated Zionism (Bahgat 2006, 426-7). However, relations have historically been and are likely to remain, hostile.

To the south, KSA is rivalled by the Republic of Yemen (ROY). At first glance, they are strikingly similar, as both have similar populations in size and demographic composition (Lackner, 2022). However, while Saudi Arabia is a firmly autocratic regime, Yemen was the region’s only republic whose government had checks and balances (ibid). It also has one of the worst economies in the region due to its low oil production and large rural population, which has isolated ROY from the region’s main industries (ibid). This poor economic performance has caused Yemeni citizens to emigrate to Saudi Arabia en masse. Today, thirty percent of Saudi’s population are Yemeni workers (ibid). Hostilities between the nations

have permeated their existence, ranging from early conflicts over Yemen's communist history to more recent rivalries between Houthi rebels and Saudi forces during the Yemeni civil war (Kessler, 2022). This civil war and consequent humanitarian crisis have been especially problematic for Saudi security - creating instability at home while also stretching its defence budget. Moreover, KSA's role in the current air and maritime blockades, destruction of medical infrastructure, social fragmentation, and other causes for the ongoing humanitarian crisis have stoked latent tensions between the nations, creating instability at their shared border (Lackner 2022).

Finally, to the northeast are the powerful Gulf nations, Iran and Iraq. Before the Second Gulf War, Saudi Arabia relied on Iraq and Iran, offsetting each other's military threats through repeated conflicts and proxy wars (Bahgat 2006, 438). This allowed Saudi Arabia to accumulate a nest egg of military resources and alleviate fears of direct invasion from either state, which, in either case, would prove disastrous due to KSA's significant material advantages (ibid, 441-2 ). However, in the wake of the Second Gulf War, this buffer has fallen, causing a new security paradigm to emerge wherein Iran is Saudi Arabia's primary rival and Iraq is a non-threat. Their rivalry falls along economic and ideological lines, as Iran holds 20% of the world's oil supply, second only to Saudi Arabia, and is the spiritual leader of Shi'ites, the second largest faction of Islam (ibid, 425). This rivalry has taken the form of a 'cold war,' wherein the two nations avoid direct conflict by battling through proxy rebel groups throughout the Middle East.

This act of patronage is emblematic of KSA's usual foreign policy of soft power, which it yields to great effect in diplomatic and economic arenas. The collapse of Middle Eastern nations patronized by Iran, such as Syria and

Lebanon, has opened the door for Saudi Arabia to curb Iran's regional sphere of influence through political interference and the funding of rebel groups (Ilishev 2016). In fact, with the notable exception of Yemen, Saudi Arabia is hesitant to get involved directly, preferring instead to patronize small groups and exercise its position as the world's largest oil exporter to strategic effect. The most notable case of this latter point occurred in the Yom Kippur War, during which KSA reduced its oil production to exert pressure on the United States to create a favourable peace treaty for Egypt. This has been a fixture of KSA's foreign policy with Israel, lobbying Western countries to exert pressure on the Jewish state, in addition to patronizing smaller states closer to Palestinian frontlines like Syria (Bahgat, 2006, 427). This strategy is what Saudi Arabia has used against Iran, avoiding military confrontations and utilizing Western relationships to sanction them and proxy groups to fight Shi'ite non-state actors like Hezbollah and Syrian rebels (IEMed, 2014).

### **Nuclear Peace Theory**

Having established Saudi Arabia's security concerns and goals, it is now crucial to define how the acquisition of nuclear weapons would simultaneously achieve KSA's strategic objectives and stabilize the Middle East. The theoretical crux of this argument relies on Waltz's Nuclear Peace Theory (NPT), which emerged as a realist argument to explain international peace in the wake of the Cold War. He notes that peace comes from interdependence, but while neoliberals attribute this to integrated financial markets and constructivists to the collective shift of combat norms, the possibility of mutually assured destruction was a nuclear war to ensure de-incentivizes nations with nuclear capabilities from attacking each other (Waltz 2000, 24). Waltz notes that realism is often

misunderstood as the endless pursuit of power instead of state behaviour placing primacy on self-interest (ibid, 28-32). Possessing WMDs enables nations to exert influence for improved fiscal and diplomatic arrangements, utilizing the threat of their military capabilities to gain these “non-traditional” realist concessions (ibid). This theory is further proven by Rauchhaus, who notes that direct conflict between states is greatly reduced when both states have nuclear weapons (Rauchhaus 2009, 271).

The condition of Nuclear Peace Theory aligns perfectly with Saudi foreign policy. The focus on soft power, achieved through resource superiority, would allow KSA to continue extending its economic and diplomatic advantages, while nations, seeing a strategic disadvantage, would be too afraid to retaliate. Traditional Nuclear Peace Theory dynamics would also parallel those currently existing between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as each nation opts to pursue conflict through patronized non-state actors in anarchic states instead of direct conflicts (Harrison 2021). However, there are a few counterarguments against the stabilizing effects of this weapon in the Middle East.

The first is derived from Waltz’s philosophy, which argues that regional polarity is a determiner of regional stability. He states that unipolar systems tend to produce the most unstable international systems, as all nations have a clear rival with which to balance power, and the hegemony is forced to overextend its resources to defeat rivals (Wohlforth 1991, 5). A nuclear Saudi Arabia, given its economic power and political presence throughout the region, could easily be construed as becoming a Middle Eastern hegemon, which would be especially contentious given the vast array of constructivist ethnic, religious and political rivalries throughout the region. In fact, a sudden concentration of power could prove extremely destabilizing, as the region has not had a singu-

lar, clearly defined military power since Egypt in the 1950s and mid-1960s (IEMed 2014). Due to the multitude of identities present in the region, as well as the large number of strategic/commercial interests for international actors, any hegemon would be destabilized not only by powerful actors within the region trying to power balance but also through attempts by hegemonic international actors seeking to maintain their space within the global power system

This counterargument, however, ignores two key principles. First, if Saudi Arabia nuclearized, it would not be the only power in the region with nuclear weapons, as Israel has allegedly possessed them since the 1960s. Saudi Arabia attributes the 20th-century instability of the Middle East to this unilateral nuclear imbalance, and thus, its acquisition would move the Middle East away from a unipolar nuclear system towards one in which multiple powers are able to balance each other (Bahgat 2006, 427). Second, KSA’s nuclearization is conditional on Iran’s development of nuclear weapons, rendering the Gulf regional ecosystem multipolar, as well as the larger Middle East-North Africa region (Sabga 2020). Saudi nuclearization would create a multipolar system wherein both Shi’ites and Sunnis possess the atomic bomb.

The second counterargument is based on Rauchhaus’ findings that while NPT is true in the case of two nuclear powers, possessing WMDs increases the likelihood of conflict in situations of asymmetrical power (2009, 271). He notes this through the stability-instability paradox, wherein the power imbalance between nuclear and non-nuclear states enables the former to default into force more frequently without fear of retaliation and wherein wars have higher levels of fatality due to the devastating weapons used by the non-nuclear side to balance power (ibid, 260). This argument, however, is based on data accumulated mostly through the framework of traditionally power-

ful states exerting power either during the Cold War or in subsequent NATO conflicts and fails to account for how localized regional asymmetry affects the use of force (ibid, 264-5). In this case, a good counter-example is France, which, despite having many non-nuclear nations in its proximity, has been less likely to engage with states forcefully than before the acquisition of nuclear weapons, which can be at least partially attributed to this military development. As such, while the point may hold up given the fractious modern history of the Middle East, there is precedent for asymmetric nuclear imbalances not resulting in increased violence through a strictly regional context.

### **Nuclear Cascades**

There is a fear that Saudi Arabia's acquisition of nuclear weapons would lead others in the region to do the same. The theoretical basis of this argument originates from the region's ambiguous polarity, whereby other prominent nations, such as Egypt, the UAE, and Turkey, may fear their loss of influence in the region and pursue the acquisition of nuclear weapons to compete with Saudi Arabia's power and influence (Crail 2008, 40). Guzan'sky notes that Sunni countries threatened by Saudi nuclearization will increase their nuclear activity, encouraging Iran to entrench its program (Guzan'sky 2022). Each nation has its own legitimate reasons to be threatened by Saudi nuclearization and the capabilities to create its own nuclear programs.

First, Egypt must be considered a regional power due to its undisputed status as the regional hegemon during the mid-20th century and its immense soft power in the Arab world. The trend of power dynamics during the latter half of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries saw Egypt's power wane whilst Saudi Arabia's grew. This loss of power can be attributed to two narratives. First is the waning of Arab

nationalism, which lent credence to Egyptian power through its association with Nasser and its effectiveness in fighting the "Zionist" threat. As of late, this philosophy has been supplanted by political Islam, most notably through the Muslim Brotherhood, which has centred KSA, the home of Sunni Islam, in political discourse. The second was Egypt's maiden peace treaty with Israel, which went against Middle Eastern ideals for a united Arab front against Israel (Quandt 1986, 357). Egypt's close diplomatic relationship with the United States further delegitimized its standing as a regional leader, causing its standing within the Arab community to diminish (ibid). Utilizing the realist framework on which this paper is built, Egypt is unlikely to cede its position to Saudi Arabia as the region's leader without a fight (Ross 2005, 63), following the Peloponnesian War principle wherein a rising power challenges a hegemon (Bagby 1994, 134). Additionally, Egypt already has the infrastructure to begin a nuclear weapons program due to its experimentation with nuclear energy to desalinate water (Crail 2008, 40).

However, it is unlikely that Egypt will pursue nuclear weapons for three reasons. First, the premise of a Peloponnesian paradigm, in the context of Egyptian and Saudi power structures, ignores the case of Saudi Arabia becoming the predominant Arab power in the region. It would be doing so by having been the region's predominant "soft" power for a long period, and it would be entering a multipolar system, not a unipolar system led by Egypt. Second, Egypt's diplomatic relationships with the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel would be negatively impacted by its development of a nuclear weapons program. US-Egyptian relations rely heavily on the military aspect of having a close friend in the Arab world. The possibility of nuclear conflict or escalated hostility between them and fellow American ally Saudi Arabia would likely lead to a reduction in

foreign aid, on which the Egyptian economy strongly relies. Meanwhile, KSA is responsible for sending defence materials to Egypt under its Palestinian support strategy, so conflict would place Cairo at a strategic disadvantage (Bahgat 2006, 426). Finally, due to its geographical proximity with Israel, known for its proclivity towards unilateral strategic action against Arab nuclear programs, Egypt would be putting itself at risk of Israeli retaliation. There is also the counterargument that Egypt has constantly advocated for global denuclearization, championing the destruction of all Middle Eastern WMDs in 1990 and co-sponsoring a UN resolution to ban nukes earlier in the century (Glaser 2015). However, Iran was also a champion of this resolution, so the changing norms of the region call this anti-nuclear precedent into question (ibid).

Turkey also has sufficient infrastructure to begin a nuclear weapons program and may choose to pursue one to reaffirm its growing economic presence and regional influence (Crail 2008, 40). This expansion of influence is especially relevant given the increased military presence of Turkey in anarchic states such as Syria, whereby Erdogan has been a massive patron of rebel groups and deployed Turkish forces in Northern Syria, recently launching ground attacks of its own after attacks from Kurdish militias (BBC 2022). However, Turkey is unlikely to acquire nuclear weapons due to its NATO membership, which, according to its guiding foreign policy principles, is a key element in Turkish National Military Strategy (Yazigioglu 2019). NATO membership allows for a nuclear sharing program, which means that Turkey cannot develop its own nuclear weapons but that it will be protected by America's nuclear umbrella in the event of an invasion (ibid). As such, Turkey is unlikely to develop nuclear weapons.

Finally, of the three nations mentioned ear-

lier, the UAE has the most robust nuclear program as it possesses the Arab world's first fully functional nuclear reactor, Barakah (Sabga 2020). It also holds a coveted 123 Agreement with the United States, which allows for the bilateral sharing of civilian nuclear components, materials, and know-how (ibid). Nuclear energy specialists question the use of nuclear fission for decarbonization in a region far more suited to cheaper solar energy, prompting questions of whether this program may serve a dual, militaristic purpose (ibid). However, this statement ignores that these treaties with the US have strict provisions concerning the violation of the arrangements which stop uranium enrichment and the reprocessing of spent fuel, which could have disastrous economic and diplomatic consequences. As such, the UAE is unlikely to be caught up in a regional nuclear cascade (ibid).

### **American Relations**

The most prominent nation which must be considered in nuclearization is the United States. In the context of Waltz's world system, the US arguably leads a unipolar system, and as such, any nuclear program that threatens that country's position in the international order may be met with retaliation (Wohlforth 1999, 6). The US has three strategies to minimize this threat. These include diplomatic strategies using treaties like NPT and the Budapest Memorandum to limit proliferation, military intervention as seen in the Second Gulf War, and economical means like the current sanctions on Iran and North Korea. However, in the case of Saudi Arabia, there are definite arguments as to why nuclearization may not lead to intervention from the US.

First, there is precedent within the Middle East whereby the US begrudgingly allows allies to develop nuclear weapons to defend against existential threats. Israel is alleged to have developed nuclear arms in secret even after norms



against nuclear weapons were established, and non-proliferation treaties were added to international law (Wilson 1991, 8). This is also true for India and Pakistan, which established their nuclear programs after the introduction of NPT (*ibid*).

All three of these nations are crucial American allies and justified their development through the existential threat of hostile neighbours (Bahgat 2006, 442). Saudi Arabia could easily argue the same due to the new Gulf Security paradigm and the low odds of surviving a direct attack from Iran. There is a caveat to this argument: none of these nations ratified NPT, whereas KSA has (*ibid*, 423). However, due to their role in OPEC and active hostility from Iran and Russia, sanctions are unlikely to be overly punitive to mitigate the risk of a global energy crisis.

This caveat factors into the second point that Saudi Arabia's economic relationship with the US prevents any massive retaliation from taking place. Saudi Arabia holds undue economic influence due to its role as the world's largest oil supplier, shielding itself from financial

retaliation from international institutions. With its role in this economy becoming even more important, given the interruption of Russian pipelines during the current war on Ukraine and the need for American industrialization to compete with China during its ongoing trade war, sanctions are unlikely to be overly punitive (BBC 2022; Huang 2021). In many ways, the US cannot afford to prevent Saudi nuclearization.

Third, under the Peloponnesian understanding of unipolar systems, America is likely to be challenged by China's rising power and, as such, requires more forces to combat Beijing's emerging threat. Therefore, America needs to remove or reduce its military presence in the Middle East, where it currently spends an exorbitant amount of resources and manpower to

remedy conflicts throughout the region (Kessler 2022). A strong military and nuclear ally in the region would reduce the need for direct involvement in such countries such as Syria. The close relationship shared with Saudi Arabia would allow America to do this, especially as the absence of strong allied forces to combat backsliding has led to disasters in disengagement from Iraq and Afghanistan. This point of American regional disengagement is actually threatening to Saudi Arabia, which views US military cooperation in the region as crucial to its foreign policy goals (Bahgat 2006, 430). As such, MBS could use the prospect of taking the lead as an American military proxy in the region to improve American economic and diplomatic relations further.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a nuclearized Saudi Arabia would, from a theoretical perspective, restore relative balance to a multipolar regional system in which a nuclearized Iran existed. It would likely not cause a further cascade throughout the region, nor would it interfere with Saudi Arabia's own foreign policy goals in regard to the United States. However, in practice, there are many reasons to suspect Saudi Arabia will not pursue nuclearization, which are outside the scope of this paper. However, for the purposes of this essay, a nuclearized Saudi Arabia would be not only a possibility but a positive force in regional MENA politics.

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