

## Is the Trump Administration Helping the Saudis Build a Bomb?

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President Donald Trump went dancing with the Saudi royals in Riyadh, where he tried to sell America's principles in exchange for a mess of weapons contracts. Since then, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has become Saudi Arabia's lead PR counsel in America. The Pentagon is the Saudi regime's premier armorer.

Now Energy Secretary Rick Perry is acting as chief nuclear procurer for the Saudis. "By ramming through the sale of as much as \$80 billion in nuclear power plants," *The New York Times* warned recently, "the Trump administration would provide sensitive knowhow and materials to a government whose de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has suggested that he may eventually want a nuclear weapon as a hedge against Iran and has shown little concern for what the rest of the world thinks."

Obviously, Trump has not endorsed a Saudi nuclear weapon. However, his administration's ongoing attempt to provide the Kingdom with nuclear technology raises serious questions about U.S. policy.

America's relationship with Riyadh has long been fraught with tension, inconsistency, and hypocrisy. The faux friendship revolves around oil, the lifeblood of the Western economy. However, the fracking revolution turned the U.S. into an energy super-supplier, and other hydrocarbon sources have since emerged. And if Washington stopped routinely sanctioning other governments for not following its dictates, oil producers such as Iran, Russia, and Venezuela would be supplying international markets, further reducing Riyadh's importance.

American officials like to promote the Saudis' antediluvian absolute monarchy as the foundation for Middle East stability. Alas, the price is unrivaled repression. Despite the crown prince's reputation as a social reformer, he so far has not relaxed the Kingdom's totalitarian political or religious controls one bit.

And that brutality has not guaranteed stability. Saudi Arabia looks brittle, an artificial, antiquated governing structure held together by tyranny and bribery. In time, it will likely lose to demands for justice, equality, and democracy, which have doomed a host of other corrupt, brutal, Mideast dictatorships, most recently Sudan's Omar al-Bashir.

Outside of the country, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) has pursued a wild and reckless strategy of regional domination. Even Senator Lindsey Graham, perhaps the United States' most war-happy lawmaker, has called MbS "crazy," "dangerous," and a "wrecking ball."

The KSA has backed radical Islamists in Syria, subsidized the al-Sisi dictatorship in Egypt, kidnapped Lebanon's prime minister, used troops to sustain Bahrain's dictatorial Sunni monarchy, isolated Qatar, kidnapped and murdered Saudi critics in foreign nations, invaded Yemen, intensified the Mideast's long-running sectarian conflict, and promoted General Khalifa Haftar's attack on Libya's internationally recognized government. MbS is even willing to court war with Iran if he believes it's necessary for regional domination.

Moreover, the Saudi royals are not Westerners in different dress. They have poured \$100 billion into the promotion of intolerant fundamentalist Wahhabism around the world, including in Yemen, where a Saudi-Emirati coalition has allied with radical jihadists against the Houthis, who had opposed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Nuclear weapons would further embolden MbS. Currently there is no active nuclear program. Nevertheless, suspicions about Riyadh's intentions are legion. A decade ago, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz told U.S. officials that if Iran acquired a nuke, "we will get nuclear weapons." Last year, MbS said, "If Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible."

Nevertheless, the Trump administration is pushing the sale of nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia. And no one seems to know what safeguards will be imposed and whether MbS will abide by those limits. "There's a legitimate question over whether such a government could be trusted with nuclear energy and the potential weaponization of it," worries Senator Marco Rubio. Senator Jeff Merkley agrees: "The last thing America should do is inadvertently help develop nuclear weapons for a bad actor on the world stage." The two are pushing legislation that would give Congress the final say over any sale.

The transfer of nuclear reactors is usually not controversial, so long as it's accompanied by a cooperation agreement under Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act. Deputy Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette insists, "We won't allow them to bypass 123 if they want to have civilian nuclear power that includes U.S. nuclear technologies." Legislators remain wary, however, complaining that seven permits, called "Part 810 authorizations," have been issued to firms to provide nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia without notification to Congress. "I believe the Saudis saw an opportunity with Trump and [son-in-law Jared] Kushner to conclude this rapidly on their terms, holding out the promise of major purchases," charges Thomas Countryman, head of the Arms Control Association.

In fact, the Saudis, in contrast to the Emiratis, want to enrich uranium, which offers a principal opportunity to divert nuclear materials for military use. And Riyadh hasn't agreed to any weapons inspections. As a result, if the Saudis come to believe they "need" a bomb—and their criteria might broaden over time—any peacetime program could automatically be turned into one for military development.

Admittedly, America's refusal to deal might not stop Riyadh. Prince Turki al-Faisal has pointed to China, France, Pakistan, and Russia as other options, a point that's been echoed by administration officials. Even so, Washington should not aid, even inadvertently, another nation, especially such a repressive and aggressive power, in acquiring nuclear weapons. The consequences would be grave, including to America's nonproliferation credentials.

Prince al-Faisal also pointedly included "our friends in Pakistan" as a nuclear power option. But Islamabad could provide more than peaceful energy. Riyadh might purchase weapons directly

from the cash-strapped and unstable Pakistan government—especially since the Saudis financed the Pakistani nuclear program. Doing so would cause an international furor, but for years, A.Q. Khan, father of the Pakistani bomb, has essentially operated a Nukes “R” Us open to the world. When confronted, Islamabad closed down Khan’s market, but with the right incentives it might be convinced to accept another client.

Six years ago, Israel’s former head of military intelligence, Amos Yadlin, claimed that Pakistan had already produced and set aside weapons for Riyadh. Gary Samore, who advised President Barack Obama on nonproliferation, observes, “I do think that the Saudis believe that they have some understanding with Pakistan that, in extremis, they would have claim to acquire nuclear weapons from Pakistan.”

The Trump administration’s fixation on Iran has malformed American policy towards the rest of the Mideast, including Saudi Arabia. The United States should not take sides in the bitter Sunni-Shia rivalry that lies beneath the Saudi-Iran conflict. It certainly shouldn’t treat Saudi Arabia as a permanent and trusted ally. The latter shares neither values nor interests with the United States, and is aggressively pursuing dangerous imperial ambitions.

Washington should drop its support for MbS’s irresponsible policies and be on guard against the Kingdom’s possible acquisition of nuclear weapons. A Saudi bomb would unsettle the region, guarantee a Middle Eastern nuclear arms race, and encourage sectarian conflict. MbS can’t be trusted with a bone saw, let alone nukes.

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