

Dorsey's Column

Saudi-Iranian Rivalry fuels Potential Nuclear Arms Race

James M. Dorsey

Saudi Arabia is developing nuclear energy and potentially a nuclear weapons capability.

The Saudi focus on these nuclear capabilities serves various of the kingdom's goals: diversification of its economy, reduction of its dependence on fossil fuels, countering a potential future Iranian nuclear capability, and enhancing efforts to ensure that Saudi Arabia rather than Iran emerges as the Middle East's long-term, dominant power.

Cooperation on nuclear energy was one of fourteen agreements worth US \$65 billion signed during the visit to China by Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in March 2017. The agreement concerns a feasibility study for the construction of high-temperature gas-cooled (HTGR) nuclear power plants in the kingdom, as well as cooperation in intellectual property and the development of a domestic industrial supply chain for HTGRs built in Saudi Arabia.

The agreement was one of a number of nuclear-related understandings concluded with China in recent years. Saudi Arabia has signed similar agreements with France, the United States, Pakistan, Russia, South Korea and Argentina.

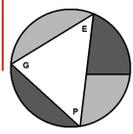
To advance its program, involving the construction of sixteen reactors by 2030 at a cost of US \$100 billion, Saudi Arabia established the King Abdullah Atomic and Renewable Energy City devoted to research and application of nuclear technology.

Saudi cooperation with nuclear power Pakistan has long been a source of speculation about the kingdom's nuclear and strategic ambitions. Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, asserts that Saudi Arabia's close ties to the Pakistani military and intelligence services during the anti-Soviet *jihad* (holy war) in Afghanistan in the 1980s gave the kingdom arms' length access to his country's nuclear capabilities.

"By the 1980s, the Saudi ambassador was a regular guest of A. Q. Khan" or Abdul Qadeer Khan, the controversial nuclear physicist and metallurgical engineer who fathered Pakistan's atomic bomb, Mr. Haqqani said in a recent interview.

Retired Pakistani Major General Feroz Hassan Khan, the author of a semi-official history of Pakistan's nuclear program, has no doubt about the Saudi kingdom's interest and intentions.

"Saudi Arabia provided generous financial support to Pakistan that enabled the nuclear program to continue, especially when the country was under sanctions," Mr. Hassan Khan said in a separate interview. Mr. Khan was referring to US sanctions imposed in 1998 because of Pakistan's development of a nuclear weapons capability. He noted that at a time of economic crisis, Pakistan was with Saudi help able "to pay premium prices for expensive technologies."



The Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) said in a recently published report that it had uncovered evidence that future Pakistani “assistance would not involve Pakistan supplying Saudi Arabia with a full nuclear weapon or weapons; however, Pakistan may assist in other important ways, such as supplying sensitive equipment, materials, and know-how used in enrichment or reprocessing (Burkhard *et al.* 2017: 5).” The report said it was unclear whether “Pakistan and Saudi Arabia may be cooperating on sensitive nuclear technologies in Pakistan. In an extreme case, Saudi Arabia may be financing, or will finance, an unsafeguarded uranium enrichment facility in Pakistan for later use, either in a civil or military program” (Ibid: 5).

The report concluded that the 2015 international agreement dubbed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to curb Iran’s nuclear program had “not eliminated the kingdom’s desire for nuclear weapons capabilities and even nuclear weapons... There is little reason to doubt that Saudi Arabia will more actively seek nuclear weapons capabilities, motivated by its concerns about the ending of the JCPOA’s major nuclear limitations starting after year 10 of the deal or sooner if the deal fails,” the report said (Burkhard *et al.* 2017: 5).

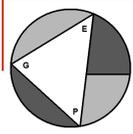
Rather than embarking on a covert program, the report predicted that Saudi Arabia would, for now, focus on building up its civilian nuclear infrastructure as well as a robust nuclear engineering and scientific workforce. This would allow the kingdom to take command of all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle at some point in the future. Saudi Arabia has in recent years significantly expanded graduate programs at its five nuclear research centres.

Saudi officials have repeatedly insisted that the kingdom is developing nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes such as medicine, electricity generation, and desalination of sea water. They said Saudi Arabia is committed to putting its future facilities under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Saudi Arabia pledged to acquire nuclear fuel from international markets in a 2009 memorandum of understanding with the United States. In its report, the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) noted however that the kingdom could fall back on its own uranium deposits and acquire or build uranium enrichment or reprocessing plants of its own if regional tension continued to fester. It quoted a former IAEA inspector as saying Saudi Arabia could opt to do so in five years’ time.

Saudi Arabia’s nuclear agency has suggested that various steps of the nuclear fuel cycle, including fuel fabrication, processing and enrichment, would lend themselves to local production. Saudi Arabia has yet to mine or process domestic uranium.

Saudi insistence on compliance with the IAEA and on the peaceful nature of its program is designed to avoid the kind of international castigation Iran has been subjected to. Saudi Arabia is likely to maintain its current position as long as Iran adheres to the 2015 nuclear agreement and US President Donald J. Trump does not act on his campaign promise to tear up the accord. President Trump has toughened US Administration’s attitudes towards Iran but has backed away from tinkering with the nuclear agreement—at least for now.



“The current situation suggests that Saudi Arabia now has both a high disincentive to pursue nuclear weapons in the short term and a high motivation to pursue them over the long term,” the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS)’s report said (Burkhard *et al.* 2017: 39).

Saudi ambitions and the conclusions of the said report put a high premium on efforts by Kuwait and Oman to mediate an understanding between Saudi Arabia and Iran that would dull the sharp edges of the two countries’ rivalry.

Kuwait’s and Oman’s leaders and officials also are likely to persuade President Trump to try to pressure Iran to guarantee that it will not pursue nuclear weapons once the JCPOA expires in a little over a decade. That may prove a tall order given Trump’s warming relations with anti-Iranian Arab autocracies evident in the recent visit to Washington by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and an earlier visit by Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

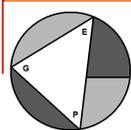
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An earlier version of the article appeared at [http\[s\]://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2017/04/saudi-iranian-rivalry-fuels-potential.html](http[s]://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2017/04/saudi-iranian-rivalry-fuels-potential.html).

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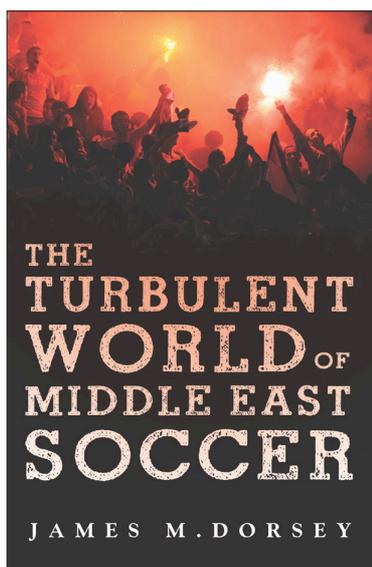
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THE TURBULENT WORLD OF MIDDLE EAST SOCCER

JAMES M. DORSEY

James M. Dorsey introduces the reader to the world of Middle Eastern and North African football — an arena where struggles for political control, protest and resistance, self-respect and gender rights are played out. Politics was the midwife of soccer in the region, with many clubs being formed as pro- or anti-colonial platforms and engines of national identity and social justice. This book uncovers the seldom-told story of a game that evokes deep-seated passions.

Football fans are shown to be a major political force and one of the largest civic groups in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood: their demands for transparency, social justice, and an end to corruption sparked vicious street battles that left scores dead and thousands wounded. Discontent in Algeria erupts regularly at matches where fans demand the ouster of

military leaders. A folk-song crooning national goalkeeper leads protests in Homs, Syria's third largest city and scene of some of the worst violence perpetrated by Bashar al-Assad's regime. In a country that bans physical education for girls, Saudi women have established clandestine football clubs and leagues. The book further tells the story of Somali child soldiers turned soccer stars and Iranian women who dress as men to smuggle themselves into stadiums to watch matches.

'A rare combination of scholar and journalist, James Dorsey offers us a fresh lens through which to look at contemporary events in the Middle East and North Africa. Insightful, provocative, and fun to read, this is a welcome addition to the meagre scholarship on sports and politics in this region.'

— Raanan Rein, Tel Aviv University, author of *Fútbol, Jews, and the Making of Argentina*

'This might well be the single most important and informative book on the Arab Spring yet written. A must read for anyone who wants to understand the deeper social and cultural processes underlying the uprisings and counter-revolutionary processes that have shaken the region the last five years.'

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Dorsey masterfully conveys the complex machinations of politics and culture through his analyses of the words and actions of real people expressing their passions about their lives through the medium of "the kicking sport." Sports fans and political junkies will greatly enjoy and learn from this fascinating book.'

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