

## **Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East**

**Daniel Serwer**

With revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action now moot, Iran has proceeded with uranium enrichment to 60%. It would require little time—perhaps a week—to produce sufficient fissionable material for a nuclear weapon. Delivery systems are available. [The long pole in the tent is now weaponization](#). But it is not very long: perhaps six months rather than years.

While Iran might still stop short of weaponizing and deploying nuclear weapons, the question few are asking is how other countries in the region will react even to the current situation. Turkish President Erdogan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman have made statements of their intention to match Iran if it acquires nuclear weapons. But doing so quickly would require that they move now in that direction rather than waiting.

Turkey has reasons to hesitate. It already has US nuclear weapons on its territory and might risk losing them and disrupting recent improvements in its relations with Washington if it undertakes its own nuclear weapons program. It is not only an NPT signatory but has also signed an Additional Protocol and a 123 Agreement with the US, albeit one that requires renewal this year.

Saudi Arabia is likewise an NPT signatory but has not signed an Additional Protocol and has refused to sign a 123 Agreement. It has linked doing so to restraining the Israeli nuclear program, but it has also been seeking American nuclear technology, which would require a 123 agreement.

As NPT signatories, neither Saudi Arabia nor Turkey is likely to announce intentions to develop nuclear weapons. IAEA Safeguards should provide some transparency about their intentions. But Safeguards, especially without an Additional Protocol, would still allow enrichment and other unannounced dual-use research and development. Once Turkey or Saudi Arabia begins to enrich, a regional arms race will pit Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and possibly Egypt against each other, in addition to Iran. Israel's nuclear weapons loom in the background, as do Pakistan's.

That is a nightmare scenario. It therefore behooves the international community to keep a close eye not only on Iran but also on the other potential nuclear powers. This can be done, but it requires much greater focus on the Turkish and Saudi nuclear programs than is apparent in the public sphere. Indicators only indicate if they are watched.

What is needed is an open-source effort to determine if Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt has embarked on an effort to match Iranian enrichment, weaponization, and delivery capabilities. Such an effort would itself constitute a barrier to proliferation, albeit a modest one. More important would be the incentive it would provide for the US, Europe, Russia, and China to be more attentive and pre-emptive in preventing a wide nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

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