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[Home](#) > Pak-Saudi Nuclear Weapon Collaboration? Challenge to Middle-East Stability

Pak-Saudi Nuclear Weapon Collaboration? Challenge to Middle-East Stability

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 01/29/2016 - 10:15

Paper No. 6067

Dated 29-Jan-2016

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Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Abdel Al-Jubeir recently gave a loaded answer to a CNN question about his country's nuclear co-operation, raising red flags from the Middle East to South Asia. He replied (Jan. 22) "I am not going into details of the discussions we have with foreign governments, and certainly not allied governments. I'm sure you understand", adding that Saudi Arabia does not negotiate over two things – "faith and security". Al-Jebeir went on to say that his kingdom will do whatever it takes to protect the nation and its people from any harm. He declined to say any more, leaving the international community to decipher his statement.

Al-Jubeir's statement came a day after US Secretary of State, John Kerry warned both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan against indulging in nuclear weapons trade, adding that there would be "all kinds of NPT consequences" if Riyadh went ahead with such a plan. Saudi Arabia is a signatory to the NPT, while Pakistan is not.

The Saudi message to the Obama administration leaves little to the imagination. By negotiating the nuclear agreement with Iran and lifting nuclear related sanctions, Riyadh's old ally and friend – the US – has empowered its existential enemy. Even if Iran's nuclear weapons infrastructure is being dismantled under IAEA supervision, the expertise will remain in the minds of Iranian scientists and engineers. Its peaceful nuclear industry will continue to function, and lifting of sanctions will release billions of dollars of Iran's frozen assets. Iran will have the freedom to trade with Europe, and the United States can further its financial and technological strength.

Saudi Arabia has drawn a red line. It is not for nothing that it has funded the Pakistani nuclear weapons programme with billions of dollars. Pakistan is very well aware of this, and its dependence on Riyadh for many other things including Pakistan's internal politics (Riyadh provided political refuge to Nawaz Sharif) and empowering its Sunni Islam programme.

With rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the past year, Pakistani leaders in recent months have warned Iran of serious consequences if it attacked Saudi Arabia. Riyadh-Tehran tensions became particularly acute after the Saudis executed Nimr-al-Nimr, a Shia cleric of Saudi Arabia who was perceived to be sharply critical of the royal family. The execution led to a public attack and protests against the Saudi embassy in Tehran, which the Saudis claim was instigated by the Iranian authorities. In retaliation, the Saudis expelled the Iranian diplomats and embassy officials and cut off all relations with Iran.

Iran is unlikely to forget the execution of Nimr-al-Nimr in a hurry. They will extract some cost from Riyadh, but how and when has not been determined. Iran also claims that the nuclear sanctions against Iran had left the field open for the Saudis to expand their extremist Wahabi religious influence in the region.

The stage is being set for a fierce Wahabi – Shia competition from Syria to the gulf. Pakistan, which has the relationship of an ally with Saudi Arabia, may get dragged in. While it has pledged to defend Saudi Arabia and retains a garrison there, it politely declined to join Riyadh militarily in the latter's military intervention in Yemen. But when the Saudi's demand that Pakistan deliver readymade nuclear weapons for which they have paid for years, the much vaunted "Islamic bomb", what will Pakistan's response be?

Saudi Arabia has been in the forefront for decades demanding a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East. It has signed several conventions other than the NPT. Much of this derived from Israel's unstated nuclear weapons status. But it also walked the nuclear path for several decades under the garb of a peaceful nuclear programme, including nuclear power. It has a fund of \$ 80 billion for building nuclear power plants, yet there is no evidence that it has even earmarked locations for such plants. The only information that has filtered out is that Saudi Arabia's nuclear establishment has started prospecting for uranium on their soil.

The late King Abdullah decided to set up an umbrella nuclear research centre, the King Abdullah Atomic Energy City. Several Saudi nuclear scientists have earned PhDs from prestigious universities in the US and the UK. But the country is still far away from setting up facilities which can produce High Enriched Uranium (HEU). This process takes a long time and will possibly include acquiring technology from abroad illegally. This path will land Riyadh squarely into international sanctions, which will hurt the Saudis severely since their oil exports will be hit. Almost 90% of the Saudi economy is oil-dependent and the plunging international oil prices are beginning to have negative effects on oil producing gulf countries.

Over the recent past, several top officials, including Prince Turki al-Faisal said (2011) that the kingdom might consider producing nuclear

weapons if it found itself caught between nuclear weapons of Israel and Iran.

The immediate option however, remains Pakistan's nuclear weapons. China has armed Saudi Arabia with about 60 to 70 CSS-2 medium range missiles, acquired in the mid-1980. These missiles, although armed with high explosive conventional warheads are also reportedly nuclear capable. There are reports that suggest that the Saudis have imported medium range (1500 kms) nuclear capable Ghauri missiles from Pakistan. The west turned a blind eye to this missile proliferation as the US president declined to make a determination when Pakistan acquired M-11 nuclear capable missiles from China in the early 1990s. This, despite the smoking gun evidence that US intelligence services provided to their President. Saudi Arabia is not convinced by the US argument that Iran's nuclear weapons have been effectively capped, and the IAEA is maintaining a close surveillance on it. From one angle, it appears the new Saudi leadership with the King's young son in charge of defence but with little or no experience in international affairs, has a free hand in determining the kingdom's military power. Pakistan on the other hand, is caught in a cleft. Can Islamabad and Riyadh declare an alliance like NATO claiming a nuclear umbrella over its constituents? If that were to happen the security and stability of the region will be severely disturbed.

Pakistan would have to declare what could determine it to use or activate this nuclear option without actually transferring nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia. The region is not so gradually slipping into a complex situation with nuclear overtones. That Saudi-Iranian competition, if not hegemony, of the region is clearly evident. Major Powers will have to step in. Two countries that have the maximum leverage here are the US and China.

If they act in an impartial manner, the situation could be retrieved. India will come under significant challenges in the midst of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Its foreign policy establishment has a difficult road ahead.

The question is – Can India sit aside with arms folded? Not if it wants its stature of a stabilizing power. It will have to activate its diplomacy between two viscerally antagonistic nations for the first time since Prime Minister Nehru tried to negotiate between the US and the Soviet Union.

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Tags:

[Pak-Saudi Arabia Relations](#) [1]

[Nuclear Saudi Arabia](#) [2]

[Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations](#) [3]

Category:

[Papers](#) [4]

Countries:

[West Asia](#) [5]

Pakistan [6]

Topics:

WMD [7]

Political [8]

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[1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1339>

[2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1340>

[3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1341>

[4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>

[5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/west-asia>

[6] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/pakistan>

[7] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/wmd>

[8] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/political>