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The Nuclearization of the Middle East

By Hamza MJAHED

Summary

The Middle East is currently witnessing a proliferation of nuclear programs that is the harbinger of headaches. A nuclear domino effect has occurred, and its implications are unpredictable but dangerous. Regional disarmament and non-proliferation initiatives are not in the cards and are becoming outdated concepts, especially since most Middle Eastern powers are systematically constructing nuclear facilities that could be used for military purposes. With shifting power dynamics shacking the region, nuclear programs are also becoming captives to the great-power competition. Hence, collective nuclear arms control is key to the Middle East's stability, and the current dynamic is untenable for regional security.

Introduction

Since the Arab Spring, the Middle East has seen the rise of new leaders, each with the ambition to lead the Arab world. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has confirmed itself as a regional powerhouse through a dynamic foreign policy and bold national targets. In July 2020, the oil-rich state successfully launched its first space mission to orbit Mars (one of the world's first such missions). Shortly after, in August 2020, the UAE opened the Barakah nuclear power plant, becoming the first Arab nation to accomplish such an achievement. The UAE has insisted the plant is intended for civilian purposes only. Nonetheless, the animosity between various Middle-Eastern states points to a potential security and environmental headache if nuclear programs continue to proliferate. The Emirati nuclear plant is located close to Qatar, and the peninsular country has described it as a serious threat to regional stability. The development of a nuclear program is a means to assert leadership, and it certainly has an economic aspect, but this cannot disguise the fact that the Middle East is at an atomic crossroads. Iran and Israel have succeeded in setting up controversial nuclear programs, while Saudi Arabia's quest for regional dominance is partly powered by an ambitious nuclear project. This should make us question, is the Middle East heading towards nuclear proliferation?

The debate on nuclear proliferation is inextricably linked to the international regimes for arms control and disarmament. Many regional powers remain outside the regimes, principally in the Middle East, which remains one of the few regions not to have declared a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ), defined by the UN Office for Disarmament as "a regional approach to strengthen global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament norms

and consolidate international efforts towards peace and security"[1]. In contrast, Africa (Treaty of Pelindaba), Central Asia (Weapon Free Zone Treaty), Mongolia (self-declared status), Latin America (Treaty of Tlatelolco), Southeast Asia (Treaty of Bangkok), and the South Pacific (Treaty of Rarotonga) have all pledged never to acquire or possess nuclear weapons. Other treaties also deal with NWFZ in unique geographical locations: the Antarctic Treaty, the Outer Space Treaty, the Moon Agreement, and the Seabed Treaty.

The Middle East's long history of rivalries is enough of a reason to comprehend why such an agreement has never materialized, but non-proliferation initiatives have occurred. In 1974, following a proposal by Iran, the United Nations General Assembly approved a resolution endorsing the objective of establishing a NWFZ in the Middle East. The Iranian plan enjoyed Arab support because it served as a coordinated approach to pressure Israel on engaging in nuclear disarmament. But Tel-Aviv's intransigence in terms of linking non-proliferation to regional peace negotiations, remains to this day the most significant obstacle to the Arab states' non-proliferation strategy[2].

Since the Iranian revolution, Egypt has traditionally led Middle East non-proliferation initiatives. In 1990, Egypt submitted to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva a proposal to establish an expanded zone free of weapons of mass destruction. Discussions continued in 1992, under the framework of the Arms Control and Regional Security Group, born out of the Madrid Middle East Peace Talks. However, negotiations ceased indefinitely because of major disagreements between Egypt and Israel[3].

Non-proliferation efforts in the Middle East were at their most extensive in 1995, during the extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The agreement, active since 1970, was intended to remain in force for 25 years. On its expiry, the major powers wanted at the 1995 NPT Review Conference to prolong the treaty indefinitely, but the Arab states, wary of the major powers' monopoly over nuclear power and Israel's controversial nuclear program, wanted to ensure that any extension of the treaty would address their main concern of establishing a NWFZ Middle East. Consequently, the United States (U.S.), the United Kingdom, and Russia sponsored a resolution addressing Arab concerns[4], the 1995 Middle East resolution, which was important for two reasons. First, it was linked to broader efforts to eradicate weapons of mass destruction in the region. Second, it became part of the NPT and ensured its extension to prevent the global spread of nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the major political divergences on regional issues made denuclearization in the Middle East obsolete, and the resolution was ineffective[5].

Nuclear Domino in the Middle East

The risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is greater than anywhere. First, since Iran is the most likely candidate to achieve a nuclear breakout, other Arab nations perceive it as an existential threat. Competing powers including Riyadh and Abu-Dhabi regard a direct nuclear attack from Tehran as unlikely. However, they fear a nuclear-armed Iran will implement a bolder foreign policy through which, directly and via proxies, Iran will interfere in Arab affairs and assert its control over strategic chokeholds, primarily the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran's regime has been ostracized globally since the revolution and its political ideology is constantly scrutinized by other Middle-Eastern states as a major factor in insecurity. This explains, to a certain degree, the enmity towards its regime. Thus, Iran's considers its nuclear program as insurance for survival in a hostile environment. As weaponized nuclear technology becomes increasingly accessible, other powerhouses in the Middle East are likely to perceive nuclear proliferation as their most viable mean of deterring Iran's regional adventurism.

Second, governments in the Middle East do not seek public approval for controversial political decisions, which enables the ruling systems to make risky choices for regional security. This explains to a certain degree why the Middle East, to this day, remains a powder keg. Adding nuclear weapons would only worsen an already edgy situation.

Third, Israel is the only Middle Eastern and non-Arab state equipped with atomic weapons that has never signed the NPT and the comprehensive safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

1. Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones, UN Office for Disarmament Affairs
2. UN Secretary-General Report. A/59/165 (Part I). 2004
3. Davenport. K (2018)
4. Ghoname. H., Hall, H. L (2016)
5. Erästö, T (2019)

So far, Tel-Aviv has maintained a policy of ambiguity over its nuclear stockpile, but it is estimated to have between 80 and 200 nuclear warheads[6], which are perceived as an existential threat for Arab security. Israel will never allow its neighbours to acquire nuclear weapons and is committed to preserving its qualitative military edge through an "asymmetric nuclear order"[7], considered as the vital aspect of its security strategy. Therefore Israel has a central role in determining the Middle East's nuclear configuration[8] and is unlikely to enter disarmament and non-proliferation talks, which makes a nuclear-armed Middle East an unavoidable reality.

Despite Middle Eastern states being uncompromising in their politics, they also have limitations. As the Cold War showed, if faced with retaliatory threats of a nuclear nature, states will not seek direct confrontation. Hence, an atomic conflict is unlikely. The conceivable scenario is that nuclear programs embolden the foreign policies of regional powers and, by possessing nuclear weapons capabilities, leaders become more confident, potentially translating into dangerous actions.

Proliferation of nuclear facilities in the region has signaled a significant shift of priorities for Egypt and Turkey, as they seek to keep pace with other states. In September 2019, President Tayyip Erdoğan declared that "some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads... But we can't have them. This, I cannot accept"[9]. He added that Israel "scare[s] by possessing these. No one can touch them". As a response to Israel, Ankara, in cooperation with the Russian agency Rosatom, plans to complete two nuclear power reactors by 2025, one of which will be located in Akkuyu, on the Mediterranean shore. In Egypt, Rosatom is constructing a nuclear power plant located in El Dabaa, with three others set to be completed by 2026. Both countries' nuclear programs reflect a dire need for energy, but in light of the growing enmity between Turkey and other Middle Eastern (and European) states, these programs might switch to military ends with unpredictable but dangerous ramifications for the stability of the eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian sea. Nevertheless, acquiring nuclear weapons is a tremendously complicated process. Even with a civilian nuclear program, moving to weaponization is both politically-costly and time-consuming, even for the wealthy Gulf states.

Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Hedging

Beyond Iran and Turkey, the Middle Eastern state with the most significant appetite for nuclear programs is Saudi Arabia. The kingdom's interest in nuclear power is public knowledge, and the opening of the nuclear plant in Abu-Dhabi will only drive Riyadh to push harder. It has announced plans to build 16 nuclear power reactors by 2040. Nuclear power is now a fundamental part of its regional ambitions, albeit for different purposes than its Emirati ally.

The UAE vowed its nuclear plant is and will remain strictly civilian and is essentially intended to produce energy. The UAE has had to sign numerous international conventions (such as the Vienna Declaration on Nuclear Safety) and has entered a legally binding agreement with Washington (U.S.–UAE 123 Agreement for Peaceful Civilian Nuclear Energy Cooperation signed on December 2009[10]), agreeing never to pursue uranium enrichment. Also, the general acceptance of the nuclear power plant on the part of the international community is likely to discourage its upgrading for military ends, at least in the short term.

On the Saudi side, the nuclear program also comprises an energy component. Riyadh's energy consumption rises constantly. With the ambition of diversifying its economy through Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia also needs to find sustainable ways of ensuring it can meet demand for water. Currently, about 50% of the kingdom's water comes from desalination, and nuclear energy could provide the means to continue this process, well-known for being energy-intensive.

Yet the appeal of nuclear programs is not limited to energy diversification. With a growing set of differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran has come increasing scope for conflict. In 2018, Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman, publicly declared that "if Iran developed a nuclear bomb"[11], Saudi Arabia would follow suit. There is undoubtedly weight and significance behind this statement. The prince has pledged to confront the

6. Avner, C. (2010)

7. Erästö, T (2019)

8. Riedel, S. (2016)

9. Erdogan says it's unacceptable that Turkey can't have nuclear weapons (2019). Reuters

10. 123 agreements named after section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act passed by the United States Congress in 1954

11. Saudi crown prince says will develop nuclear bomb if Iran does: CBS TV (2018). Reuters

geopolitical challenges of a Middle East mired in chaos and to transform Saudi-Arabia into the undisputed hegemon in the region. His leadership will not accept Iran becoming the sole Islamic nuclear power in the region. Consequently, the kingdom now possesses an experimental nuclear laboratory at the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), which could contribute to enriched uranium production.

Riyadh has surely the motives to pursue a nuclear program, but the main question remains about the means. Partnering up with a major nuclear power— probably China or the U.S.— seems the most viable way to access the technology for Saudi Arabia's ambitious nuclear program. However, U.S. support is conditional on the signing of the accord on the peaceful use of nuclear technology (123 Agreement), which would effectively constrain any Saudi intention to challenge the Iranian threat. Israel also has a say on the matter, according to Ilan Goldenberg, the Director of the Middle East Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, who declared to The Times of Israel that "Israel has strongly opposed any 123 agreement between the US and Saudi that does not entail forgoing all domestic enrichment"[12]. Washington's determination to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge has pushed Riyadh to opt for Beijing's nuclear option because it does not offer the same restrictions that are attached to nuclear cooperation with the Western world.

Since 2017, Saudi-Chinese nuclear cooperation has become well established, through the signing of a collaborative agreement on research on uranium extraction from seawater between the China National Nuclear Corporation and the KACST. Several analysts have noted that Riyadh has already constructed nuclear facilities that could produce nuclear fuel, and eventually, lead it to the development of nuclear weapons (Figure 1)[13]. Furthermore, the Wall Street Journal reported on August 4, 2020, that Saudi Arabia has built, with Chinese support, a facility to extract yellowcake, a critical step toward enriched uranium[14]. If the reports are accurate, then Saudi Arabia has been undertaking a nuclear hedging policy, broadly considered as "determination to reach the capacity to indigenously produce nuclear weapons in a realistic timeframe (weeks to a few years) alongside an important measure of restraint in how far to proceed along this path"[15].

12. Ahran, R (2020)

13. Saudi Arabia Seen to Build Missile Factory. Arms Control Association.

14. Saudi Arabia, With China's Help, Expands Its Nuclear Program (2020). The Wall Street Journal

15. Levite, A (2019).

Figure 1: Saudi Ballistic Missile Facility in Al Dawadmi

Saudi-Chinese nuclear cooperation has deep implications for the geopolitical balance of the Middle East and, indeed, the world. First, it carries a high risk for the Washington-Riyadh alliance, and in the case of a Democrat victory in the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, the relationship could further unwind. China will capitalize on that opportunity, because the Middle East presents a unique geostrategic location for the Belt and Road Initiative. A well-functioning partnership with Saudi Arabia allows Beijing to be cautious in its tactics of balancing relations between regional rival states, and to secure access to the Middle East shipping routes.

Second, Saudi-Arabia aims to counter Iranian ambitions by seeking strategic autonomy. At the moment, an Iranian-Chinese rapprochement is hopeful of concluding a 25-year strategic partnership in trade, politics, culture, and security that could well give Tehran the financial bailout it desperately needs for economic recovery, while Beijing gains a strategic foothold that will inevitably strengthen its geopolitical clout in the Middle East. Hence, it is normal that Riyadh looks to the east in a bid to seek a balance of power with Iran and simultaneously gain the technological knowhow denied by the U.S. This is demonstrative of shifting dynamics in the region, where the centre of gravity of power is pulling further away from Washington. As illustrated by its failure to extend the Security Council ban on sales of conventional weapons to Iran, because of Chinese and Russian vetoes, the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy has not yielded any results and has isolated the U.S. on one of the most significant Middle Eastern issues. Most importantly, it proved that the U.S. non-proliferation strategy in the Middle East has been largely unsuccessful, as we are witnessing a multiplication of nuclear actors. Furthermore, Chinese activity is of significant concern to Israel. If the nuclearisation of the Middle East continues unabated, it will be vital for Israel's national security to seek better alliances with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The normalisation of relations with the UAE is a vital step in that direction. The UAE is arguably the most influential Arab state, and as fears over Iranian adventurism explains the decision, it is also a step towards a new security alliance with the strategic objective of containing Iran's nuclear program and power projection. Third, the Saudi-Chinese nuclear partnership will push other Asian countries, primarily India and Pakistan, to look west. The two south Asian states do not wish to be pawns in the great power competition between the U.S. and China, and will look to further align their geopolitical interests with Middle Eastern powers to guarantee their security. It thus seems that nuclear proliferation will have implications for the enlarged strategic environment of the Middle East, from the Mediterranean shores to the Indo-Pacific.

Finally, the security of nuclear infrastructure. If technology can mitigate environmental concerns to some extent, the difficulty lies in protecting nuclear installations against belligerent actions from foes. The Middle East is a magnet for major wars and crises, and to this day, continues to experience attacks on its strategic energy and nuclear infrastructure. Most importantly, attacking nuclear facilities has proved to be of limited value in terms of ending nuclear programs, since sabotage is not a solution to political problems and only undermines non-proliferation efforts.

Is the Middle East Heading Towards Nuclear Proliferation?

The threat of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East has all the ingredients to exacerbate tension. The development of Saudi and Emirati nuclear programs will push Turkey, Egypt, and Qatar to follow the same path, and will strengthen the resolve of Iran to continue its nuclear weapons program. Nonetheless, even though it seems nuclear power is poised for growth in the Middle East, it is unlikely to be weaponized. It is both a political and technological issue whose development depends on significant engagements between parties. Furthermore, the history of nuclear programs shows that their hazardous impacts do not stop at borders. Nuclear risks are international in nature, and this is where regional cooperation is vital. Given the significant divergences between Middle Eastern states, how can they provide nuclear security without unity? It seems that the three majors—the U.S., China and Russia—are primed to marshal the development of nuclear programs in the Middle East. Their desire to work with Middle Eastern states with nuclear ambitions is clearly more acute, as reflected by their growing involvement in providing nuclear technology. This serves them well in consolidating alliances, and Russian and Chinese penetrations are specifically designed to compete with the West. Obviously, this is major concern for the U.S., which is in the midst of a strategic refocus to great-power competition, and has already withdrawn from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty on the basis

of presumed Russian violations. But this withdrawal was also aimed at containing China, since it was not part of the treaty. In this context, the expiry of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) scheduled for February 2021, will determine if the Middle East and, the world, moves closer to a new sense of nuclear insecurity.

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About the author, Hamza Mjahed

Hamza Mjahed is a research assistant at the Policy Center for the New South. Before joining the International Relations Department, he worked for a Berlin-based NGO dedicated to supporting migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from Syria and sub-Saharan Africa. Holder of a Master degree in International Relations and a Bachelor of Political Science, his research centres on the MENA region, with a focus on Maghreb politics, power projection and security aspects.

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Suncity Complex, Building C, Av. Addolb, Albortokal Street,
Hay Riad, Rabat, Maroc.
Email : contact@policycenter.ma
Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54
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