

What to Know About the US-Saudi Nuclear Agreement

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The recent signing of a US-Saudi Arabia civilian nuclear cooperation agreement, until recently envisioned as an incentive to the Kingdom to pursue normalization with Israel, represents one of the most consequential nuclear diplomacy developments in recent years. Along with the recent decision to loosen export controls on UAE imports of sensitive advanced technologies, the deal reflects the Trump administration's attempts to shore up relationships with key Gulf allies in the wake of the ongoing conflict with Iran that has disproportionately impacted those nations' security and economies. Its significance extends well beyond Saudi Arabia's energy diversification goals enshrined in the ambitious [Vision 2030](#) strategic plan and will likely serve as a blueprint for US efforts to balance historic nonproliferation goals against geopolitical realities, including competition with Russia and China. In the immediate term, however, the nuclear cooperation agreement removes an important point of leverage for the United States, increases tensions with Israel, and has the potential to set off a new era of nuclear proliferation in an increasingly destabilized region.

Whether this framework actually leads to US-supported Saudi civilian nuclear developments in the near term remains an unresolved question. Shortly after the agreement was announced, President Trump asserted that it would not be implemented until Saudi Arabia joined the Abraham Accords. Sources in Saudi Arabia have rejected this linkage, arguing the agreement had already been finalized [without those provisions](#) despite President Trump's claim that it was always part of the understanding. This has further complicated the political and legal underpinnings of an agreement that the Administration had sought to frame as a diplomatic victory.

What is the Agreement?

The agreement falls under Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act, which establishes the legal framework to permit US export of nuclear technologies and expertise while ensuring recipient countries adhere to strict safeguards. This particular agreement would enable the US to participate – ideally at the exclusion of China – in Saudi Arabia's planned civilian nuclear program, which the Kingdom argues is necessary to meet growing energy needs and diversification goals.

While the two countries still need to finalize the technical provisions of the agreement, Saudi Arabia has resisted making a permanent commitment to forgoing uranium enrichment – something the US has required of signatories to similar agreements, including in its 2009 123 agreement with the UAE. Saudi Arabia has insisted it retain the full enrichment rights afforded to it as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The two parties are seeking to push that issue down the road by agreeing to a two-year joint technical study to examine whether enrichment is economically

justified, technically practical, and consistent with non-proliferation objectives. The study would also examine how enrichment in the Kingdom could be structured and supervised.

The Trump administration is required to submit the agreement to Congress, which can review the agreement for 90 days. During this review period, Congress can pass a Joint Resolution of Disapproval to attempt to block the agreement; however, this joint resolution would need a veto-proof majority to override a presumptive presidential veto. If the congressional review period concludes without the enactment of a Joint Resolution of Disapproval, the agreement will go into effect.

The Saudi Arabia Agreement in a Global and Regional Context

The nuclear cooperation agreement highlights an ongoing tension in the global non-proliferation regime: The NPT guarantees members a right to peaceful nuclear technology while seeking to prevent the spread of technologies that could lead to weaponization. Because the NPT does not prohibit enrichment for peaceful purposes, many signatories, including Iran, possess enrichment capabilities while remaining members. In response, the US has promoted “gold standard” provisions like those negotiated with the UAE, under which recipient countries voluntarily renounce enrichment. Saudi Arabia argues that this promotes unequal treatment of NPT members.

The United States has strong incentives, including in the case of Saudi Arabia, to find a path to secure 123 agreements in order to retain influence over the development of civilian nuclear programs that countries are committed to pursuing. The cases of Turkey and Egypt provide a cautionary tale as both have instead pursued their own nuclear programs with Russian, rather than US, support in the absence of a negotiated 123 agreement. At the same time, though, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly stated that if Iran were to develop a nuclear weapon, it would seek to restore deterrence by matching those capabilities. This has raised concerns both about Saudi Arabia’s eventual desire to pursue enrichment and the resulting potential for Saudi nuclear advancement to set off a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

With substantial uranium deposits, Saudi Arabia could also ultimately serve as an exporter of enriched uranium, diminishing US oversight even further. At the same time, the relationship with Saudi Arabia is one of significant and growing geopolitical and economic importance for the United States, serving as a strong incentive for the US to find a mutually beneficial (or at least acceptable) path forward rather than lose leverage and leave a gap for Russia or China to fill.

Implications for Israel and its Relationship with the US

Israel occupies a unique position in this discussion and no aspect of the agreement has generated more controversy in the United States than its implications for Israel. Although it is widely understood that Israel possesses nuclear weapons, it has never publicly acknowledged that and

has refused to join the NPT or submit to the treaty's oversight regime. Israel's longstanding policy of nuclear ambiguity has helped shape the nuclear landscape in the Middle East today.

For decades, Israel has (especially in the context of Iran) supported close US-Arab security cooperation while seeking to maintain its Qualitative Military Edge and minimize the spread of nuclear technology – particularly enrichment – in the region outside its own. Israel's support for such close security ties will have only been reinforced by the ongoing war with Iran. But Israeli concerns over the Saudi agreement remain and are twofold. First, the agreement does not – yet – prohibit Saudi enrichment but rather kicks the proverbial can down the road by at least two years.

Second, in recent years, a civilian nuclear agreement with the US had been on offer as a key incentive to Saudi normalization of relations with Israel. The Biden administration had asserted that a three-way deal was in the final stage of negotiations prior to the October 7 attacks. In the wake of the Gaza war, however, Saudi Arabia has conditioned normalization on a viable pathway to Palestinian statehood. Even as normalization appears ever more elusive, criticism of the agreement has centered around the perception that the United States has given away this key piece of leverage for little more than shoring up a relationship damaged by America dragging its Gulf allies into a reckless war of its own choosing with Iran.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the US-Saudi civilian nuclear cooperation agreement reflects the difficult choices facing the United States in a region whose geopolitics are rapidly evolving in response to the ongoing war with Iran and the resulting loss of America's credibility as a security guarantor. The agreement represents a strategic gamble by the United States to preserve its influence over a nuclear program many see as inevitable, to counter Russian and Chinese inroads in the Gulf, and to reassure its allies of its commitment to their security despite the disproportionate impact they have borne from Iranian retaliation. Whether the benefits of the agreement will accomplish these goals depends on the yet-to-be-negotiated details and whether the Trump administration can ultimately resist pressure to allow Saudi Arabia to retain enrichment rights.