The U.S.-Saudi Arabia Civilian Nuclear Deal: New Risks Ahead

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In 2026, the extended deterrence landscape in the Middle East has undergone a significant transformation. Driven by the signing of the U.S.–Saudi civilian nuclear deal (Section 123 Agreement), the establishment of the Saudi–Pakistan–Turkey trilateral alliance (the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement), and the potential for a nuclear-capable Iran, the consequences of this evolving architecture can be analyzed through three core dimensions.

First, the signing of the U.S.–Saudi Section 123 civilian nuclear agreement by the Trump administration represents a shift in how Washington manages regional security, marked by the abandonment of the nonproliferation "Gold Standard." Historically, the U.S. required allies to permanently renounce domestic uranium enrichment and reprocessing, as in the 2009 U.S.–UAE agreement. By creating a pathway for future Saudi uranium enrichment through joint feasibility studies, the U.S. shifted from total nonproliferation prevention to high-stakes risk management. This trade-off means that the U.S. extended nuclear technology to Riyadh primarily to anchor the Kingdom within the Western orbit. This denies lucrative contracts and geopolitical leverage to Russia and China, both of which were actively bidding on the Saudi Arabian nuclear program. Had the U.S. not acted, Saudi Arabia may well have considered these alternatives.

Second, recognizing the limitations of a U.S. security guarantee historically reluctant to draw explicit nuclear red lines against Iran, Saudi Arabia has systematically hedged its bets. The landmark Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan features an Article 5-style collective defense clause. While official texts remain carefully ambiguous about nuclear sharing, senior officials note the pact encompasses "all military means." This effectively introduces Pakistan, a state that is not a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, as a primary extended-deterrence guarantor in the Gulf: a de facto Pakistani nuclear shield. This new regional security architecture was further expanded into a trilateral pact including Turkey. This combines Saudi Arabian financial capital and Turkey's NATO-standard defense-industrial capabilities with Pakistan's nuclear deterrent. This means that American extended deterrence no longer operates in a vacuum; it must coexist with an emerging bloc of Sunni middle powers.

Third, while designed to reassure Riyadh and stabilize the region against Iranian aggression, these deals have heightened interlocked systemic risks. The U.S.–Saudi deal does not require the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) strict "Additional Protocol," instead relying on custom bilateral U.S.–Saudi inspections. Critics warn this sets a dangerous international precedent. It diminishes inspection standards and makes it even harder for international regulatory bodies to demand stringent verification protocols from Iran or future nuclear aspirants. Further, by allowing Saudi Arabia a domestic enrichment pathway, neighbors like the UAE are concerned, as they feel economically and strategically penalized for having accepted the "Gold Standard." A question could emerge whether Egypt or Turkey would demand similar enrichment concessions, resulting in more proliferation.

Members of Congress introduced Joint Resolutions of Disapproval to block the proposed Washington-Riyadh civilian nuclear cooperation agreement (a "123 Agreement") the Trump

administration submitted to Congress on September 14, 2026. Under Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, the deal goes into effect after a 90-day congressional review period unless Congress passes a joint resolution of disapproval that can survive a presidential veto.

On proliferation concerns, lawmakers have pointed to previous statements by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman regarding a desire for nuclear weapons capabilities if Iran obtains them. Supporters have argued that the framework keeps the U.S. as Saudi Arabia's primary nuclear partner, ensuring safety standards and oversight that would otherwise be provided by competitors like Russia or China. Proponents maintain that the deal incorporates technical studies on enrichment viability and standard IAEA safeguards for declared facilities.

Another inescapable problem is that, in a region that is routinely at unrest, this agreement amounts to setting up nuclear facilities inside a war zone. What terms should govern U.S. assistance to Saudi Arabia in constructing nuclear facilities that can withstand bombardment? According to Tim Roxey, an expert on the survivability of nuclear facilities in war, he has specific views on what Congress should demand before the U.S. helps build any nuclear plants in Saudi Arabia. Essentially, any nuclear plant built in Saudi Arabia should be able to remain shut down for a period, even if every auxiliary system and air defense system is defeated. Congress must also weigh the cost of these active defenses against the cost of losing the plant.

This new nuclear agreement may keep Saudi Arabia more closely aligned with the West and provide a hedge against Iran, but it could introduce new nuclear proliferation and verification challenges. Saudi Arabia does not yet have a weapons-grade industrial infrastructure. One thing is clear. If a U.S. contractor is building civilian nuclear power facilities inside an unstable region, it may suffer the consequences of any toxic or radiological release after a bombardment.

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