

US-Saudi Nuclear Deal: Implications for West Asia and Global Non-Proliferation

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US-Saudi Nuclear Deal Latest News

- The United States and Saudi Arabia have signed a landmark civilian nuclear cooperation agreement.
- Framed as a “**peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement**,” the 30-year pact has sparked concerns that it could enable Saudi Arabia to eventually develop nuclear weapons.

What the Deal Involves

- The agreement gives American companies **substantial access** to Saudi Arabia’s nuclear energy programme.
- Alongside it, a “**bilateral safeguards agreement**” was also signed, though the full text remains undisclosed.
- Reports suggest the deal could permit **Saudi Arabia to enrich uranium domestically** — fuel primarily meant for power plants, but which can also be diverted toward weapons-grade material.

- Some US media reports question whether the accompanying safeguards are robust enough.

The 123 Agreement: Legal Backbone of the Deal

- Named after **Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act, 1954**, a 123 Agreement is mandatory before the US can undertake significant nuclear cooperation with any country.
- It facilitates transfer of nuclear materials, equipment, and technology for peaceful purposes while ensuring non-proliferation compliance.
- India precedent: India's 123 Agreement with the US, cleared by Congress on October 1, 2008, ended three decades of technology-denial restrictions. India agreed to place select civilian facilities under India-specific IAEA safeguards in exchange for uninterrupted fuel supply — a **model frequently cited in nuclear diplomacy discussions**.
- The Saudi deal must similarly be ratified by the US Congress — a politically uncertain process, since Saudi Arabia lacks the broad bipartisan support Israel enjoys in the US legislature.

Why the Deal Raises Concerns

- **Regional arms race risk:** West Asia already has one nuclear power (Israel) and one on the threshold (Iran). A Saudi enrichment capability could trigger a proliferation cascade.
- **Iran factor:** Saudi Arabia's then-Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated in 2018 that the Kingdom would pursue nuclear weapons if Iran did. The deal could embolden Iran's own weapons ambitions and push it closer to China and Russia.
- **Weak inspection regime:** Unlike the 2009 US-UAE nuclear deal — under which Abu Dhabi does not enrich its own fuel and faces multiple restrictions — the Saudi pact may allow indigenous enrichment, setting a more permissive precedent.
- **Geopolitical timing:** The deal comes amid escalating US-Iran hostilities. Saudi Arabia hosts US military bases that have faced Iranian attacks, and it comes just two days after Yemen's Houthis announced a maritime blockade against the Kingdom.
- **Conflict of interest concerns:** The Trump Organisation has significant financial dealings with Saudi Arabia, having raised around \$50 million in 2024 alone from Saudi-linked business, raising questions about the deal's underlying motivations.

Strategic and Economic Rationale

- **For the US:** Opens major sales opportunities for American nuclear firms, notably Westinghouse.
- **For Saudi Arabia:** Enables diversification away from oil-based electricity generation toward nuclear power, freeing more crude for export.
- Both governments have officially framed the deal as mutually beneficial and non-proliferation-compliant.

Conclusion

- The US-Saudi nuclear deal marks a major diplomatic win for Riyadh but carries significant proliferation risk in an already volatile West Asia.

- Its ultimate impact will hinge on the strength of safeguards, Congressional ratification, and whether it triggers a wider regional race for nuclear capability — making it a critical case study in the balance between energy diplomacy and non-proliferation.

Source: IE | BBC

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