

DYNAMICS OF THE US-SAUDI ARABIA NUCLEAR DEAL

By

Ghazala Yasmin Jalil

Research Fellow

Arms Control & Disarmament Centre (ACDC), ISSI

Email: ghazala.jalil@issi.org.pk

Edited by

Malik Qasim Mustafa

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The U.S. signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia on July 22, 2026. The agreement provides a framework for a 30-year nuclear partnership to develop Saudi Arabia's peaceful nuclear energy infrastructure, with participation by U.S. companies such as Westinghouse. While the full text and detailed implementation arrangements have not yet been made public, the agreement has generated considerable international debate regarding the future of Saudi Arabia's civilian nuclear programme, and the wider implications for the Middle Eastern region. For Pakistan, Saudi Arabia's peaceful nuclear energy ambitions merit consideration within the broader context of Pakistan-Saudi strategic relations, including the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement signed in September 2025. At the same time, questions surrounding safeguards, enrichment and reprocessing underscore the importance of maintaining confidence in the regional and international nuclear non-proliferation framework.

What is the Nuclear Deal About?

The deal was signed following the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) visit to the U.S. in November 2025. According to a joint statement from the U.S. Energy Secretary and Saudi Energy Minister, the two countries have committed to a multi-billion-dollar, multi-decade nuclear partnership

that envisages bringing American companies and technical experts directly into Saudi Arabia's nuclear energy programme. The U.S. Department of Energy said that it includes a bilateral safeguards agreement.¹ The U.S. Secretary of Energy, Chris Wright, said: "Rest assured, these agreements uphold the highest standards of nuclear safety and nonproliferation, while relying on the world's best nuclear technology and scientists, designed right here in the United States."²

The signed nuclear deal, also known as a "123 agreement," named after Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act of 1954 that regulates peaceful nuclear technology transfers, is among 26 such agreements with countries around the world.³ With details of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia deal still emerging, it may include uranium enrichment and reprocessing facilities which would be safeguarded under a bilateral agreement as well as IAEA oversight under the terms of the NPT. However, President Trump, soon after signing the U.S.-Saudi Arabia nuclear deal, stated that it did not involve any enrichment of nuclear material.⁴ Another recent 123 Agreement, such as the UAE's, followed the "Gold Standard" of nuclear cooperation, where the enriched nuclear fuel is imported for nuclear power plants. Other countries in the region with 123 agreements with the U.S. include Turkey and Egypt.⁵ Egypt's agreement expired in 2001 and did not explicitly prohibit uranium enrichment. Turkey's 123 agreement is in place since 2008, but does not permanently take away Turkey's right to develop enrichment capabilities unlike the agreement with UAE.

Proliferation Concerns

Reports concerning the agreement have focused particular attention to the issue of uranium enrichment and reprocessing and to the extent of international verification arrangements. These reports should, however, be distinguished from the commitments formally announced by the two governments, particularly as the complete text of the agreement has not yet been made publicly available. The U.S. has described the arrangement as incorporating a bilateral safeguards agreement and has emphasized its commitment to nuclear safety and non-proliferation. Saudi Arabia, for its part, remains a state party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and is subject to IAEA safeguards obligations. Thus, Saudi Arabia should be able to pursue peaceful nuclear energy while remaining

¹ James FitzGerald and Max Matza, "US Signs Landmark Nuclear Deal with Saudi Arabia," *BBC News*, July 24, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj03r59z73po>.

² FitzGerald and Matza, "US Signs Landmark Nuclear Deal."

³ François Diaz-Maurin, "Trump Administration Signs a Nuclear Deal with Saudi Arabia—and Risks a Middle East Arms Race," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, July 23, 2026, <https://thebulletin.org/2026/07/trump-administration-signs-a-nuclear-deal-with-saudi-arabia-and-risks-a-middle-east-arms-race/>.

⁴ Brig Zahir Kazmi, "US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Agreement and India Exception: A Comparative Review," *CISS*, July 24, 2026, <https://ciss.org.pk/us-saudi-civil-nuclear-agreement-and-india-exception-a-comparative-review/>

⁵ Diaz-Maurin, "Trump Administration Signs a Nuclear Deal with Saudi Arabia."

within the parameters of the non-proliferation regime and the ambit of NPT's promise of peaceful nuclear technology cooperation with member states.

Saudi Arabia's Civil Nuclear Ambitions

Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions are closely linked to its long-term energy diversification strategy and should, therefore, not be interpreted as an intention to acquire nuclear weapons. The nuclear energy technology is inherently different from nuclear weapons technology, where only highly enriched uranium (HEU) up to 90% can be used, while for nuclear power only 3% to 5% enrichment is needed.

Proponents of the U.S.-Saudi nuclear deal emphasize that Riyadh's nuclear ambitions are driven by legitimate economic diversification under Vision 2030 that envisions replacing domestic oil consumption for power generation with a mixture of renewables and peaceful nuclear energy. Vision 2030 aims for 50% renewable energy by 2030 and a net-zero pledge for carbon emissions by 2060. Further, Saudi Arabia remains bound by its NPT obligations and international safeguards under the IAEA as an NPT signatory. The U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, dismissed proliferation concerns that the deal could advance Saudi Arabia's ability to develop nuclear arms, saying: "The U.S. is not going to reach any agreement with any country in the world that leads to the risk of proliferation."⁶ He reassured that Washington's bilateral non-proliferation frameworks are designed to enforce rigorous oversight.

US-Saudi Nuclear deal vs Indo-US Agreement

The U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement also provides an important comparative case. In 2005, the U.S. facilitated India's access to international civilian nuclear cooperation despite India's status outside the NPT, subsequently contributing to a Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver that enabled international nuclear commerce where only designated civilian facilities were placed under IAEA safeguards, leaving key fuel-cycle infrastructure such as India's fast breeder reactors, enrichment and reprocessing plants, and several power reactors permanently unsafeguarded.⁷ The case demonstrated how strategic considerations can lead to exceptional arrangements within the global nuclear non-proliferation order.

The Saudi case is different because Saudi Arabia is an NPT state that grants it access to peaceful nuclear energy and remains subject to IAEA safeguards. Nevertheless, the comparison is relevant in

⁶ "What are the Security Implications of the US-Saudi Nuclear Deal?."

⁷ Kazmi, "US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Agreement."

highlighting the importance of consistency, transparency and credible safeguards in international nuclear cooperation.

Pakistan's Perspective

From Pakistan's perspective, any assessment of the U.S.-Saudi nuclear deal should recognize Saudi Arabia's legitimate peaceful nuclear-energy requirements while maintaining confidence in the broader non-proliferation regime. In addition, the nuclear deal should be viewed separately from questions concerning Saudi Arabia's foreign-policy choices. Pakistan maintains close and strategic relations with Saudi Arabia, and the two countries' Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement signed in 2025 reflects a longstanding defence partnership and a shared commitment to regional peace and stability. Accordingly, developments in the U.S.-Saudi nuclear relationship are best assessed through the broader regional security context rather than through assumptions about Saudi Arabia's intentions.

Furthermore, Pakistan's extensive, spotless safety and security experience – spanning over five decades of operating nuclear power plants under IAEA safeguards positions it as a potential partner in Saudi Arabia's civil energy transition. Pakistani engagement could center on technical training, workforce capacity-building, operational safety protocols, and regulatory governance. Specifically, the Pakistan Centre of Excellence for Nuclear Security (PCENS) - an IAEA-recognized regional hub - could offer Saudi personnel specialized training in nuclear security, regulatory compliance, and facility protection, thereby supporting Riyadh's civilian energy ambitions.

Politics of the Deal

Beyond civilian energy, the agreement carries significant political, economic and strategic dimensions. Firstly, President Trump has linked the nuclear deal's approval to Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords adding a political dimension to an otherwise principally civilian energy agreement. Secondly, Washington is pursuing civil nuclear cooperation agreements following an executive order signed by President Trump in May 2025 that envisages the pursuit of 20 new 123 Agreements by the end of 2028 and re-negotiation of agreements set to expire.⁸ Thus, the U.S.-Saudi nuclear deal is part of an ambitious plan to revive the U.S. nuclear industry, bringing in economic dividends for U.S. companies. Thirdly, it is motivated by "strategic denial" to rival nuclear energy suppliers like Russia and China, preventing them from establishing a foothold in the Saudi energy sector. Countries doing nuclear energy cooperation also leverage their nuclear exports for global influence. The U.S. seeks to expand

⁸ Diaz-Maurin, "Trump Administration Signs a Nuclear Deal with Saudi Arabia."

its influence in the Middle East while undercutting the influence of rivals – Russia and China.⁹ Thirdly, the deal is deeply intertwined with the shifting security architecture of the Middle East, particularly following the 2026 Iran war. The agreement serves as a political signal of the U.S. commitment to its Gulf allies, including the need to strengthen relations with a partner that has absorbed blowback from the U.S. conflict with Iran.

Conclusion

In signing the nuclear cooperation agreement, Washington and Riyadh have signaled a shared desire to deepen their strategic alignment amidst a rapidly shifting regional security landscape. For Saudi Arabia, nuclear energy forms part of its longer-term strategy of energy diversification and economic transformation. For the U.S., the agreement offers commercial, technological and strategic opportunities while reinforcing its engagement with an important regional partner. For Pakistan, the agreement carries particular significance because of the depth of Pakistan-Saudi strategic relations, the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement signed in September 2025, and the more recent Mecca Agreement.¹⁰ Pakistan has a clear interest in Saudi Arabia's security, stability and economic development. Supporting Saudi Arabia's peaceful nuclear development while advocating responsible nuclear governance is consistent with Islamabad's strategic partnership with Riyadh and its broader commitment to regional peace, stability and the peaceful uses of nuclear technology. Ultimately, the success of the U.S.-Saudi nuclear agreement hinges on reconciling Saudi Arabia's legitimate pursuit of peaceful nuclear energy with the need to preserve confidence in the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

⁹ "What We Know About the U.S.-Saudi Nuclear Deal," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 23, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2026/07/saudi-us-nuclear-deal-abraham-accords-123-agreement>

¹⁰ "Makkah Al-Mukarramah Summit for Joint Defence," Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 7, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/makkah-al-mukarramah-summit-for-joint-defence>