



Prospects for U.S.-Saudi Nuclear Energy Cooperation

The 119th Congress may engage the Trump Administration with regard to U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia's National Project for Atomic Energy and proposals for U.S.-Saudi nuclear energy cooperation. During Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud's visit to the United States in November 2025, the United States and Saudi Arabia "signed a Joint Declaration on the Completion of Negotiations on Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation."

According to the White House, the declaration "builds the legal foundation for a decades-long, multi-billion-dollar nuclear energy partnership with the Kingdom; confirms that the United States and American companies will be the Kingdom's civil nuclear cooperation partners of choice; and ensures that all cooperation will be conducted in a manner consistent with strong nonproliferation standards."

Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, as amended (AEA; 42 U.S.C. §2153 et seq.), requires all significant civil U.S. nuclear cooperation agreements to undergo congressional review. Such agreements are known as "123 agreements." Media sources describe a recent Trump Administration report to Congress concerning a possible 123 agreement and bilateral nuclear safeguards agreement with Saudi Arabia. The report waives a statutory restriction that would prevent steps required for congressional review of a 123 agreement because Saudi Arabia has not agreed to certain international nuclear safeguards.

The Trump Administration has made limited public comments on its plans for nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Some observers assert that the Trump Administration is reconsidering requirements from previous administrations that the kingdom accept enhanced international safeguards or forgo pursuit of the most proliferation-sensitive nuclear facilities—those for enriching uranium or reprocessing spent nuclear fuel to obtain plutonium. Prior administrations linked a U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation agreement to these conditions, and through FY2025, Congress limited the use of certain funds to support U.S. nuclear exports to Saudi Arabia unless the kingdom accepted these conditions. The Administration's November 2025 statement and its aforementioned report to Congress concern types of nuclear cooperation that would require a 123 agreement. For information on such review, see CRS Report RS22937, *Nuclear Cooperation with Other Countries: A Primer*.

Saudi Nuclear Plans and Policy

In July 2017, Saudi Arabia approved a National Project for Atomic Energy, including plans to build large and small nuclear reactors for electricity production and water desalination. The project is part of a broader Saudi government effort to diversify the kingdom's economy and expand the use of non-fossil-fuel-based energy. Saudi Arabia holds 16% of the world's proven reserves of crude

oil, has the world's fourth-largest reserves of natural gas, and is the second-largest consumer of energy in the Middle East. In 2023, oil and natural gas generated about 41% and 58% of the kingdom's electricity, respectively.

Saudi authorities have worked to develop required nuclear energy legal and regulatory frameworks with the support of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). IAEA officials completed a nuclear infrastructure review in Saudi Arabia in 2018 and issued a final report in January 2019. The kingdom established a Nuclear and Radiological Regulatory Commission in March 2018 and, in March 2022, created the Saudi Nuclear Energy Holding Company (SNEHC) to develop and operate planned nuclear facilities.

In 2017, the Saudi government solicited marketing information from potential international partner companies for reactor construction; it has since extended its formal bidding process several times. In May 2022, Saudi officials invited technical bids related to the planned construction of two 1.4 gigawatt electric (GWe) reactors at Khor Duweihin, a coastal area between the kingdom's borders with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As of July 2024, China National Nuclear Corporation, EDF of France, the Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO), and Rosatom of Russia reportedly were approved bidders. Saudi Arabia also has received bids for project management and consultancy related to the proposed construction.

In 2019, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abd al Aziz bin Salman Al Saud said, "We want to go for the full cycle, from producing uranium, to enriching the uranium, [to] using the uranium." The minister further stated in January 2023 that Saudi Arabia intends to use its substantial domestic uranium resources for producing low-enriched uranium fuel.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has said that if Iran obtains a nuclear weapon, the kingdom will have to follow suit. Saudi policy maintains that Saudi nuclear energy pursuits are limited to peaceful purposes.

Saudi Arabia acceded to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1988 and since 2009 has had a comprehensive safeguards agreement (CSA) with the IAEA on all nuclear facilities. CSAs entail monitoring and inspections designed to impede the development of nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia has not concluded an Additional Protocol to its CSA, which would enhance the IAEA's ability to investigate undeclared nuclear facilities and activities. In 2024, Saudi Arabia rescinded a small quantities protocol (SQP) to its CSA. SQPs hold "in abeyance" most CSA procedures for states with limited nuclear activities. Other international mechanisms restrict the spread of sensitive nuclear technology, including for enrichment.

In 2020, Saudi authorities denied claims in the press, attributed to “Western officials,” that Saudi Arabia had accepted China’s help to build a facility for milling uranium oxide ore. Saudi Arabia’s CSA requires the government to declare such a facility to the IAEA. Other press reports discussed another possible undeclared site.

Congress may consider how U.S.-Saudi nuclear cooperation plans account for security threats in Saudi Arabia from terrorist groups and hostile regional actors. These include missile and rocket attacks on Saudi energy infrastructure and government facilities that U.S. officials have attributed to Iran or Iran-backed groups. Ongoing U.S.-Saudi security cooperation seeks to mitigate these threats and others.

Both highly enriched uranium and plutonium can be used as fuel in some types of nuclear reactors but also are used as fissile material in nuclear weapons. Consequently, ostensibly peaceful enrichment and reprocessing facilities frequently generate concern that a government’s facilities may aid nuclear weapons programs. Conversely, a nuclear program without such facilities generally poses little proliferation risk, but may pose security and/or environmental risks.

U.S. Nuclear Cooperation Requirements

Section 123 of the AEA requires nuclear cooperation agreements for certain nuclear cooperation. Such cooperation includes the transfer of certain U.S.-origin nuclear material subject to licensing for commercial, medical, and industrial purposes; the export of reactors and critical reactor components; and other commodities under Nuclear Regulatory Commission export licensing authority. Foreign entities’ nuclear exports to Saudi Arabia containing U.S.-origin technology might require U.S. consent.

123 agreements are to include the terms, conditions, duration, nature, and scope of cooperation, and meet several nonproliferation criteria. The law requires the President to make a written determination “that the performance of the proposed agreement will promote, and will not constitute an unreasonable risk to, the common defense and security.” The AEA requires Congress to review a 123 agreement for two time periods totaling 90 days of continuous session. If the President has not exempted the agreement from any requirements of Section 123(a), it becomes effective at the end of the second period, unless during that time Congress adopts a joint resolution disapproving the agreement, and the resolution becomes law.

Section 123 agreements do not require partner governments to forgo enrichment or reprocessing. The 2009 U.S.-UAE 123 agreement provides the United States the right to terminate nuclear cooperation if the UAE “possesses sensitive nuclear facilities within its territory or otherwise engages in activities within its territory relating to enrichment of uranium or reprocessing of nuclear fuel.” A bilateral Agreed Minute states that its terms “shall be no less favorable in scope and effect” than U.S. agreements with other countries in the Middle East and that the United States will, at the UAE’s request, consult “regarding the possibility of amending” the agreement with equally favorable terms.

U.S.-Saudi Nuclear Cooperation

In 2008, the United States and Saudi Arabia signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) stating bilateral intent to cooperate on nuclear activities in the fields of medicine, industry, and electricity production. The nonbinding MOU stated Saudi Arabia’s intent “to rely on existing international markets for nuclear fuel services as an alternative to the pursuit of enrichment and reprocessing.”

In 2012 and 2018, respectively, the Obama and first Trump Administrations sought a bilateral civil nuclear energy agreement with the kingdom, including through formal negotiations over the text of a proposed 123 agreement. From 2017 to 2019, DOE granted seven “Part 810” authorizations (per 10 C.F.R. §810) for U.S. companies to engage in civil nuclear discussions, including marketing, with Saudi Arabia in response to the kingdom’s 2017 request for information. Such authorizations do not require a 123 agreement.

The Government Accountability Office reported in 2020 that the governments had “not made significant progress toward a nuclear cooperation agreement because of persistent differences ... over nonproliferation conditions,” including those related to an Additional Protocol and restrictions on enrichment and reprocessing. Those differences reportedly persisted during the Biden Administration, with U.S. and Saudi officials revisiting the prospect for civilian nuclear cooperation in the context of U.S. efforts to promote diplomatic normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. In 2022, U.S. and Saudi officials signed an MOU on the exchange of technical information and cooperation in nuclear safety matters. According to unnamed U.S. and Israeli officials cited in a September 2023 press report, the United States was then considering a U.S.-run uranium enrichment operation in Saudi Arabia.

Section 1264 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 (P.L. 116-92, 42 U.S.C. §2153 note) states that a Nuclear Proliferation Assessment Statement (NPAS) may not be submitted for certain governments that have not concluded an Additional Protocol. An NPAS is required for congressional review of a 123 agreement. The executive may waive the Section 1264 restriction by submitting a required report. Media accounts state that the Administration has waived the Section 1264 restriction by reporting to Congress on a draft U.S.-Saudi 123 agreement and Bilateral Safeguards Agreement “with the involvement of the [IAEA], that employs additional safeguards and verification measures to the most proliferation sensitive areas of potential nuclear cooperation.”

Congress and U.S. Policy

From FY2020 to FY2025, Congress enacted provisions to limit the use of funds for the Export-Import bank to support nuclear exports to Saudi Arabia until nonproliferation criteria were met. In prior Congresses, some introduced bills would have required a congressional joint resolution of approval before a 123 agreement with Saudi Arabia could take effect. In November 2025, some Members argued that a U.S.-Saudi agreement should require Saudi Arabia both to adopt an Additional Protocol to the country’s CSA and to forswear uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing.

Paul K. Kerr, Specialist in Nonproliferation

Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern
Affairs

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