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QI Panel:

Will Biden's Saudi Security Pact Spark a Nuclear Arms Race?

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Trita Parsi 0:31

Good afternoon and welcome to the Quincy Institute's panel, titled Will Biden's Saudi security Pact Spark a Nuclear Arms Race? My name is Trita Parsi. I'm the Executive Vice President of the Quincy Institute, a transpartisan think tank in Washington that promotes ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless war and toward rigorous diplomacy. We favor a national security strategy that is centered on diplomacy and military restraints. The binary situation is reportedly close to finalizing a controversial security agreement with Saudi Arabia, while the security guarantees that Biden reportedly has put on the table, as well as implications for the Israeli Palestinian conflict has been addressed in the media extensively. One aspect of the deal, the nuclear collaboration with Saudi Arabia has received slightly less attention. And that is the issue that we want to focus on here today. And to do so we have an fantastic panel that will be moderated by none other than Jim Walsh. Jim Walsh is a senior research associate at MIT Security Studies program and one of America's foremost experts on nonproliferation. He is one of the very small number of Americans who have traveled to both Iran and North Korea and engage in extensive discussions on these matters with those governments. So without any further ado, Jim, the floor is yours. I think you're still on mute.

Jim Walsh 2:12

I am sorry about that. Not a not an auspicious beginning. Thank you, Trita. And thanks to the Quincy Institute, as you say Trita, a potential Saudi nuclear deal that helps grow the kingdom's nuclear capability is arguably one of the most consequential but least publicly discussed developments in Non Proliferation in some years. And that's why it's fantastic. We have these three accomplished and outstanding panelists to help us think through the implications. Tom Countryman, is a former senior government official and chair of the Arms Control Association. Ariel Petrovics is a fellow at the Quincy Institute whose research focuses on nuclear weapons decision making in particular by proliferators. And of course, Bob Einhorn, former senior government official and a senior fellow at Brookings, thank you all three, for taking time to join us today. Let me if I may begin with Ariel for some context. Now aerial there is a long history of government to government civilian nuclear agreements and related agreements, some of help prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, and some have facilitated you know, thinking here, maybe if Canada and India, so now, Saudi Arabia is it's not your typical country. But stepping back? What does history what does your research tell us more broadly, about the role of civilian nuclear agreements and proliferation? What are these agreements likely to achieve their goals?

Ariel Petrovics 3:41

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Thank you, Jim. So a little bit of background on nuclear cooperation agreements, they aren't all of a type, right, a nuclear cooperation agreement can run the gamut from very minimal, sort of support, maybe a little bit of technical knowhow or expertise sharing to something very involved, such as the US supplying, you know, reactor cores, or maybe even taking the spent fuel rods and reprocessing them at home, basically facilitating everything except for the actual energy production itself. So just because it's a nuclear cooperation agreement doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to look like all of the others. There have been scores of them that have happened in the past, between the US and recipient states, but not only the US, many of the other nuclear countries have also done similar kinds of cooperation agreements with other countries in the past. So this isn't a new thing. We've done it many times. The problems can come from basically the how permissive a cooperation agreement can be. So some examples in in the 2000s, there was a deal set up with the UAE that many sort of touted as like a gold standard for a safe kind of nuclear cooperation agreement. So that involved me Basically no reprocessing and not even enrichment happening domestically on UAE soil. When they set that up, that basically means that that closes the United Arab Emirates ability to potentially sort of take over the enrichment process and potentially enrich more than is necessary for a civilian energy. Basically, civilian energy does not require as highly enriched uranium as a weapons grade enrichment would, wouldn't necessitate. So having basically control over that means that the recipient country doesn't get weapons grade uranium. The other problem on the other side, basically, once those fuel rods are used to make energy at home, then you have spent fuel rods. And in the UAE example, those fuel rods were then sent back to the United States, they basically catalogued them to make sure they got the same amount that were sent, and then they do the reprocessing back in the United States. The reason that one is important is because in the spent fuel rods, you have plutonium, and plutonium is the second path to a nuclear weapon. So those two are sort of the risky elements, the most risky elements for a nuclear cooperation agreement. Basically, if in any way, you sort of transfer the ability to make nuclear weapons fuel to the recipient country. The biggest problem with what we see when we do actually transfer sort of the ability of either enrichment or reprocessing so enrichment to make the fuel or reprocessing to deal with the spent fuel is that those can sort of be sidestepped a little bit, or maybe even taken a little too far. There are only a few countries that have been granted sort of enrichment capabilities domestically on their own soil, many of them are actually already nuclear armed countries themselves. So sort of like less of a worry, because they already have the nuclear weapons, this is really just a support and energy production. And even fewer than get the get get reprocessing.

The only example that I can think of that was intentionally permitted reprocessing capabilities that did not already have a nuclear weapon has been Japan. And even that example, has actually been taken not very well by some of the other recipients, for example, South Korea really doesn't like it that Japan is allowed to do reprocessing and South Korea is not. So it can be a touchy subject who is allowed to have what capabilities, there have been a couple of examples where it has worked to basically prevent proliferation, or been sort of part of the the supporting agreements, Taiwan is one example. It has allowed not only American, but also IAEA, so International Atomic Energy Agency, basically, third party, totally uninvolved, basically

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experts to come in and verify that the recipient countries only doing what they are supposedly allowed to within the scope of the agreement. By ensuring that there are inspectors that come in, which is always part of the agreement with the United States, the United States has what's called a 123 agreement that's necessary for any recipient country, they have to allow inspectors in. And so that is another part of this agreement that is very useful. Anytime there's a nuclear cooperation agreement, it basically helps facilitate more inspections, inspections, I should note don't prevent, basically misuse of the technology. But they do help ensure that there is a lot earlier detection, because if you have inspectors on site, those inspectors can show up at any time, they don't have to announce themselves long in advance, you know, long enough in advance for the recipient to maybe clean up anything they shouldn't have been doing. So the inspections really help. They are usually trusted by all parties. And so that's another sort of big benefit of the nuclear cooperation agreements. The downside is obviously if you do then end up inadvertently transferring know how. So it's not just expertise, but technology and materials, that you don't necessarily want to have a potential proliferator basically misuse. In other words, a lot of the stuff that you get for a civilian energy program could be repurposed for a nuclear weapons program, and you want to basically ensure that that doesn't happen. So that's sort of a little bit of background. I'm happy to give some examples, which could maybe come up in the in the q&a, but I don't want to sort of take too much time for the background, because we probably want to get to the Saudi deal itself.

Jim Walsh 9:29

Right. Well, that's perfect. That does set the stage. Thanks so much. And as you suggest, let's turn to the Saudi case in particular. And maybe it makes sense to start at the beginning. What is the current state of play? Where are we what do we think Saudi Arabia has asked for? What do we think the United States has offered? Let's start with you, Bob. See, in case you have any insight on where we currently stand not everything's going to be defined, but any light you can shed would be appreciated.

Robert Einhorn 10:00

Sure sure, Jim, what what the Saudis want from the United States is broad assistance in establishing a modern nuclear energy program in the kingdom. And as part of that, they asked the United States to construct a uranium enrichment facility in the kingdom, the Saudis believe that a domestic enrichment program would enable it to take advantage of what it regards as substantial uranium deposits on its territory. And it wants to develop those deposits, to provide low enriched fuel to fuel future Saudi nuclear reactors, as well as to become a player on the international uranium market. The United States is eager to engage in nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia, it is prepared to assist the kingdom in developing a modern nuclear energy program. It's even prepared, I believe, it's even prepared to go so far as to construct at some point, not necessarily immediately, but at some point uranium enrichment facility in Saudi Arabia, but if it does that, build this enrichment facility, I believe, according to my sources, that it will insist on a variety of restrictions to try to make sure that that facility will never be used as part of a Saudi nuclear weapons program. I mean, it's, it's on guard about this, because the

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Saudi Crown Prince has made clear that Saudi determination to match any nuclear capability that Iran achieves if Iran achieves nuclear weapons capability, that kingdom wants to do it as well.

The administration is well aware of this and doesn't want to contribute to a Saudi nuclear weapons program. So it would place a variety of restrictions on a U.N. enrichment program constructed by the United States in the kingdom, for example, only Americans wouldn't be allowed to operate the facility. No Saudi nationals would be given access to it, there would be no centrifuge enrichment technology shared with Saudi nationals, there would also be enhanced monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency, not just the Additional Protocol, which the Saudis have been reluctant so far to accept, but a monitoring that would go well beyond the Additional Protocol, including some of the enhanced monitoring that was contained in the now moribund Iran nuclear deal. Also, as part of this deal, the United States, and apparently the Saudis have agreed that as long as there was cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia would not engage in nuclear cooperation with any other country. And if carried out, this would make it very difficult for the Saudis to end run the US cooperative agreement and acquire sensitive technologies that can contribute to a nuclear weapons program. Look, I regret that the Biden administration may be prepared to construct an enrichment facility in the kingdom. But I believe it's concerned about the prospects of proliferation by the Saudis and will do its best to put guard rails on that facility to make sure it won't be used in a nuclear weapons program.

Jim Walsh 14:02

Before we really get into it, and we'll probably get more back and forth in that period. Let me just see if anyone has any follow up questions on the panel for Bob, regarding the specifics. I mean, you know, it's tough to talk about because it's not done till it's done. So promising elements, promised today may not make the final cut, and vice versa. There may be improvements that come that are not under discussion, but I had a question anyway, Bob, just real quick, maybe someone else did too. When you say there would be no Saudis allowed in the plant is currently conceived or as your understanding of it. Does that mean there won't be selling technicians or other people supporting the enrichment plant and process?

Robert Einhorn 14:46

That is my understanding. The idea of debate, basically, it would, that facility would be a black box to the to Saudi Arabia, it would simply not have access and they would not be Any sharing of the centrifuge enrichment technology, but let me say very quickly that the administration has been public that the deal is almost final, that all of the key elements have been agree. And I think, as I said, one of the key elements involved construction of a and enrichment facility, but that doesn't mean that we're going to see a deal consummated anytime soon. I think the Biden administration is reluctant to submit it to Congress before there's an agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia on normalization of relations. And, you know, it's, you know, there is no

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agreement now on normalization. Sure. The Saudis are saying we can't normalize until there's a credible pathway to statehood for the Palestinians.

Jim Walsh 15:53

Let me just jump in here Bob to see if Tom or I wanted to follow up with you about any any particular questions, Tom, anything to add or to ask.

Thomas Countryman 16:05

I think Bob is better plugged in than me on what the US administration is considering, I can speak to what the kingdom has asked for. During my time as Assistant Secretary, I had several negotiating or pre negotiating sessions with Saudi representatives, a couple of things were clear about what they did not want. One is the Additional Protocol, the enhanced monitoring authority for the International Atomic Energy Agency. Another was to have no obligation to renounce the possibility of enrichment and reprocessing in the kingdom as the United Arab Emirates had done in 2011. What more they want is of great interest, because we have and truly an unprecedented situation in which a government that has spoken openly about its potential to build nuclear weapons is being considered for a civil nuclear agreement to 123 agreement. Now, a couple of questions there that are not central, but interesting. One is, does Saudi Arabia need nuclear energy? Some people suggest they need nuclear energy about as much as Washington DC needs more lobbyists. Another question that has perplexed me, if Saudi Arabia and Israel want to become friends, we should encourage that it has never been clearer to me why we need to bribe both governments to do something that is manifestly in their mutual interest. But they have grown accustomed to expecting that and Washington has accustomed them to expect that from the US. What does concern me very much, whether it is i Well, let me back up and just say one thing, it is possible to have a good civil nuclear cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia, we have outstanding precedents for it, that have allowed other countries such as the UAE, to build an important nuclear industry. But each of the things that Bob describes that go beyond that, even if they are not an immediate proliferation, danger, gradually erode the United States leadership in building a strong global non-proliferation regime.

Jim Walsh 18:56

So let we've already anticipated the next question, and already gotten some points in but let me now turn to the heart of the matter, or one, if it's maybe there's multiple hearts, but one heart is, is Saudi Arabia, a good candidate for the nuclear agreement? That has been described in public so far, assuming some details aren't set, but that we have some pretty good idea of the threshold of what's being asked here. I want to start with Ariel, we you started at the beginning talking about how different nonproliferation or so civil nuclear agreements are with a particular case of Saudi Arabia. Do you think it's a good candidate for it? And if so, why or why not? And we'll go around the room.

Ariel Petrovics 19:47

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Let me preface with I am a fan of 123 agreements. In general, I think they can be a really important nonproliferation tool. So in other words, they can be very useful at preventing countries that are proliferation risks like Saudi Arabia, from actually moving towards that next step of, of a nuclear weapon. That said, the, from what I can see the parameters, the agreement that at least that Saudi Arabia is demanding, having enrichment capabilities on their soil, even if they're black boxed. And basically having the The Enrichment Center, therefore, permanently built, it's going to be built on Saudi Arabian soil, if they get what they're asking for. I see that as a big proliferation risk. That's basically what happened with the Tehran research reactor with Iran. It was basically something that was built with US assistance as part of the Atoms for Peace project when Iran was an ally. But we also know that that figured very prominently as part of the sort of concern when the United States realized that Iran was repurposing, many of its materials and its technology for a weapons program. So there is precedent set that if you sort of help a country towards enrichment capabilities, you can also help them towards a bomb. The reason why I see that as concerning, even if it's black box, because what Bob said is exactly right. I mean, the US is saying we don't want to share this kind of material and technology with a country that has stated it wants to get a nuclear weapon.

So they're saying, Okay, well, we'll build it for you, and we will run it ourselves, you will not be allowed inside of it. But what happens if it gets nationalized? What happens if the US is basically kicked out of the facility that it is built, we've basically then handed a working basically functioning enrichment facility that can then be used to further enrich uranium all the way to weapons grade. So that's, that's where the risk comes in. Saudi Arabia knows that, right? It's that this is sort of publicly available information. So it is a little bit concerning that Saudi Arabia has previously stated they are not interested in the Additional Protocol, that basically means much more rigorous inspections, and that they, they really want they need to have that enrichment capability on their soil. There are potentially domestic reasons for that, right. MBS probably wants to be the Crown Prince probably wants to be able to sell that domestically, right? I have been the person to bring modern energy to Saudi Arabia, you can, you can imagine a domestic reason for it. However, we can also very easily imagine sort of more nefarious reasons that he might be demanding it. And there's no reason why he wouldn't be able to negotiate an agreement that would actually provide plenty of civilian energy, if that is really what he's looking for, wherein the US provides the fuel rods and then takes them back and does the reprocessing stateside.

Jim Walsh 22:49

Sounds good. So, uh, Bob, do you think, do you think they're a good candidate for this agreement?

Robert Einhorn 22:58

Well, as as, as Tom pointed out, they got plenty. They've got an abundance of oil and natural gas for energy needs, although there can't be a legit legitimate case, to save those oil and gas

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resources for export and to use nuclear in order to diversify their economy and their sources of energy. But you know, are they just does the Crown Prince is the declaration of interest in nuclear weapons doesn't make them a prime candidate for nuclear cooperation. But I think it may be possible to devise constraints that would make that unlikely. Ariel just mentioned the notion of Saudi ability simply physically to take over not just nationalized legally, but physically take over the plant. I think this is on the minds of the Biden administration. And they've tried to build in certain safeguards about that, as part of the overall package with Saudi Arabia, the US is committed to a new security guarantee for the Kingdom. I think as a deterrent, the administration could say if you take over this plant, you notify that guarantee. I think that's a considerable disincentive. They've also talked about even stationing US military personnel at or near the plant in order to deter a physical takeover. And I've seen in the press speculation, I have no idea whether it's accurate about talking about remote disabling mechanisms, so that if the Saudis took over the plant, there would be some way to ensure that they would get little benefit from it. So that's, you know, that's very much in the mind. I think. I would prefer it to so the Saudis accepted the gold standard and renounced enrichment per permanently, but they're not going to do that. You know, that's why I've recommended a 10 year moratorium on enrichment as part of the US Saudi deal. I don't think the administration is going to go for that. But a 10 year moratorium, after which there could be a joint determination in which the US would have to agree on whether after 10 years they can engage the Saudis in domestic enrichment. This would buy some time, without closing a door to enrichment forever, which themselves the Saudis would not want to do. I think that the Non Proliferation risks are not so much that it will enable the Saudis to use a facility for nuclear weapons. It's the global implications for the Non Proliferation regime. Once we say yes to the Saudis, how do we say no to our ally South Korea?

Jim Walsh 25:59

I will stop you there, Bob, we're gonna get on to that later the implications for allies and adversaries. It's an important point. And we'll we'll leave with you when we get to it. Let me quickly turn to Tom, to fill out the trio here, your reactions to Saudi Arabia as a candidate for a, I'm going to call it, a unique agreement?

Thomas Countryman 26:20

Well, without question, Saudi Arabia is a good candidate for a good agreement. If the agreement is less strong than those the US have insisted upon in the past, it's more difficult to make the case. Now, you can make the case that there is a strategic rationale for including for making such a deal with Saudi Arabia. And this goes to one of the questions in the chat in the q&a. Why don't we simply tell them go find another vendor? There is no question that the United States wants Saudi Arabia to buy us reactors, if it's going to buy any, and there is no question that the Saudis most want to buy us reactors rather than Chinese or Russian or French. The question is, what's the relative desire on the two parties parts? And how does that lead to negotiating leverage when you get down to these very fine details that Bob has talked about, but there is a strategic rationale for not only assisting normalization with Israel, but also further

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strengthening the US Saudi relationship, it's been built on oil for the last 80 years, I think it would be an exaggeration to say for the next 80 years, it would be built on nuclear. But there's a sound strategic rationale if you can get the details. Last point is, when I was assistant secretary for Non Proliferation, I noted a number of times that one of the things that made my job very difficult was the 2005 US India nuclear deal, where the US for the first time significantly bent the bars of the Non Proliferation regime it had built up. I think this would be the second self inflicted blow by the US to a Non Proliferation regime that has served all of us well. That's in the worst case scenario. And obviously, we need to look at the details of such an agreement.

Jim Walsh 28:52

Right? Well, you referenced it, Tom, there are a lot of great questions in the chat. We're only going to get to one or two of them, I'm afraid, but I wish we had more time. And Marie asks, and maybe this is for you, Bob or for anyone. How is this verification approach more proliferation resistant, without Saudi Arabia committing to concluding an additional protocol? And maybe that's part of the agreement, but it would be good to clarify whether they have to do this or not. And then additionally, will the Biden administration commit to even more financing of the IAEA is Department of safeguards to be able to undertake such a novel verification approach? What happens if Trump 2.0 withdraws such financing? That's actually three questions snuck in, that's against the rules. But take what part of it makes sense to you, Bob, and any clarification you can have on the Additional Protocol would be, I think central.

Robert Einhorn 29:47

Well, as Tom knows better than I do, the Saudis have resisted the Additional Protocol. But what I'm told is that in Connect action with the US Saudi deal and especially one that involved an enrichment facility, they would agree to the Additional Protocol. And perhaps not just that, but to go beyond the Additional Protocol, including some of the measures contained in the Iran nuclear deal. Yes, it would be novel. But actually, ironically, the precedent for these verification measures is the Iran nuclear deal. And I think the the US Saudi deal with we borrow from that novel, arrangement and financing, look, the the IAEA safeguards program has been stretched very, very thin. And if there is an increase in the world's reliance on nuclear energy, it's going to be stretched even thinner. And it's essential that the, you know, all members of the IAEA meet their financial obligations in the US, you know, since the inception of the IAEA has been the number one funder of the program, and that will really need to continue. My only hope is that this will be below the, the the possible future Trump administration's field of vision, and they won't. And they won't quibble with the amount of but it's essential we keep up and even increase our funding for the IAEA.

Jim Walsh 31:31

Anything from Tom or Ariel on these points, additional protocol or funding? Great, more questions are pouring in, I regret that we won't be able to get to them all. But I hope we can keep them as part of the Zoom walk and share them. I'm going to jump around here as our time.

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We're at the halfway point. But we have it's clear we have some people from Congress or work with Congress. Let me jump to the question. And this is open for anyone. What is Congress's role here? And how might you react to a proposed salary agreement and what ability does it have to shake that outcome?

Thomas Countryman 32:18

Okay, well, a few comments on that. First, a 123 agreement does not require approval or ratification by the Congress. Rather, it goes into effect 90 days after it is transmitted by the White House to the Congress, that is 90 congressional working days. I'm not sure they got to work 90 days this year. If the Congress does not take action by a two thirds majority, to reject the agreement, it goes into effect there. That has never happened that the Congress has rejected an agreement. It has stalled agreements, notably for many years in the case of the US China Agreement, and it set numerous conditions on the US India agreement and the so called Hide legislation. So they could slow it down. It's very difficult to stop. On the other hand, nobody should assume that this would sail through Congress without criticism. There have been several pieces of legislation that have significant support, introduced not yet passed, that add additional requirements to the Atomic Energy Act specifically for Saudi Arabia, saying that a 123 agreement must include adherence to the Additional Protocol. And citing Saudi Arabia's human rights records, and its statements about possibly pursuing nuclear weapons, kind of reverse the requirement for non approval, making it instead of approval, a positive act by the Congress. So there will be a significant amount of criticism and resistance when this goes forward. i It seems to me, nobody has said this to me from the administration. But it seems to me that the intent has been to give a package deal that if Israel endorses the package deal, because it includes normalization with Saudi Arabia, then the criticism of any nuclear agreement or the part that we're not talking about today, security guarantees to Riyadh, that part would sail through without much criticism And I think that is still the intended outcome here. I just have to comment on one great question in the chat from Aaron Miller, that asks, As I noted earlier, why do we have to be the ones to make it worthwhile for these two countries to do the right thing? That's still my most basic question.

Jim Walsh 35:25

First of all, I love I've never really seen a lot of this, but I love panelists, just taking questions from the chat on their own, and bringing them to the fore. That's fantastic. So we talked about the domestic audience. Bob, or Ariel, do you have any anything to fill in there before we talk about allies?

Robert Einhorn 35:44

Well, I agree with Tom, I think an agreement as a 123 agreement, would sail through, you know, especially if it had the support or aquas acquiescence of the Israeli government, if it were seen by the American public as being instrumental to achieving Israeli Saudi normalization, which is very popular in the United States, if there was strong monitoring measures, if the case could be

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made that with the US company supplying nuclear reactors to Saudi Arabia, this would create lots of jobs in America. I think we'd sail through if all of these conditions were realized, I think the I think Tom was alluding to it, if the deal permitted enrichment, if it caught for us construction of an enrichment facility, there wouldn't be legislation that would change the entry into force requirements. You know, from what Tom mentioned, were to defeat it, you need a joint resolution of disapproval but two thirds majority against two positive affirmative majority votes of both houses of Congress. And in today's polarized Washington. I think achieving that is a lot harder. And this is not theoretical. Senator, Senator Markey of Massachusetts, Senator, Rubio of Florida have, in the past submitted a new legislation that would require a Saudi 123 to have majority support, this would make it this would be a much higher bar. And I think we could put the support for the deal in question.

Jim Walsh 37:36

Terrific. All right. That's our domestic audience. Ariel, did you have anything you wanted to add?

Ariel Petrovics 37:41

Yeah, I just wanted to note that I mean, we obviously we're going to be discussing it largely from American perspective. But there are at there's at minimum, one more domestic audience that we have to consider and that Saudi Arabia, although obviously Saudi Arabia is an autocracy, we can't entirely ignore that. That was sort of one of the big elements of bargaining. the Iran deal with Iran was their own domestic audience constraints on the deal. And so there will be something similar with Saudi Arabia. And then if we are to include Israel, which is looking harder currently than we had hoped. But if we're going to include Israel, that's another domestic audience that we're going to have to consider. So it's not just passing it through U.S. public, U.S. Congress, it's also going to need to obviously pass through the at least minimal approval of both of the other partners were at minimum Saudi Arabia.

Jim Walsh 38:33

Good point, well, let's expand it and talk about other constituencies that may be interested in this for good or nefarious reasons. And that is the other countries that are not in the agreement, our allies and others. And what let's go back to you, Ariel, because you have had, as Tom and Bob have had in the policy domain, you've been able to survey some history in different cases in different countries. And I guess the question is, if a deal is signed, that includes enrichment or promises enrichment, how will our friends and adversaries would be proliferators in both camps respond to that? How would South Korea nuclear curious South Korea? How would it affect the as Bob put it the currently more violent JCPOA? Or perhaps its revival, it would seem on its face to have implications for that, at least theoretically, if not practically, any piece of that Ariel that you want to take a whack at?

Ariel Petrovics 39:36

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Sound sounds great. I mean, Bob and and Tom have both already alluded to this, but this deal does not happen in a vacuum. And it has potential to set some problematic precedent. Obviously, there's specific elements that I'm particularly worried about, but there are elements that a number of other observers are concerned about. So South Korea is one such example. They actually have something on the order of 78% public approval rating for developing their own nuclear weapon. And most experts agree that there may be a month away from doing so if they were to choose to. So it is they have all of the capabilities in place. And they could do it at a moment's notice if they chose to. So it has been solely a choice not to proliferate in the case of South Korea, for example, setting a precedent that we're going to basically grant potentially very problematic, risky technology and materials to a state that's already openly said it actually, the leaders or are interested in potentially developing nuclear weapons would certainly not be taken very well. In a case like South Korea, one of I would argue maybe one of the even bigger problems is, although the JCPOA or the Iran deal, as is defunct right now, there has been a lot of talk of hopefully, you know, revamping it maybe going back to the negotiating table, obviously, we don't, though, the worst outcome would be an uncontrolled Iranian nuclear program that maybe starts back up a nuclear weapons program, which from everything we can tell, it's probably been closed down since 2005. But they, they have all of the capabilities if they chose to, and and all of their plans were actually quite advanced. It's not like they don't have the ability to quickly develop it. If the New Deal with Saudi Arabia would have set a precedent that the United States is is willing to sort of barter away controls on on nuclear proliferation and exchange for for other sort of security issues or, or other sort of domestic reasons, then that that definitely sets the precedent that then any future deal that we might be able to negotiate with Iran or any other potential proliferator for that matter? would say, Okay, well, you gave this potential proliferator enrichment capabilities or whatever the the issue is at hand, we're going to want that too. So there is a lot of precedent setting that can happen here. And that's obviously something that I'm sure the administration knows they're keeping that in mind, but it is definitely something that we might have to contend with. Maybe not even that far down the road.

Jim Walsh 42:11

Right. What do you say, Bob? You certainly have had your share of travel around the globe, how do you think others are gonna react to it?

Bob Einhorn 42:23

Tom and I have not only traveled a lot around the globe, but we've negotiated these agreements for civil nuclear cooperation, including both of us were involved in the, in the agreement with South Korea, and were in South Korea asked over and over again for advanced consent to enrichment and reprocessing. And we denied it. And if we said yes to Saudi Arabia on enrichment, how could we say no, to South Korea? But what about Russia and China? If we say yes to Saudi Arabia? How can we persuade China and Russia not to build enrichment plants in other countries, you know, both countries want to sell nuclear reactors very lucrative to sell nuclear reactors. They may want to sweeten the deal, a nuclear reactor deal by saying we will offer to construct an enrichment facility, maybe, you know, maybe with Turkey, with Egypt,

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perhaps other countries? How do we persuade them that they shouldn't do that once we have done that with Saudi Arabia? So you know, that's a real concern. I can imagine the Biden administration reacting to that comment, they saying, look, the kind of deal will have Saudi Arabia might be a decent model for other countries. Because, you know, if we told the South Koreans that yes, you can have enrichment, we'll leave and build it for you. But like, you can't, we won't share technology with you, will we, you know, we will do it. I mean, you can you can do it with Russia, with Egypt or turkey or something like that. But you should do it by insisting not just on the Additional Protocol, but additional constraints. So the FBI can imagine the Biden administration saying we are creating a model that would reduce the global proliferation risks, but I don't know how credible that explanation would be.

Thomas Countryman 44:29

I don't mean to suggest that some of our partners sometimes lack credibility. However, no country has ever asked the US for permission for enrichment and reprocessing. Out of an economic argument, or scientific curiosity. They asked for it because they are interested in weapons latency. That's the ROK and that's Saudi Arabia. And we will have a more difficult time saying no do our okay. If we say yes to Saudi Arabia, the two more points one, you know, Bob outlines a positive scenario, which would be very difficult, but not impossible that you could conceivably get to a new international standard of how countries can do domestic enrichment, nevermind repro reprocessing, we should continue to reject the idea of reprocessing in other countries, just as we should reject the idea of reprocessing for new design nuclear power plants in the US. So, potentially, that could work very difficult at the moment when we can't get, you know, started negotiating. Were discussing anything with Russia and very little with China, on the regional scene, two interesting points. One, there are several questions in the q&a, that point to the economic irrationality of the world's largest sunshine spot, Saudi Arabia, turning to nuclear power instead of solar power for its future. It's not an argument that goes anywhere with the Saudis. In discussing nuclear power with the Jordanian government, I tried always to make the point that they would be better off with a self reliant, decentralized energy grid, than calling on the Russians to build one plant that will have 50% of its electricity. It's hard to get through on those arguments, when nuclear is seen as a sign that you have arrived, that you are now a more prestigious economic power. The other interesting thing are the Israelis. All the time that we were discussing with Saudi Arabia, we would hear messages from the Israelis don't let them have any enrichment. And we are saying the same thing, by the way to China and to Russia. It seems that Mr. Netanyahu is so enamored of the possibility of normalization with Saudi Arabia, that he is willing to accept some compromise from what used to be a very clear Israeli position. Yes, do a 123 with Saudi but but don't give them anything special. That's an interesting development that may have as much to do with Israeli politics as American.

Jim Walsh 48:01

Terrific. I'm gonna take one more question from the list here, and maybe set it up with a theoretical point, one intervention on my part, it seems to me there's a natural tension or relationship between building a case that, yes, we can have a Non Proliferation agreement, that

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transfer and enrichment technology and it'll be perfect, there'll be no, no risk, no compromise and won't have access to it, it'll be great for ever a tension between being able to make that claim if you can make that claim or as close to it as you can, with the tension that will others will say, Well, why not make that? Why not? For me, you know, the harder we tried to, it seems that you strive to ensure that there can't be cheating or whatever, the stronger the argument on the part of the have nots will be, well, we should all have this, right. There are no dangerous hell of Saudi Arabia can have it. Anybody can have. Right. And so let me speak to a, what is a implication of that? Maybe? Or maybe I'm just twisting things. John writes in the chat. And it's interesting. This is a political not a technical question. Is there a reason to worry that Riyadh would succeed and loosening all restrictions on its nuclear program, and maybe even gain tacit acceptance, you know, or whatever. And he's thinking of the political atmosphere in Washington in a scenario where, you know, Iran gets the bomb or something else happens. So in other words, 10 years is a long time. You know, 50 years is a long time. Suddenly, friends change, allies change, and we want Saudi Arabia Arabia to keep their promises but we hate someone else more whoever that is. And if they're starting at it, we sort of looked the other way. You know, that's happened. That At least in other domains, and that's essentially a political thing. How come we can have confidence in the technical rules? Can we have confidence in the political relationships? Let me start with that mouthful of a terrible question and drop it on Ariel.

Ariel Petrovics 50:19

Think it is it is a very good question. Basically, are we going to set this precedent? And is it going to create political problems for us in the future? So we've already obviously talked about sort of setting the, in some ways, the technical precedent, but that has political implications. Right. This is we're talking about not just as I mentioned, not just American domestic audiences, not just the American Congress, but foreign audiences as well. If we have to be able to renegotiate with our allies, right. South Korea is an ally, we've been much more, I guess, not lacks on on on IAEA inspections or other inspections. We just we know that we have so far been able to trust South Korea to come forward, at least in recent years, South Korea did actually have a weapons program. But that was before it was the ROK. So sort of, kind of black box that went and set it aside because it wasn't actually the current South Korea. They are though very, very interested in developing nuclear weapons. As I mentioned, it's more than a majority. It's something on the order of 72 to 78%. Consistently, over the last many years, the public has been saying, Yes, we are interested in developing our own indigenous nuclear weapon. In other words, we don't just want to have American security guarantees anymore. And a lot of that has to do with obviously what's going on on on their own Peninsula, North Korea developing its own weapons program getting more advanced on ballistic missiles, being able to target the US, which makes it harder to trust a US security guarantee.

But all of that basically to say that there's very little preventing a country like South Korea from from developing nuclear weapons Japan as well, Japan is also very, very close to being able to develop a nuclear weapon, if it chose to, it's basically a choice to not. And so if you have countries that are already a known problem, basically acquiring capabilities that are so far limited towards our allies that we've been able to trust. Why would they say okay, well, you've

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said we can't because this is too risky, but we shown ourselves to be reliable. So why would you give it to a state that has shown itself to maybe not be as reliable, or at least not yet shown itself to be reliable? So there's, there's a lot of political constraints in the basically any other countries we would want to be able to negotiate with as well. So we have to kind of think about that.

Jim Walsh 52:45

Bob, frailty of the political politics, even if the rules are good, or also, you know, impact on others, any piece of that that you want.

Bob Einhorn 52:55

I mean, look, if Iran crosses in nuclear, I shall actually possesses nuclear weapons. I think you were asking, would we become more tolerant of an ally like Saudi Arabia, also matching them with nuclear weapons? I don't think so. Especially if we have a new mutual defense arrangement with the Saudis, which could implicate us in any nuclear war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. I mean, look at the Korean Peninsula analogy. North Korea has acquired nuclear weapons. Does that mean we acquiesce to South Korea also developing a matching capability? No, it's been very important for the United States to enhance the credibility of US security assurances, so that South Korea will not acquire nuclear weapons, the United States doesn't want South Korea as a nuclear armed state. And, you know, it's it's and I'm sure the same would apply to Saudi Arabia.

Jim Walsh 54:07

Okay, can finally, Tom, your take on this?

Thomas Countryman 54:10

Well, it's a great question from Ambassador Koenig about political realities. One is they're not easily predicted. In 2017, when I was out of government, I predicted that the Trump administration would just give Saudi Arabia anything it wanted. That didn't happen. Secretary Tillerson stood up, insisted on the Additional Protocol, and that continued throughout the Trump administration. So we're predicting left right is not easy. I am. I agree with Bob that we're not going to love the idea that if the ROK decides to go build nuclear weapons, it'll be okay with us. I am concerned that in our current chair stumping politics in the United States, there are fewer political leaders who have a clue what nuclear weapons are, and how dangerous it would be to have 20 countries with nuclear weapons instead of nine. It's kind of almost a reversion to the questions that Nixon asked Kissinger in 1969. And thankfully, Kissinger gave him a bit of an education. The point about countries wanting nuclear weapons. Yes, in South Korea, if you ask people 75 80% will say we should have nuclear weapons. If you ask me what I like a new Ferrari, the answer is yes. But if you ask me, am I ready to give up my house? The answer is no. The relevant question for South Koreans is our Do you want nuclear weapons so much that you are willing to live without the US nuclear umbrella, you don't get to have your cake and eat it

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as well. We have good relationships with allies, because we understand our obligations to each other. And a unilateral renunciation of a key part of those obligations changes the Alliance. Very last point, and I'm not sure how to develop it. It will be very hard to assess a draft 123 agreement with Saudi Arabia, unless the US is also thinking very hard about what's the regional strategy, how does this affect what we're trying to do and what we can do with Iran?

Jim Walsh 56:48

All right, well, sadly, our time is run away from us. I wish I could go another hour and focus only on audience questions. But I can't do that. Instead, I'm gonna pass it over to Trita again with my thanks and gratitude for being able to listen in on this wonderful conversation.

Trita Parsi 57:06

Thank you so much, Jim. And thank you to Tom to Bob and to Ariel, as well for a fantastic conversation. You're quite right, Jim, this this hour passed by very, very quickly. I think it revealed a large number of very serious questions about this potential deal. One that stood out to me is that when Ariel points out that we have to take into account the risk of nationalization in which some of the safeguards that the administration is trying to put in, may go straight out the window. And Paul points out that they have been thinking about it, and they one potential solution is to position us troops at these facilities. That to me raises the question of if this is a solution that requires that type of safeguarding perhaps that in and of itself is a major red flag that we should think a little bit more seriously about. Before I let you all go. Let me also mention to you an upcoming webinar that we have on July 10. That is titled, is in regards to potential new era of foreign lobby lobbying transparency, our researchers at the Quincy Institute are coming out with a new report that is analyzing a huge new tranche of fairer data from the Department of Justice that was just made available earlier this year. It provides great insight into the foreign lobbying that is taking place in Washington and potential impact that it may have had on foreign policy, US foreign policy on some very sensitive areas. That webinar is on July 10. For those of you who are not subscribed to the Quincy mailing list, please go to Quincy i n st dot org sign up so that you will receive email invitations to all of these different webinars as well as receive our reports and products on a regular basis as well. So with that said, thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you again to our wonderful panelists, and hope to see you on July 10. Thank you so much.