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Managing Nuclear Proliferation in the Arabian Gulf

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The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in Vienna on July 14, 2015, might prompt other countries in the region to insist upon the same nuclear "rights" received by Iran. Even before the deal was signed, several Middle East states began developing civilian nuclear infrastructures. The UAE, for example, has four reactors under construction, and is expected to be the first Arab country to use nuclear energy. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has sent out feelers to outside companies for the purpose of developing civilian nuclear energy, and has started building the necessary technological and scientific infrastructures.

There is real concern that these projects could serve as springboards for the development of military programs. This concern is amplified by the fact that some of the states in question refuse to waive their right to develop fuel cycle capabilities (i.e., enriching uranium or separating plutonium). Given the tremendous resources required to jump-start a nuclear program as well as its technical complexity, it is not clear that all the candidates would be able to realize their nuclear plans, some of which are very ambitious indeed. Nevertheless, the possibility of future transitions from civilian to military nuclear capability will require close monitoring.

In 2009, a proliferation-weary Congress declared the "123 Agreement" with the UAE to be the "gold standard," a model for future cooperation. The US, it has been said, will only cooperate with those states willing to limit their fuel cycle activities. However, now that the deal has been signed