



Middle East Spotlight

Heightened Concern

In the past two years, more than a dozen countries in the Middle East have announced plans for nuclear energy, citing economic concerns. But given the historical near absence of nuclear programs in the Middle East—a region flush with oil and other fuel resources—this spike in nuclear interest can only be attributed to one cause: Iran’s aggressive quest for an atomic bomb.

In recent months, Iran has accelerated its efforts to enrich uranium, increasing Middle Eastern countries’ fear that a nuclear-capable Iran would alter the strategic balance of the entire region. With this danger in mind, many states in the region have reevaluated their own nuclear policies in order to counterbalance Persian hegemony.

Long worried that Cairo’s regional influence is weakening, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak declared last year that developing nuclear know-how is “an Arab right.” In fact, as early as September 2006, Egypt announced plans to revive its dormant nuclear power program. To this end Egypt signed a nuclear cooperation deal with Russia in March of this year, allowing Moscow to bid on a nuclear reactor project in Egypt.

Sitting just across the Persian Gulf from Iran, Saudi Arabia would also be greatly affected by the new balance of power in the region should Iran go nuclear. The oil-rich desert kingdom has no need for new sources of energy, but rather the Saudi monarchy’s atomic ambitions stem strictly from strategic calculations. As former U.S. Middle East envoy Dennis Ross has argued: “If Iran goes nuclear, Saudi Arabia almost certainly will, as well. They will not allow Iran to use a nuclear shield behind which it can engage in coercion and subversion.”

Turkey is another key Middle Eastern country that would be at a disadvantage if the regional balance of power shifted in Iran’s favor. Although Turkey is formally protected by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) collective security guarantee, growing Turkish skepticism about NATO could lead it to consider its own deterrent capabilities. Turkey has a well-established nuclear research agency already in place and preliminary work has begun on its civilian nuclear program.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are just a few examples of a long list of Middle Eastern countries that have responded to Iran’s atomic ambitions with a newfound interest in nuclear capabilities of their own. For the sake of international peace and security stopping nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is sure to be a top policy priority for the next presidential administration. Time is running out. If Iran goes nuclear, there is every indication that nuclear programs will cascade across the Middle East.