



## **Nuclear Power for the Gulf States**

**Dr. Newton Howard**

The chronic Arab-Israeli conflict is no longer the most riveting focus of Middle East politics. Four years into the war, Iraq's instability and its four million refugee crisis continue to top news headlines. Meanwhile, Iran stokes its nuclear ambitions in defiance of growing anxiety on the part of the international community, threatening possible regional confrontation with devastating consequences. Analysts and scholars can rest assured that this region, marred by conflict and tense historical issues, can only become more complex. As Iran defies the international community and challenges its political will, its Arab gulf neighbors adjust, plan and take action to best serve their interests.

During the 102<sup>nd</sup> session of the ministerial council held in Riyadh in early March 2007, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretary General Abdul-Rahman al-Attiya briefed GCC foreign ministers on his talks with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Mohammed el-Baradei. The brief proposed to implement a December 2006 GCC Supreme Council resolution for a joint Arab nuclear program to be implemented by the six member states. The ministerial Council discussion, on the heels of declarations of intent last year by Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, focused on developing a joint GCC nuclear technology program for peaceful applications conforming to international regulations. The ministers concluded with a unified emphasis on the right of any country to possess nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. With combined foreign cash reserves larger than all of Asia and estimated at \$3 trillion, GCC countries are investing in critical assets. Unlike the oil booms of the 1970s and 80s, the current boom marks a radical social, economic and physical infrastructure transformation providing a social safety net for a rapidly growing population.

Cooperation in the area of energy production and sharing, especially in the context of nuclear power, nonproliferation, regional security challenges and the need for economic diversification, has been a dominant issue for Gulf Arab states. Based on estimates of known oil reserves and current production rates, oil revenues will drastically drop in two to three generations as oil supplies wane by the first decade of the next century. In light of increasing power demands in the region, especially due to desalination plants, a soaring young population, free-trade zones and financial markets, as well as new cities to diversify the economy, nuclear energy is becoming increasingly relevant to the Gulf States. In this context, pursuing alternative energy sources, especially nuclear power, seems a rational direction.

However, Gulf States must consider a large number of security, political and economic issues before embracing nuclear energy. From an international security point of view, there is a growing concern about increased nuclear proliferation, highlighted by the international standoff toward North Korea's nuclear program and Iran's growing nuclear ambitions. Building a nuclear arsenal is normally achieved as soon as raw materials are available, a key point when considering



dual-use technology. Indeed, the Gulf Arab states could easily conceal a nuclear arsenal under the cover of a peaceful, civil nuclear program, thus duplicating the current efforts of their sworn foe, Iran.

The impact of mutual perceptions among regional and international players, a crucial factor often overlooked in political and security analysis, plays a central role here. Scholars, analysts and policy makers must first determine the true intentions behind the GCC's planned nuclear program in light of current regional complexities. In order to determine the appropriate positions and responses to a Middle East powered with nuclear energy, the cognitive dimensions guiding rationale, intentions and actions must be carefully examined. The region's complexities and chronic disputes should not cause hyper-paranoia leading to misperceptions and unjustified hostilities. A clash of powers can always be avoided if a clash of perceptions is mitigated early enough, before misconceptions emerge.

It is important to determine whether the Arab states are pursuing nuclear technology for energy needs or to counter Iran's growing political hegemony in the region, built on the ashes of an internally crumbling Iraq. The ongoing discussion by the Gulf States may also be part of a strategy to gain public support and neutralize radicalization, especially since most Arab regimes are perceived by their people as corrupt puppets of Western powers. In addition, it is critical to determine how Israel would perceive a nuclear powered Gulf. Israel has maintained an opaque nuclear posture—widely suspected of possessing nuclear weapons but refusing to publicly acknowledge such capabilities—in order to boost its deterrent position. Israeli governments have likely managed for years to create a myth of military superiority purely by manipulating perceptions. The Lebanon-based militant organization Hezbollah, which enjoys Iran's support, challenged this perception in its attacks last summer. The ambiguity of Israel's position has served it well. However, the next Israeli government will likely lift the veil and demonstrate its nuclear capabilities. In such a case, Gulf Arab states will have more reasons to favor a military use of nuclear technology, especially if no sustainable resolutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict are reached. The Middle East faces a grim future if perceptions are not balanced. It all begins and ends with Jerusalem.

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