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Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies

Risks of Iran Acquiring Nuclear Weapons for Arabian Gulf and Regional Security

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June 2026

BUSHEHR NUCLEAR POWER PLANT (SOUTHERN IRAN)

Despite several concerns related to the Iranian threat to Arabian Gulf and regional security, the most significant is Iran's pursuit of developing nuclear capabilities for military purposes. This issue is presented as the primary factor — alongside others — behind the outbreak of the Twelve-Day War between Iran and Israel in June 2025, as well as the armed confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, which lasted 39 days from 28 February 28 to 8 April 2026.

The risks associated with Iran acquiring nuclear weapons are numerous. Chief among them is the potential use of such weapons to safeguard the Iranian regime and advance its ideological objectives. This could enable Iran to impose its regional vision, seek dominance over the Arabian Gulf, and further entrench an already uneven balance of power, thereby threatening both Gulf and broader regional security.

In addition, the possession of nuclear weapons could perpetuate chronic regional tension and limit prospects for cooperative security frameworks. It also increases the risk of radioactive contamination, whether due to natural disasters such as earthquakes or military strikes on nuclear facilities. These risks reinforce the imperative of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.
This paper examines four key issues: the history of Iran's nuclear program; Iranian justifications for developing nuclear energy; the implications of military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program for Arabian Gulf and regional security; and the strategies adopted by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to address Iran's nuclear ambitions.

HISTORY OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

It is possible to distinguish two main phases in the history of Iran's nuclear program: the first extends from the 1950s to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, while the second spans from 2002 to the present.

During the era of the Shah, Iran's nuclear cooperation with the United States developed within the framework of their broader strategic partnership. On 8 December 1953, U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced the "Atoms for Peace'' initiative in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy. In this context, the United States and Iran signed a nuclear cooperation agreement in 1957 focused on civilian applications, with a duration of ten years. Under this agreement, Iran received technical assistance and limited quantities of enriched uranium. The Nuclear Science Institute was also transferred from Iraq to Iran. This institute had been affiliated with the Central Treaty Organization, which included the United States, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey.

Iran's nuclear cooperation was not limited to the United States. The Shah also pursued partnerships with several European countries, including France and West Germany, leading to the establishment of nuclear research centers within Iran. Cooperation extended further to Israel, and in 1960 the two countries reportedly reached an agreement on a joint nuclear research program.
By 1958, Iran had joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In 1968, it signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and ratified it in 1970. In 1977, Iran began planning and contracting for the construction of two nuclear reactors, one in Bushehr and the other in Ahvaz. During this period, Iran also pursued nuclear cooperation with several countries, including Argentina, India, Australia, and South Africa.[1]

[1] Sharifa Kalaa, "Qirā'a fī Tārīkh wa-Dawāfi' al-Barnāmaj al-Nawawī al-Irānī' [A Reading of the History and Motives of the Iranian Nuclear Program], May 25, 2016, accessed April 18, 2026.

U.S. PRESIDENT DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER ANNOUNCED THE "ATOMS FOR PEACE' INITIATIVE IN A SPEECH TO THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 8 DECEMBER 1953.

With the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran's nuclear policy underwent a fundamental transformation. At the time, Ruhollah Khomeini viewed nuclear development as potentially incompatible with certain religious principles. As a result, several nuclear agreements with Western states were suspended, and much of Iran's nuclear activity was curtailed.

However, the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) renewed Iran's interest in nuclear development, including efforts that were often conducted with a degree of secrecy, despite official claims that the program was intended for peaceful purposes. Iranian statements during this period also emphasized deterrence and the protection of national security as key motivations. Among Iran's efforts was a mid-1980s agreement with Pakistan that contributed to the acquisition of knowledge related to centrifuge technology.

The pace of nuclear development increased further under the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, beginning in 1989, who regarded nuclear capability as an important pillar of both national security and development. Additionally, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 created new opportunities for Iran to access scientific expertise and technical know-how, including the recruitment of scientists from former Soviet republics and the acquisition of technology through unofficial channels.

In parallel, the United States pursued policies aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear capabilities. In 1984, Iran was designated a state sponsor of terrorism by the U.S. government, followed by additional sanctions throughout the 1980s and 1990s, including measures imposed in 1995 over alleged involvement in weapons of mass destruction programs. In 2002, the United States labeled Iran part of the "Axis of Evil,'' leading to further sanctions.

At the international level, the United Nations Security Council adopted a series of resolutions beginning in 2006 in response to Iran's refusal to suspend uranium enrichment activities. These measures included restrictions on the export of nuclear materials and technologies, the freezing of financial assets, and limitations on ballistic missile development and related delivery systems.[2]
Despite the importance of the foregoing developments, the most significant turning point in the history of Iran's nuclear program occurred in 2002, when the Iranian opposition group, the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, revealed the existence of a previously undeclared nuclear facility at Natanz. The site was reported to house many centrifuges for uranium enrichment and was designed to accommodate approximately 54,000 centrifuges. It is also estimated to cover an area of around 1,400 hectares.[3]

Since then, Iran's nuclear program has remained a major concern for the United States and the international community, particularly in the context of efforts to prevent the development of nuclear weapons capabilities. During the military confrontations between Israel and Iran in June 2025, reports indicated that several sites associated with Iran's nuclear program were targeted, including the Natanz Nuclear Facility, the Fordow Uranium Enrichment Plant, and the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center. Reports also suggested that Iran had succeeded in enriching uranium to levels of up to 60% at the Natanz facility.

[2] Youssef Kamel Hattab, The Iranian Nuclear Program: Its Beginnings, Crises, and Outcomes, May 7, 2025, accessed April 18, 2026, [1] Sharifa Kalaa, "Qirā'a fī Tārīkh wa-Dawāfi' al-Barnāmaj al-Nawawī al-Irānī'' [A Reading of the History and Motives of the Iranian Nuclear Program], May 25, 2016, accessed April 18, 2026.,
[3] Saber Gol Anbari. "Isfahan: The Province of Secrets and the Center of Nuclear and Military Power in Iran.'' April 20, 2024. Accessed April 18, 2026. [1] Sharifa Kalaa, "Qirā'a fī Tārīkh wa-Dawāfi' al-Barnāmaj al-Nawawī al-Irānī'' [A Reading of the History and Motives of the Iranian Nuclear Program], May 25, 2016, accessed April 18, 2026.,

The Fordow Uranium Enrichment Plant, constructed in 2007 and publicly disclosed in 2009, is an underground facility designed for uranium enrichment activities, though its scale and operational capacity differ from Natanz. The Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center houses several research reactors and facilities linked to nuclear fuel cycle activities.

In addition, the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant operates using nuclear fuel supplied by Russia and remains under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. The Arak Heavy Water Reactor is also a significant facility, as it has the potential to produce plutonium as a byproduct, which raises concerns regarding its possible use in the development of nuclear weapons.[4]
Despite the multiplicity of sources that may reveal information on Iran's nuclear sites — whether declared or undeclared — three key observations can be made.

First, even if Iranian nuclear facilities were to be destroyed through U.S. or Israeli military strikes, this would not necessarily mark the end of Iran's nuclear program. The program is not limited to physical infrastructure but also includes four essential components: facilities, research laboratories, scientific expertise, and enriched uranium stockpiles.
Second, Iran's nuclear development is supported, directly or indirectly, by cooperation with states such as China and Russia, which contributes to the resilience and continuity of its nuclear capabilities.

Third, the limitations of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection and verification mechanisms may enable Iran to reconstruct or expand its nuclear infrastructure over time. Ultimately, this is largely a matter of timing rather than feasibility, even in the context of potential agreements. The 2015 nuclear deal demonstrated these challenges, as Iran committed to limiting enrichment levels but was later accused of non-compliance, a development that contributed to renewed tensions and the escalation toward conflict in 2026.

[4] Asharq Al-Awsat, "3 Iranian Nuclear Sites Bombed by the United States... What Do We Know about Them?' June 22, 2025, accessed April 18, 2026, https://shorturl.at/SoKc7.

A WORKER AT AN IRANIAN NUCLEAR SITE.

FORMER IRANIAN PRESIDENT MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD VISITS ONE OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR LABS, 2007.

IRANIAN JUSTIFICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING NUCLEAR ENERGY

An analysis of Iranian discourse indicates that Iran consistently emphasizes the peaceful nature of its nuclear program and frames its objectives as being primarily related to energy production. In this context, Iranian officials frequently assert that the program is not intended for military purposes.

For example, in his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2025, President Masoud Pezeshkian stated that "Iran has not sought to build a nuclear bomb and will not seek to do so, based on the fatwas of its leadership.''[5] In another statement, Pezeshkian asserted that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued a fatwa in 2003 prohibiting the production and use of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, and that this ruling definitively means that Tehran will not develop nuclear weapons.''[6] In addition, other statements have emphasized that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively peaceful in nature. For instance, Mohammad Eslami, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, stated that "the objectives of the Iranian nuclear program are transparent and peaceful, and we operate under the full supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency.'' He further added that "we have never moved toward nuclear weapons in any way, and this is not part of our defense doctrine.''[7]
Three observations can be made regarding Iran's arguments.

First, Iran's electricity generation is heavily reliant on natural gas, which accounts for approximately 85.9% of total production. Oil contributes around 6.7%, while hydropower accounts for about 4.8%. In contrast, the contributions of nuclear energy, renewable energy, and coal remain minimal.[8]

[5] Iran International, "Pezeshkian at the United Nations: Iran Has Not and Will Not Seek to Build a Nuclear Bomb,'' September 24, 2025, accessed April 21, 2026, [4] Asharq Al-Awsat, "3 Iranian Nuclear Sites Bombed by the United States... What Do We Know about Them?'' June 22, 2025, accessed April 18, 2026, https://shorturl.at/SoKc7.

[6] Asharq News, "Iranian President: Khamenei Issued a Fatwa Prohibiting Weapons of Mass Destruction... and We Will Never Manufacture Nuclear Weapons,'' February 26, 2026, accessed April 21, 2026, [4] Asharq Al-Awsat, "3 Iranian Nuclear Sites Bombed by the United States... What Do We Know about Them?'' June 22, 2025, accessed April 18, 2026, https://shorturl.at/SoKc7.

[7] Sky News Arabia, "Iran: Our Nuclear Program Is Peaceful... and Talk of Nuclear Weapons Is 'Politicized,"'' May 17, 2025, accessed April 21, 2026, [4] Asharq Al-Awsat, "3 Iranian Nuclear Sites Bombed by the United States... What Do We Know about Them?'' June 22, 2025, accessed April 18, 2026, https://shorturl.at/SoKc7.

[8] Asharq Business, "Infographic: Gas Accounts for More than 85% of Electricity Generation in Iran,'' March 25, 2026, accessed April 21, 2026, [4] Asharq Al-Awsat, "3 Iranian Nuclear Sites Bombed by the United States... What Do We Know about Them?'' June 22, 2025, accessed April 18, 2026, https://shorturl.at/SoKc7.

Second, despite statements by Esmaeil Baghaei, spokesperson for the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, indicating the extent of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring in Iran—including approximately 500 of 690 inspections, 144 of 224 design verification activities, and around 1,260 inspections conducted within a single year, as well as the allocation of about €4 million out of the Agency's €28 million budget for inspection activities in Iran—concerns persist regarding the effectiveness and adequacy of the verification regime.[9]

Third, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has reported difficulties in conducting inspections with full transparency and cooperation from the Iranian side. In his address to the IAEA Board of Governors on 9 June 2025, Director General Rafael Grossi stated that "Iran has repeatedly failed to respond to the Agency's requests or has not provided technically credible answers.'' He further noted that Iran had attempted to "sanitize'' sites that the Agency assessed as having been part of a structured nuclear program in the early twenty-first century. He emphasized that "unless Iran assists the Agency in resolving the outstanding safeguards issues, the Agency will not be in a position to provide assurance that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively peaceful.'' Grossi also expressed concern over "the rapid accumulation of more than 400 kilograms of highly enriched uranium and enrichment levels reaching 60%,'' both of which raise significant proliferation concerns.[10]

The foregoing suggests that if Iran does not require nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, and if a religious fatwa prohibits the possession of nuclear weapons, a key question arises: why does Iran insist on developing an extensive nuclear infrastructure? Even if the need for nuclear reactors is accepted, Iran has not demonstrated consistent cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations body responsible for global nuclear safeguards. By 2024, 182 states had concluded safeguards agreements with the Agency.

[9] Youm7, "Tehran: The Iranian Nuclear Program Is Subject to the Strictest Inspection Regimes by the Agency,'' June 9, 2025, accessed April 21, 2026, https://shorturl.at/RVdqj.

[10] United Nations News, "The International Atomic Energy Agency and Iran: What Is the Agency's Role in Verifying the Peaceful Nature of the Nuclear Program?'' June 24, 2025, accessed April 21, 2026, https://news.un.org/ar/story/2025/06/1142631.

FORMER IRANIAN PRESIDENT HASSAN ROUHANI INSPECTS NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY IN TEHRAN ALONGSIDE ALI AKBAR SALEHI, HEAD OF THE ATOMIC ENERGY ORGANIZATION OF IRAN, JANUARY 2021.

BUSHEHR NUCLEAR POWER PLANT (SOUTHERN IRAN)

By analyzing Iran's current nuclear capabilities, it can be argued that Iran has reached the status of a "nuclear threshold state." This is based on the fact that moving from 60% enrichment to weapons-grade levels of approximately 90% requires a comparatively limited additional amount of separative work units (SWU), indicating that a substantial portion of the enrichment process has already been completed. In practical terms, Iran's existing stockpile could potentially provide sufficient fissile material for several nuclear weapons if further enrichment were pursued.

Moreover, the conversion of enriched uranium gas into weapon-usable components is often assessed as requiring a relatively short timeframe, further reinforcing concerns about the potential rapidity of breakout capability.

What further increases the seriousness of the situation is the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) limited ability to fully verify certain aspects of Iran's centrifuge production activities since 2021. Reports indicate that gaps in monitoring and reduced access to relevant facilities have weakened the Agency's capacity to maintain continuity of knowledge regarding centrifuge manufacturing and inventories. This, in turn, raises concerns about the possible existence of undeclared facilities or additional enrichment capabilities that are not subject to international oversight.[11]

According to estimates, civilian nuclear energy applications typically require uranium enriched to around 3–5%, meaning that Iran's reported enrichment level of 60% significantly exceeds civilian requirements. This discrepancy is often cited as one factor that calls into question Iran's claim that its nuclear program is exclusively peaceful in nature.

[11] Robert Goldston, "Iran's Stockpile of Highly Enriched Uranium: Worth Bargaining For?" March 16, 2026, accessed May 1, 2026, https://armscontrolcenter.org/irans-stockpile-of-highly-enriched-uranium-worth-bargaining-for/.

Accordingly, some analysts argue that Iran may view its nuclear program as a component of deterrence strategy and broader geopolitical competition, with implications for the regional balance of power in the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East.[12] What further reinforces concerns regarding the acceleration of Iran's enrichment activities, amid the declining level of oversight by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), are reports indicating that Iran produced approximately 933 kilograms of enriched uranium between 2021 and June 2025, part of which was enriched to 60%. Additional concerns have also been raised regarding the possible existence of undeclared stockpiles of enriched uranium within Iran.[13]

[12] Max Zahn, "What to Know about Iran's Uranium Enrichment and Its Role in the Middle East Conflict," April 18, 2026, accessed May 1, 2026, https://abcnews.com/Business/irans-uranium-enrichment-role-middle-east-conflict/story?id=132057549&utm.

[13] David Albright and Sarah Burkhard, "How Much 20 Percent Enriched Uranium Does Iran Possess," April 9, 2026, accessed May 1, 2026, https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/how-much-20-percent-enriched-uranium-does-iran-possess.

MAJOR ELECTRICITY GENERATION PLANTS IN IRAN

MEETING BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY (IAEA) DIRECTOR GENERAL RAFAEL GROSSI AND IRANIAN PRESIDENT MASOUD PEZESHKIAN, 14 NOVEMBER 2024.

THE IMPACT OF IRAN'S DEVELOPMENT OF NUCLEAR PROGRAMS FOR MILITARY PURPOSES ON ARABIAN GULF SECURITY

The Arabian Gulf states, whether collectively through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or individually, have not opposed the right of states to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, provided that such programs remain subject to the supervision and safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Indeed, GCC countries themselves have an interest in the peaceful development of nuclear energy.

However, Iran has not demonstrated a sufficient degree of transparency regarding its nuclear activities, in addition to its previously noted lack of full cooperation with the IAEA. Accordingly, Iran's continued pursuit—according to some assessments—of nuclear capabilities that may extend beyond peaceful purposes constitutes a threat to the security of the Arabian Gulf and regional stability from several perspectives, including the following:

1. The consolidation of the imbalance in the regional balance of power. The balance of power refers to "a condition in which no state or group of states within a region possesses sufficient power to dominate other states or compel them to submit to its will.'[14] It may be argued that this approach has characterized Iranian policy since 1979. One of its most prominent manifestations was the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), which lasted eight years and placed the Arabian Gulf states before three principal options. First, increasing their military capabilities, both quantitatively and qualitatively, through arms acquisitions in line with their financial capacities. Second, entering into security partnerships with major international powers. Third, adopting a policy of neutrality. However, this option proved unsustainable in light of persistent regional tensions and the lack of consensus among the parties concerned.[15]

[14] Paul Robinson, Dictionary of International Security (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2009).

[15] Khaled Mousa Al-Masri, Introduction to the Theory of International Relations (Nineveh: Dar Nineveh for Publishing and Distribution, 2014).

2. The continued dominance of military security over cooperative security in the Arabian Gulf. In this context, security would remain centered on armament and counter-armament dynamics rather than on cooperative security arrangements. Cooperative security refers to "activities undertaken by states in collaboration with one another to reduce the likelihood of war or mitigate its consequences.'' This concept includes mechanisms such as disarmament, confidence-building measures, economic cooperation, and efforts to prevent weapons proliferation. Within such a framework, relations among states may gradually evolve into institutionalized forms of regional cooperation comparable to organizations such as the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.[16] However, Iran's nuclear policies, together with its conventional military buildup in areas such as ballistic missiles and drones, contribute to the continued dominance of the concept of military security over cooperative security. This dynamic reinforces regional arms competition and heightens tensions, thereby posing a threat to the security of the Arabian Gulf and broader regional stability. Reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and other international assessments have repeatedly highlighted concerns regarding Iran's enrichment activities and expanding strategic capabilities.

3. The environmental risks associated with radioactive leakage from Iranian nuclear facilities. Such risks may arise either from natural disasters, particularly earthquakes, or from military strikes targeting nuclear reactors, concerns that were already raised during the conflicts of June 2025 and February 2026. Addressing radioactive contamination is highly complex and falls within the framework of "nuclear safety requirements.'' For example, the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant is geographically closer to Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province than to the Iranian capital, Tehran. The facility is located approximately 1,600 kilometers from Tehran but only around 200 kilometers from Kuwait. In addition, desalination plants in the Arabian Gulf states are concentrated along the Gulf coastline. Consequently, any radioactive leakage into Gulf waters could threaten regional water security, particularly given the heavy dependence of Gulf states on seawater desalination for domestic, industrial, and agricultural needs.[17]

[16] Robinson, Dictionary of International Security.

[17] Ashraf Mohamed Keshk, Peaceful Nuclear Projects and Nuclear Safety Requirements (Riyadh: Naif Arab Academy for Security Sciences, 2014).

4. The threat arising from the linkage between Iran's nuclear ambitions and its conventional missile capabilities. The danger associated with Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons lies in the simultaneous development of its conventional military capabilities, particularly successive generations of ballistic missiles and drones capable of carrying warheads over long distances. This combination raises concerns regarding the potential future integration of nuclear and missile capabilities. Given the limited geographical depth of the Arabian Gulf states, such developments are viewed as posing a direct security threat. International assessments have frequently highlighted that Iran possesses one of the largest and most diverse ballistic missile arsenals in the Middle East, with some missiles reportedly capable of ranges of up to 2,000 kilometers or more, enabling them to reach targets across the Arabian Gulf region and beyond.[18]

5. The impact of Iran's nuclear ambitions on prospects for a regional security framework in the Arabian Gulf. Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is widely regarded as a major obstacle to the establishment of a comprehensive regional security framework in the Arabian Gulf. Over past decades, various proposals for regional security arrangements have been advanced by both the Arabian Gulf states and Iran; however, the continuation of Iran's nuclear ambitions has complicated these efforts. As a result, Arabian Gulf states increasingly seek binding security guarantees from the international community, alongside strengthened confidence-building measures with Iran, particularly measures aimed at halting the development of capabilities perceived as threatening to the security of the GCC countries. The acquisition of such capabilities would also undermine efforts to foster good-neighborly relations and deepen mutual trust. Furthermore, it would restrict opportunities for broader regional cooperation and mutual benefit that could otherwise emerge from a structured security framework based on principles such as the renunciation of force and the peaceful settlement of disputes, including unresolved border issues, through dialogue and negotiation.[19] Such a framework would also require Iran to commit to refraining from repeating attacks against GCC countries similar to those reported during the 2026 conflict, in order to reinforce regional stability and confidence-building measures.

[18] Ashraf Keshk, Iranian Policies toward the Gulf Cooperation Council States after the Nuclear Agreement: Implications and Regional Repercussions (Manama: Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies "Derasat," 2016).

[19] Talal Al-Otaibi, "The Development of the Iranian Nuclear Program and Its Impact on the Security of the Arabian Gulf Region," December 2023, accessed April 25, 2026, https://journals.ekb.eg/article_343984_983dae7124227af6e5f3e103ad994b0c.pdf.

6. If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, its asymmetric capabilities within the existing regional conflict could become more consequential. This would likely include increased support for armed proxy groups in the region under the protection of a perceived "nuclear umbrella,'' potentially reducing fears of deterrence or direct retaliation for its regional activities, particularly vis-à-vis neighboring GCC countries, while avoiding direct interstate military confrontation. Such a dynamic could contribute to an expansion of Iran's regional influence. This development may also increase risks to maritime security and critical energy infrastructure. Ultimately, it could weaken the effectiveness of regional deterrence, heighten strategic uncertainty, and raise the likelihood of escalation across multiple domains, including terrorism and cyber operations.[20] Iran's regional policies over past decades have reflected an approach in which instability is used as an element of regional strategy and as a means of strengthening its influence in the Arabian Gulf. This approach is often characterized as a deliberate escalation strategy aimed at generating strategic ambiguity and uncertainty, thereby complicating the security calculations of GCC countries.[21]

7. The potential for nuclear proliferation caused by growing regional insecurity. Increasing security uncertainty in the Middle East may encourage some states to consider developing nuclear capabilities. In this context, nuclear weapons could be perceived as the most effective form of deterrence and self-protection amid an unstable international environment and diminishing confidence in external security guarantees, particularly those of the United States. This dynamic may contribute to a "domino effect'' in nuclear proliferation, whereby the pursuit of nuclear weapons by one state encourages others to follow suit. Such a development would pose a serious challenge to the global non-proliferation regime and weaken existing international agreements. Ultimately, it could mark a highly destabilizing turning point in both regional and global balances of power.[22]

[20] The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), The Iran War and the Global Terrorism Threat (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026), accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/The-Iran-War-and-The-Global-Terrorism-Threat.pdf.

[21] Jesse Marks, "Iran's Instability and the Gulf's Indispensability,'' April 20, 2026, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/irans-instability-and-gulfs-indispensability.

[22] Chatham House, "The Iran War Risks Triggering a New Wave of Nuclear Proliferation,'' March 30, 2026, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/03/iran-war-risks-triggering-new-wave-nuclear-proliferation.

DESALINATION PLANTS ALONG THE ARABIAN GULF COULD BE AFFECTED IN THE EVENT OF RADIOACTIVE LEAKAGE FROM IRANIAN NUCLEAR REACTORS LOCATED NEAR THE GULF WATERS.

BALLISTIC MISSILES DISPLAYED DURING CEREMONIES MARKING THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION IN FEBRUARY 2026, REPORTEDLY CAPABLE OF CARRYING NUCLEAR WARHEADS OVER LONG DISTANCES.

PATHS AVAILABLE TO ARABIAN GULF STATES TO CONFRONT IRAN'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS

GCC states have three principal paths available to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions, as follows:
The First Path: Developing GCC nuclear research capabilities.[23] In fact, calls within the GCC for the development of peaceful nuclear programs are not new. In the final communiqué of the twenty-seventh session of the "Sheikh Jaber Summit,'' held in the State of Kuwait in 2006, the Supreme Council was directed to conduct a joint study among the GCC countries on establishing a common program in the field of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, in accordance with international standards and regulations.

At the same time, the communiqué urged Iran to continue its international dialogue and full cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to adhere to international standards of safety and security, and to take environmental considerations into account while strengthening its cooperation with the Agency.[24]

The foregoing does not imply that GCC countries seek to develop nuclear weapons for military purposes. However, considering persistent regional uncertainty and references to attacks on critical infrastructure in the Arabian Gulf during 2026, Saudi Arabia has pursued a strategy of diversifying its security partnerships in both the nuclear and defense sectors. This includes cooperation with countries such as Pakistan and Turkey, as well as limited engagement with China in certain aspects of nuclear development.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has continued negotiations with the United States regarding access to civilian nuclear capabilities, including potential provisions related to local uranium enrichment and the development of elements of the nuclear fuel cycle, while maintaining its commitments under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards regime.[25]

[23] Asharq Al-Awsat, "Turki Al-Faisal: Gulf States Must Cooperate and Develop Their Capabilities to Confront Iran's Nuclear Project,'' February 24, 2026, accessed April 25, 2026, https://shorturl.at/4hRUC.
[24] Gulf Cooperation Council, "Final Communiqué of the Twenty-Seventh Session – Sheikh Jaber Summit,'' December 10, 2006, accessed April 24, 2026, https://www.gcc-sg.org/ar/AboutUs/Data/SupremeData/Pages/TheClosingStatementoftheTwenty26.aspx.
[25] Nour Eid, "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Path Will Not Depend on Iran or the War's Outcome,'' March 23, 2026, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.stimson.org/2026/saudi-arabias-nuclear-path-will-not-depend-on-iran-wars-outcome/.

The Second Path: Employing the GCC countries' diplomatic capabilities to mobilize international efforts to prevent Iran from developing nuclear energy for non-peaceful purposes. The events of the 2026 war highlighted these diplomatic capabilities, particularly through Bahrain's success in securing the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2817 on 11 March 2026. The draft resolution, submitted by Bahrain on behalf of the GCC countries and Jordan, condemned attacks attributed to Iran against the territories of these states, describing them as violations of international law and a serious threat to international peace and security. It further called for their immediate cessation and reaffirmed respect for freedom of navigation in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab in accordance with international law. The resolution reportedly received the support of 136 United Nations member states.[26]

On the other hand, the engagement of GCC countries within the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) should prioritize strengthening verification and monitoring mechanisms, as nuclear restrictions are of limited effectiveness in the absence of robust oversight. It has been observed that early rounds of negotiations did not sufficiently emphasize verification, despite its central role in preventing nuclear proliferation.

In this context, full implementation of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement is essential, including granting inspectors unrestricted access to declared nuclear facilities. Equally important is the implementation of the Additional Protocol, which provides the IAEA with broader authority to access information and sites beyond declared facilities, including centrifuge-related installations and associated infrastructure.

More broadly, the monitoring framework must be sufficiently flexible and adaptive to address emerging challenges or potential gaps in the post-agreement phase, thereby ensuring the credibility, effectiveness, and continuity of any future nuclear arrangement.[27]

[26] Yasmin Al-Aqeedat, "Strategic Expert: No Successful Negotiations without an Effective Gulf Presence,'' April 11, 2026, accessed May 1, 2026, https://akhbar-alkhaleej.com/news/article/1434478.

[27] Alicia Sanders-Zakre, "The Trump Administration Must Prioritize Verification in Iran Talks,'' April 20, 2026, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2026-04-20/trump-administration-must-prioritize-verification-iran-talks.

The Third Path: One of the most contentious issues in relations between GCC countries and Iran concerns Tehran's influence in neighboring countries. Iran has developed and maintained extensive ties with non-state actors and allied groups across several regional environments, a strategy widely described in analytical literature as a "proxy model'' of regional influence, enabling it to project power beyond its borders while maintaining plausible deniability.

Accordingly, it may be in the interest of the GCC countries to pursue a political and diplomatic approach that safeguards their interests in these neighboring states and prevents Iran from leveraging allied groups or proxies in ways that could undermine regional stability or Arabian Gulf security interests. Such an approach typically combines diplomatic engagement, regional coordination, and international partnerships aimed at reducing escalation risks and managing areas of influence competition.[28]

[28] Amal Al-Marzooq, "'Derasat' Launches the Activities of the Second National and Regional Security Conference for the Gulf States,'' April 24, 2014, accessed May 1, 2026, https://www.albiladpress.com/article242256-1.html.

BARAKAH NUCLEAR POWER PLANT, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

BARAKAH NUCLEAR POWER PLANT, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

1. Since 1951, Iran has pursued nuclear ambitions, though the intensity and focus have varied over time. Nonetheless, the program has consistently been treated as a key national project and a central element of Iran's national security strategy, particularly in safeguarding regime stability.

2. The Iranian claim that it requires peaceful nuclear energy due to electricity shortages is misleading, as the country's power sector is overwhelmingly dependent on natural gas, which accounts for roughly 80–85% of electricity generation. This resource is abundantly available domestically, making natural gas the dominant and sufficient fuel for Iran's electricity needs.

3. Repeated statements by International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi indicate that Iran has not consistently responded to the Agency's requests or provided technically credible explanations, and that concerns remain over roughly 400 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60%. These findings have heightened concerns among GCC countries and the broader international community about the potential non-peaceful dimensions of Iran's nuclear program.

4. Some sources assess that Iran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium could, if further refined, be sufficient for several nuclear weapons, with estimates ranging from roughly 9 to 10 potential warheads. In addition, certain analyses suggest that once a decision is made, the final enrichment to weapons-grade levels could be completed in a relatively short timeframe, potentially within days to a few weeks.

5. Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would have significant implications for Arabian Gulf security, potentially strengthening Iran's regional power position and deepening existing military imbalances at the expense of cooperative security frameworks. It also raises concerns about possible environmental risks from any nuclear incidents or radioactive leakage. In addition, Iran's possession of missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads would increase perceived threats to GCC states, while its continued support for regional armed groups and militias could further destabilize the region and heighten the risk of a wider nuclear arms race.

6. GCC countries have three main approaches to addressing Iranian nuclear ambitions: first, advancing their own peaceful nuclear research capabilities; second, using diplomatic efforts to build international consensus to prevent the militarization of Iran's nuclear program; and third, pursuing political arrangements with neighboring regional actors that safeguard Arabian Gulf interests and help limit Iranian regional influence.

7. Despite the perceived threat posed by Iran's nuclear program to Arabian Gulf and regional security, existing disputes between Iran and GCC states—including maritime naming and security issues, border disagreements, interference in domestic affairs, and support for regional militias—suggest that Iran's potential nuclear threshold crossing could be viewed as the culmination of broader regional ambitions. This, in turn, is seen by some as a shift away from principles of good neighborliness and confidence-building toward a more dominant regional posture associated with "Revolutionary Iran'' rather than "State Iran.''

In conclusion, preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons would be a significant achievement for both regional and international security, given the range of concerns attributed to its policies, including risks to maritime navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. This raises an important question about the implications for the international system if Iran were to obtain nuclear weapons while also retaining the ability to affect strategic maritime routes through the Strait.