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## United States Senate

August 7, 2020

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The Honorable Robert O'Brien  
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. O'Brien,

I write to express my concern regarding new reports that Saudi Arabia is building up its capacity to produce nuclear fuel with assistance from China. I urge you to make clear that the United States strongly opposes a nuclear cooperation agreement with Riyadh, especially one without a Saudi renunciation of uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing on its territory, and a commitment to conclude an Additional Protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency. I further urge you to reverse policy decisions that have increased the likelihood of a Middle East nuclear arms race.

According to an August 4, 2020 report by the *Wall Street Journal*, Saudi Arabia has built a facility for extracting uranium yellowcake from uranium ore, relying on Chinese help and neglecting to disclose the existence of the facility.<sup>1</sup> A *New York Times* report on August 5, 2020 further suggests that Saudi Arabia, aided by China, may be engaged in other efforts to process raw uranium into a form that could later be enriched into weapons fuel.<sup>2</sup> These actions appear to be concrete steps towards achieving a Saudi goal expressed by energy minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman: implementing every stage of the nuclear fuel cycle, including the production and enrichment of uranium.<sup>3</sup> Once a country is enriching uranium, it can use the same technology to produce weapons-grade fissile material. Taken together with the Kingdom's clandestine ballistic

<sup>1</sup> Warren P. Strobel, Michael R. Gordon, and Felicia Schwartz, *Saudi Arabia, With China's Help, Expands its Nuclear Program*, *Wall Street Journal* (Aug. 4, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-with-chinas-help-expands-its-nuclear-program-11596575671>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Mazzetti, David E. Sanger, and William J. Broad, U.S. Examines Whether Saudi Nuclear Program Could Lead to Bomb Effort, *N.Y. Times* (Aug. 5, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/us/politics/us-examines-saudi-nuclear-program.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Rania El Gamal and Alexander Cornwell, *Saudi Arabia flags plan to enrich uranium as U.S. seeks nuclear pact*, *Reuters* (Sep. 9, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-energy-wec-saudi-nuclearpower/saudi-arabia-wants-to-enrich-uranium-for-nuclear-power-minister-idUSKCN1VU168>.

missile program, also reportedly sourced from China, the United States and the world have good cause to fear that a Saudi civilian nuclear program will also have a weapons dimension.<sup>4</sup>

In 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated publicly that Saudi Arabia would seek to acquire nuclear weapons if Iran were to “develop” a nuclear bomb.<sup>5</sup> Given Iran’s recent steps to advance its enrichment program beyond the limits it agreed to in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Saudi Arabia may already perceive Iran to be “developing” a nuclear weapon.

In light of these developments, I urge the Administration not to resume civil nuclear cooperation negotiations with Saudi Arabia, and I call on you to make clear that any future negotiation will be firmly contingent on “gold standard” nonproliferation commitments and the Kingdom’s adoption of the Additional Protocol. Beyond the risk of helping the Crown Prince realize his stated nuclear weapons ambition, the United States must demonstrate the futility of attempting to extract concessions from our government by exploiting U.S.-China competition. Should Saudi Arabia continue its counterproductive effort to develop latent nuclear capability, it must do so without the assistance and global legitimacy conferred by a U.S. civil nuclear cooperation agreement.

To prevent a nuclear arms race in the region, the Administration must also reverse its destabilizing policy with respect to Iran. President Trump’s decision to violate the JCPOA has given Iran an excuse to back further away from its nuclear commitments. President Trump’s policies have made nuclear proliferation more rather than less likely, and the Administration must change course.

I further note that Riyadh likely perceives a green light to proceed with these projects despite decades-long United States leadership against nuclear proliferation. The Trump administration has allowed Saudi leaders to get away with the murder of U.S. resident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi; overlooked Saudi Arabia’s use of child soldiers; looked the other way as the Kingdom detains women’s rights activists who have sought to change the male guardianship system; supported Riyadh’s indiscriminate military campaign in Yemen, including by providing billions in arms and production licenses to Saudi Arabia; and allowed some U.S. companies to provide nuclear knowledge to the country without informing Congress in a timely manner. The Administration has undertaken all these actions despite bipartisan opposition, strengthening the Saudi perception of impunity. This bipartisan opposition exists because Riyadh has turned increasingly belligerent in its foreign relations as it continues to violate human rights at home.

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<sup>4</sup> Phil Mattingly, Zachary Cohen and Jeremy Herb, *Exclusive: US intel shows Saudi Arabia escalated its missile program with help from China*, CNN (Jun. 5, 2019), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/05/politics/us-intelligence-saudi-arabia-ballistic-missile-china/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Vivian Salama, *Saudi crown prince: If Iran makes a nuclear bomb, so will we*, NBC News (Mar. 19, 2018), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/saudi-crown-prince-if-iran-makes-nuclear-bomb-so-will-n857921>.

With these concerns in mind, I respectfully request written responses to the following questions by August 28, 2020:

1. What is the United States doing to prevent Saudi Arabia from acquiring the knowledge, equipment, and materials needed for a nuclear weapon?
2. What is the current status of civil nuclear cooperation negotiations with Saudi Arabia?
3. What is the United States doing to ensure justice for the murder of U.S. resident and Washington Post reporter Jamal Khashoggi, a murder that the CIA concluded was carried out and approved by the highest levels of the Saudi government?<sup>6</sup>

These new developments make clearer than ever that the United States should not reward Saudi Arabia with new nuclear cooperation. Thank you for your attention to this important matter. I look forward to your responses.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

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<sup>6</sup> Shane Harris, Greg Miller, and Josh Dawsey, *CIA concludes Saudi crown prince ordered Jamal Khashoggi's assassination*, Wash. Post (Nov. 16, 2018), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-concludes-saudi-crown-prince-ordered-jamal-khashoggis-assassination/2018/11/16/98c89fe6-e9b2-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-concludes-saudi-crown-prince-ordered-jamal-khashoggis-assassination/2018/11/16/98c89fe6-e9b2-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d_story.html).