

## Saudi Arabia

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### Summary

Saudi Arabia signed and ratified the *Biological Weapons Convention* when it was opened for signature in 1972, but that time Saudi's did not have intentions of acquiring biological weapons. Since then, various regional developments have increased the significance of Biological and Chemical Weapons as useful armament.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with its towering presence in the Gulf Region seems to stir up debates over alleged ownership of Chemical and Biological Weapons from time to time. Being signatory to several treaties and conventions, it becomes imperative for the country to clarify its position periodically. Further Saudi Arabia, situated in a region characterized by significant Chemical, Biological and Nuclear weapon proliferation, possesses unlimited resources and infrastructure that encourages it to pursue Nuclear and Chemical and Biological Weapon (CBW) capabilities. A lack of publicly available evidence proves the contrary, yet conditions like threats emanating from Iran and Israel cannot be overlooked and do not deter it from acquiring them. Allegations of support to Pakistani and Iraqi weapons programs also indicate otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

Saudi Arabia signed and ratified the *Biological Weapons Convention* when it was opened for signature in 1972, as presumably at that time Saudi's did not have intentions of acquiring biological weapons. Since then, various regional developments have increased the perceived utility of the CBW for Saudi Arabia. Major event in this respect was the 1991 Gulf War where throughout the period of war Saudi Arabia was confronted with CBW threat and its strategic, operational and tactical ramifications.<sup>2</sup> Saudi perception of vulnerability to threats from the surrounding countries like Iran, Egypt, and Israel may lead it to acquiring these weapons. A likely outcome of threat perception would be to acquire CBW or nuclear capabilities for deterrence and retaliatory purposes in accordance with the *Geneva Protocol of 1925* that bans the use of CBW in wars but not their possession, to which Saudi Arabia is a signatory.<sup>3</sup> The fact that Saudi Arabia joined the Geneva Protocol following the bombing of two Saudi sites near Yemen border by the Egyptian Air Force can

not be overlooked in the context of CBW strategy. The motivation and capability to acquire *CBW or* nuclear weapons does not stop here. Further US intelligence reports on comprehensive onsite diagnostic laboratory where large numbers of troops were stationed during Gulf war for CBW threat assessment point to the possible Saudi strategy. In addition, Saudi scientists have carried out basic research relevant to CBWs and other necessary know-how for the same.<sup>4</sup> Analysts routinely concluded that Saudi Arabia lacks in natural resources, technological capabilities and scientific community to develop advanced sophisticated weapon program. However, going by some business reports, Saudi chemical industries are well developed and have grown considerably in area of biotechnology has taken place over the years.<sup>5</sup> Parallel to that, Saudi Arabia signed the *Chemical Weapons Convention* in 1993 with a delayed ratification in 1996, which reflects some ambivalence to the treaty and ability to acquire CBW.<sup>6</sup> Hence, all this coupled with enormous wealth would not make it impossible for Saudi Arabia to source necessary ideas and resources to develop CBW capacity. That apart, the possibility of outside assistances cannot be overlooked, and in this case Saudi Arabia could look towards Pakistan which has been its major ally.<sup>7</sup> Then again, Saudi authority would be careful not to invite international isolation and harm to *US-Saudi* relations that would result from such an act.<sup>8</sup>

Any other motivation to acquire or possess weapons by Saudi Arabia could be attributed to purposes of deterrence and defense, although other possible rational like prestige or regional hegemony do seem to exist, they do not seem reasonable or relevant enough causes for pursuing CBW capacity. Israel's possession of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and its threats to Saudi Arabia in addition to the other neighbouring countries'

CBW capacities may increase Saudi perception of threats. Perception of CBW as relatively cheap and easy way of keeping enemy forces at bay in sparsely populated areas, along with the above mentioned factors can determine the CBW strategy of Saudi Arabia.

It is worthwhile to conclude that future motivation to acquire CBW or nuclear weapons by Saudi Arabia could be attributed to Gulf War of 1991 and its geostrategic location. The necessity to counterbalance intensifying unconventional threats towards Saudi Arabia since the end of *Gulf War* might prove otherwise. The strategic military protection furnished by the United States could form an equilibrium, nevertheless Saudi Arabia could be named as "threshold state rather than a potentially capable state"<sup>9</sup> for building and acquiring CBW or nuclear program. Further Israel's possession of nuclear weapons casts doubt on likelihood of American retaliation due to its relations with the Israel and presumably risk of potential weapon escalation. Officially Saudi Arabia denies the possession of any sort of weapons or facilities to develop one. However, any future movement in that direction might be inevitable with the changing dynamics of political relations in and around it. Foreign assistances and resources are abundant, that might not be a hindrance for case of Saudi Arabia with its wealth. In summary, it appears that Saudi Arabia has geostrategic incentives to acquire weapon capabilities; it already possesses the necessary infrastructure and has the capacity to import assistance to produce equipment that cannot be produced domestically. Thus, Saudi Arabia could likely pursue a CBW or nuclear capability if not already for afore mentioned factors.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> NTI: Research Library: Country Profiles: Saudi Arabia Nuclear Overview, available

on [www.nti.org/e\\_research /profile/  
Saudi \\_Arabia/Nuclear/index.html](http://www.nti.org/e_research/profile/Saudi_Arabia/Nuclear/index.html),  
accessed 26/11/2010

- <sup>2</sup> Dany Shoham , “Does Saudi Arabia Have or Seek Chemical or Biological Weapons?”, The Non proliferation Review, Spring-Summer, 1999, p.122
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.123
- <sup>4</sup> CBW Conventions Bulletin, No 42, 1998, p.29
- <sup>5</sup> Mubarak Al Khafrah, “The Future Prospects for Industry in Saudi Arabia”, paper delivered to Confederation of British Industry Conference , July 15th 1994 and The Saudi Arabia Biological Society, Proceedings of the First Arab Gulf Conference on Biotechnology and Applied Microbiology, Riyadh, November 1984
- <sup>6</sup> Danny Shoham, p.127
- <sup>7</sup> Marie Colvin, “How an insider lifted the Veil on Saudi Plot for an Islamic bomb”, Sunday Times, London, July 24, 1994, LexisNexis
- <sup>8</sup> Arnaud De Borchgrave, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia in Secret Nuke Pact, “Washington Times, October 22, 2003
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 128