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No Gold Standard: The US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Deal and the Enrichment Question

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No Gold Standard: The US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Deal and the Enrichment Question

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

US Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement and a bilateral nuclear safeguards agreement on July 22, 2026. The following day, President Donald Trump said the deal was contingent on Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords, and the White House later stated the deal is off if Riyadh does not normalise relations with Israel.

WHAT THE AGREEMENT CONTAINS

According to the US Department of Energy, the agreement lays the foundation for a **30-year, multi-billion-dollar nuclear partnership**, under which American companies will help Saudi Arabia build its nuclear sector. The full text has not been made public.

ELEMENT	PROVISION
Instruments signed	A civil nuclear cooperation agreement and a bilateral nuclear safeguards agreement
Signed by	US Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman
Date	July 22, 2026
Scope	Transfer of civil nuclear materials, technology and equipment from the US to Saudi Arabia
Commercial terms	US nuclear companies receive preferred treatment in Saudi nuclear infrastructure build-out
Safeguards	Additional verification measures on proliferation-sensitive areas: enrichment, conversion, fuel fabrication and reprocessing
Initial fuel	Imported into Saudi Arabia
Enrichment	A joint two-year study on the value and commercial viability of enrichment for the kingdom

If that study concludes local enrichment is warranted, US companies will **build and operate** a uranium enrichment facility in Saudi Arabia under an arrangement designed to prevent the transfer of sensitive enrichment technology to the Saudis. The distinction between hosting a facility and owning the technology is the entire non-proliferation architecture of this deal.

The Two Omissions That Matter

Two absences define the agreement's significance more than any of its provisions.

No gold standard. In 2009, when the United States and the UAE concluded their civil nuclear agreement, Abu Dhabi agreed not to enrich uranium or reprocess spent fuel before opening its Barakah plant. Non-proliferation experts held this up as the “**gold standard**” for states seeking nuclear power. According to American media reports, the US-Saudi agreement contains no equivalent requirement.

No Additional Protocol. The agreement does not require Saudi Arabia to adopt the International Atomic Energy Agency's **Additional Protocol**, the instrument that permits inspectors to conduct short-notice inspections to verify that nuclear material is being used peacefully. Standard IAEA comprehensive safeguards verify declared material; the Additional Protocol is what addresses the possibility of undeclared activity.

Why Enrichment Is the Threshold

TERM	DETAIL
Natural uranium	About 0.7 per cent uranium-235
Reactor grade	Typically 3 to 5 per cent for light-water reactors
Weapons grade	Around 90 per cent
Reprocessing	Chemically separating plutonium and unused uranium from spent fuel

The same centrifuge **cascade** that enriches uranium to reactor grade can, with more stages and time, reach weapons grade. This is why non-proliferation policy polices enrichment capability rather than reactor ownership, and why the presence or absence of a gold-standard clause is the substantive question.

WHY SAUDI ARABIA WANTS A NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

The Saudi case rests on three distinct arguments.

Economic diversification. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has said the kingdom must end its addiction to oil. **Vision 2030** commits Saudi Arabia to promoting tourism, building mega projects, developing a top-class financial sector and constructing power-hungry artificial intelligence data centres. The kingdom currently relies heavily on burning oil and gas to generate electricity, which is both an economic waste of exportable product and a constraint on power-hungry new industries.

Resource endowment. Saudi officials have long argued that a country rich in uranium ore deposits should enrich its own fuel and generate nuclear power domestically rather than import both.

Strategic hedging against Iran. MBS has said that if Iran makes a nuclear bomb, Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional rival, would have to make one too. This is a declaratory position rather than a programme, but it establishes the logic under which Saudi enrichment capability is understood in the region.

The War Context

The regional situation has sharpened all three arguments. The war on Iran by the United States and Israel, and the closure of the **Strait of Hormuz**, made it difficult for Saudi Arabia to export its oil products, reinforcing the case in Riyadh for reducing reliance on oil. Saudi Arabia is simultaneously being struck by Iranian and Houthi missiles and drones, which gives Washington its own reason to reassure the kingdom about the durability of the partnership.

THE IRAN DIMENSION

Iran has the most advanced and sophisticated nuclear programme in the Persian Gulf, having built advanced centrifuges and developed the technology to enrich uranium to near weapons-grade purity. Iran's nuclear programme is one of the reasons for the war; Tehran maintains it is peaceful, while the United States and Israel accuse it of a secret weapons programme.

Before the war, in talks with Iran, the United States made two central demands: that Iran export or dispose of its highly enriched uranium, and that it stop enriching nuclear fuel. Iran rejected both, arguing that as a signatory of the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)** it has the right to maintain enrichment capabilities, and opposing the removal of its highly enriched uranium from the country.

The consequence is straightforward. If the United States helps Saudi Arabia build nuclear facilities and permits enrichment on Saudi soil, Iran's position on its own enrichment rights is likely to harden. A **concession** to Riyadh that Washington refused to Tehran undermines the argument that the demand was ever about the technology rather than the government holding it.

THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS LINKAGE

When the Department of Energy announced the deal, it made no mention of the Abraham Accords. The linkage came from President Trump the following day.

MILESTONE	DETAIL
2020	UAE, Bahrain and Morocco normalise relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords, mediated by the first Trump administration
2023	Under the Biden administration, Saudi Arabia and Israel come close to formal diplomatic ties
2023	The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is announced the same month, linking India's western coast to southern Europe through West Asia
October 7, 2023	Hamas attacks Israel; the ensuing war in Gaza changes Saudi calculations
Present	Riyadh conditions normalisation on a credible pathway to an independent, sovereign Palestinian state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital

Saudi Arabia has not responded to Trump's demand. It is unclear whether the Abraham Accords condition was added after signature or reflects a prior understanding.

Why IMEC Makes This India's Problem

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor depends on Saudi Arabia and Israel both playing key roles. A corridor that requires cooperation between two states without diplomatic relations, in a region at war, is a corridor whose timeline is hostage to the Palestine question. India's stake in West Asian normalisation is therefore infrastructural and economic, not merely diplomatic.

Reflecting the Government of India's consistent position, India supports a negotiated two-state solution with a sovereign, independent and viable State of Palestine living within secure and recognised borders side by side at peace with Israel, and has consistently condemned terrorism.

THE INDIA COMPARISON

FEATURE	INDIA	SAUDI ARABIA
NPT status	Not a party	Party, as a non-nuclear-weapon state
US agreement	123 Agreement, 2008	Signed July 22, 2026
Enabling step	Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver, 2008	Not applicable in the same form
Safeguards	Civil-military separation; IAEA safeguards on designated civil facilities; India has an Additional Protocol for its civil facilities	Not required to adopt the Additional Protocol under this agreement

India's exemption was granted to a state outside the NPT with an established weapons programme, on the strength of its non-proliferation record. The Saudi case runs the other way: a state inside the NPT obtaining latitude the treaty does not forbid but that suppliers have historically withheld.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India or affecting India's interests; important international institutions and their [mandate](#); effect of policies of developed countries on India's interests.

GS Paper 3: Awareness in the field of nuclear energy; [energy security](#).

Prelims pointers:

- The civil nuclear cooperation agreement and bilateral nuclear safeguards agreement were signed on July 22, 2026 by US Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman.
- The US Department of Energy describes it as the foundation of a 30-year partnership.
- The agreement contains no enrichment renunciation and does not require the IAEA Additional Protocol.
- The 2009 US-UAE agreement, under which the UAE renounced enrichment and reprocessing before opening Barakah, is the "gold standard".
- A joint two-year study will assess the commercial viability of enrichment in Saudi Arabia; US companies would build and operate any facility without transferring sensitive technology.
- The Abraham Accords, 2020, covered the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, mediated by the first Trump administration.
- IMEC, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, was announced in 2023.
- Saudi Arabia is an NPT party as a non-nuclear-weapon state; India is not a party to the NPT.
- Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia's economic diversification framework.

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

US-SAUDI AGREEMENT, JULY 22, 2026:

Two instruments: a civil nuclear cooperation agreement and a bilateral nuclear safeguards agreement

Signatories: US Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman

US Department of Energy: foundation for a 30-year, multi-billion-dollar partnership

US companies to receive preferred treatment in Saudi nuclear build-out

Safeguards cover enrichment, conversion, fuel fabrication and reprocessing

No gold-standard enrichment renunciation; no requirement to adopt the IAEA Additional Protocol

Joint two-year study on enrichment viability; any facility to be built and operated by US firms without technology transfer

Full text not yet public

On July 23, 2026 President Trump made the deal contingent on Saudi accession to the Abraham Accords

NON-PROLIFERATION BENCHMARKS:

“Gold standard”: the 2009 US-UAE agreement, under which the UAE renounced enrichment and reprocessing before opening Barakah

IAEA Additional Protocol: permits short-notice inspections to verify peaceful use, addressing undeclared activity

Enrichment levels: natural uranium about 0.7 per cent U-235; reactor grade 3 to 5 per cent; weapons grade about 90 per cent

A 123 Agreement derives from Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act, 1954

SAUDI DRIVERS:

Vision 2030: tourism, mega projects, financial sector, AI data centres

Kingdom currently burns oil and gas for electricity; rich in uranium ore deposits

MBS has said Saudi Arabia would build a bomb if Iran does

Strait of Hormuz closure disrupted Saudi oil exports; kingdom struck by Iranian and Houthi missiles and drones

IRAN:

Most advanced nuclear programme in the Persian Gulf; advanced centrifuges; enrichment to near weapons-grade

NPT signatory; asserts the right to enrich; rejected US demands to export its highly enriched uranium and halt enrichment

ABRAHAM ACCORDS AND IMEC:

Abraham Accords, 2020: UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, mediated by the first Trump administration

2023: Saudi-Israel normalisation nearly concluded under the Biden administration; IMEC announced the same month

Since October 7, 2023, Riyadh conditions normalisation on a credible pathway to a Palestinian state on 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as capital

IMEC links India's western coast to southern Europe through West Asia

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

The NPT opened for signature in 1968 and entered into force in 1970; the IAEA was established in 1957 and is headquartered in Vienna.

The Nuclear Suppliers Group was formed in 1974 following India's first nuclear test; India received an NSG waiver in 2008.

Sources: *The Hindu*, *US Department of Energy*, *IAEA*

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