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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

· A May 12 Page One article incorrectly said that the United Arab Emirates had signed a deal with a French company to build two nuclear reactors. Despite a January announcement to the contrary by a French industrial consortium, a formal agreement has not been reached.

Spread of Nuclear Capability Is Feared

Global Interest in Energy May Presage A New Arms Race

By Joby Warrick
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VIENNA -- At least 40 developing countries from the [Persian Gulf](#) region to Latin America have recently approached [U.N.](#) officials here to signal interest in starting nuclear power programs, a trend that concerned proliferation experts say could provide the building blocks of nuclear arsenals in some of those nations.

At least half a dozen countries have also said in the past four years that they are specifically planning to conduct enrichment or reprocessing of nuclear fuel, a prospect that could dramatically expand the global supply of plutonium and enriched uranium, according to U.S. and international nuclear officials and arms-control experts.

Much of the new interest is driven by economic considerations, particularly the soaring cost of fossil fuels. But for some Middle Eastern states with ready access to huge stocks of oil or natural gas, such as Kuwait, [Saudi Arabia](#) and the United Arab Emirates, the investment in nuclear power appears to be linked partly to concerns about a future regional arms race stoked in part by [Iran's](#) alleged interest in such an arsenal, the officials said.

"We are concerned that some countries are moving down the nuclear [weapons] path in reaction to the Iranians," a senior U.S. government official who tracks the spread of nuclear technology said in an interview. He declined to speak on the record because of diplomatic sensitivities. "The big question is: At what point do you reach the nuclear tipping point, when enough countries go nuclear that others decide they must do so, too?"

Although the United Arab Emirates has a proven oil reserve of 100 billion barrels, the world's sixth-largest, in January it signed a deal with a French company to build two nuclear reactors. Wealthy neighbors Kuwait and Bahrain are also planning nuclear plants, as are Libya, Algeria and Morocco in North Africa and the kingdom of Jordan.

Even Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Arab world, last year announced plans to purchase a nuclear reactor, which it says is needed to produce electricity; it is one of 11 Middle Eastern states now engaged in starting or expanding nuclear power programs.

Meanwhile, two of Iran's biggest rivals in the region, Turkey and [Egypt](#), are moving forward with ambitious nuclear projects. Both countries abandoned any pursuit of nuclear power decades ago but are now on course to develop seven nuclear power plants -- four in Egypt and three in Turkey -- over the next decade.

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Egypt's ambassador to the United States, Nabil Fahmy, told a recent gathering of Middle Eastern and nonproliferation experts that his country's decision was unrelated to Iran's nuclear activities. But he acknowledged that commercial nuclear power "does give you technology and knowledge," and he warned that a nuclear arms race may be inevitable unless the region's leaders agree to ban such weapons.

"We continue to take the high road, but there isn't much oxygen there, and it is very lonely," Fahmy told the gathering in Washington at the [Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars](#). He added a prediction: "Without a comprehensive nuclear accord, you will have a proliferation problem in the Middle East, and it will be even worse in 10 years than it is today."

Many countries involved in nuclear expansion have stressed their peaceful intentions. Some, such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, publicly vowed never to pursue uranium enrichment or fuel reprocessing -- technologies that can be used to create fissile materials for nuclear weapons. But some arms-control experts say the sudden interest cannot be fully explained by rising oil prices.

"This is not primarily about nuclear energy. It's a hedge against Iran," said Ploughshares Fund president Joseph Cirincione, an expert on nuclear policy and author of "Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons." "They're starting their engines. It takes decades to build a nuclear infrastructure, and they're beginning to do it now. They're saying, 'If there's going to be an arms race, we're going to be in it.' "

'90 Percent' Is Deterrence

Although U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Iran halted its research into making nuclear weapons five years ago, the Islamic republic still seeks to make enriched uranium with centrifuges at its vast underground facility at Natanz. It is now operating about 3,000 centrifuges and plans to increase the number to 50,000.

While Iran insists that the uranium will be used only to make electricity, the United States and its European allies have sought to dissuade Tehran from pursuing the technology by pushing ever-tougher sanctions through the [U.N. Security Council](#). Iran's neighbors, convinced that a nuclear-armed Tehran is now likely, are keeping their own options open, nuclear experts say.

Mohammed ElBaradei, the director general of the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency and a winner with the [IAEA](#) of the 2005 [Nobel Peace Prize](#) for his work preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, has likened the pursuit of "latent" nuclear capability to buying an insurance policy.

"You don't really even need to have a nuclear weapon," ElBaradei said at a recent international conference of security officials in Munich. "It's enough to buy yourself an insurance policy by developing the capability, and then sit on it. Let's not kid ourselves: Ninety percent of it is insurance, a deterrence."

The Middle East's renewed interest in nuclear power is part of a global trend that began around 2004, as prices for fossil fuels began to rise. Before that, commercial nuclear development had remained relatively flat since 1986, when a massive fire at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine widely spread radioactive contamination in history's worst commercial nuclear power accident.

But now, with oil supplies tightening and prices soaring, nuclear power is being viewed in a different light, said Alan McDonald, an IAEA official who coordinates the agency's programs on nuclear energy. McDonald said he thinks there is a logical economic argument for developing a domestic nuclear industry, even if a nation's oil reserves are measured by the tanker-load.

"Why would these Gulf states want to go nuclear? Because they know their oil will only become more valuable as global demand increases," McDonald said. "It may be more cost-effective to sell oil to Americans

driving SUVs than to burn it domestically."

The IAEA officially encourages commercial nuclear development under policies backed by successive U.S. administrations since the 1950s. It also provides technical and legal assistance to any country that wants a nuclear power plant.

But IAEA officials say they have never previously seen such widespread interest in starting a domestic nuclear power industry. While officials declined to detail their correspondence with specific countries, the list of the newly interested includes several African countries, such as Nigeria and Namibia, and at least half a dozen former Soviet republics that are embracing new Western designs to replace less-reliable Soviet nuclear plants.

Programs Can Be Hidden

Nuclear weapons experts say commercial nuclear power plants, by themselves, pose relatively little proliferation risk, although they are frequently mentioned as possible targets for terrorist attacks. But nuclear power can give a country the technological expertise and infrastructure that could become the foundation for a clandestine weapons program.

Such covert programs can be successfully hidden for years, as was demonstrated in recent months by U.S. and Israeli allegations that Syria was building a secret plutonium production reactor near the desert town of Al Kibar. Plutonium is an efficient fuel for nuclear explosions, as well as for power generation.

Both [India](#) and [Pakistan](#) built nuclear devices using an industrial infrastructure built ostensibly for nuclear power. Taiwan and [South Korea](#) conducted weapons research under cover of civil power programs but halted the work after being confronted by the United States.

A particular concern is rising interest in nuclear enrichment and reprocessing, the commercial enterprise that creates nuclear fuel and then, after its use, separates plutonium from the spent fuel. The business has long been dominated by the United States, [Russia](#) and a consortium of European nations.

But since 2004, uranium-producing countries such as Namibia, [South Africa](#), Argentina and [Brazil](#), as well as close U.S. allies such as Canada and Australia, have sought to develop their own enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. All of these nations are seeking to cash in on the future growth in nuclear power generation.

Canada's push for expanded enrichment capacity has already prompted private but intense clashes with the Bush administration, officials said.

"They're all rethinking enrichment, even countries that did it in the past and gave it up," said a senior IAEA official who monitors fuel-cycle development, who agreed to be interviewed on the condition that he not be identified by name. "They already mine uranium and sell it, and now they realize they could make a lot more money if they enrich it."

While no one forecasts a nuclear-armed Canada or Australia, the change could lead to more nuclear materials being transported around the world, among countries in nearly every region with heightened nuclear expertise.

"People stand up and pay attention when you talk about enrichment and the fuel cycle," said the senior U.S. government official who tracks nuclear proliferation. "That's the long pole in the tent" in the acquisition of a nuclear arsenal. He added that, while the extensive system of IAEA inspections and monitoring for such programs is meant to prevent misuse, "that only holds up to the point where the country decides to kick the IAEA out."

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