

'Iran's nuke program may spur arms race'

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Iran's disputed nuclear program has sent a wave of interest in atomic energy across the Middle East, a think tank said Tuesday, warning that it risked setting the scene for a regional nuclear arms race.

At least 13 Middle Eastern countries either announced new plans to explore atomic energy or revived pre-existing nuclear programs between February 2006 and January 2007, the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, or IISS, said in a report.

While the flurry of interest in nuclear power is still tentative, the report said countries such as Saudi Arabia, Algeria or Egypt could soon feel the need to match Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"If Teheran's nuclear program is unchecked, there is reason for concern that it could in time prompt a regional cascade of proliferation among Iran's neighbors," it said.

Israel, the United States and others have accused the Islamic republic of covertly seeking nuclear weapons under the guise of a civilian nuclear program.

Iran insists its intentions are peaceful, but its program has helped push nearly all its Middle Eastern neighbors into drawing up their own nuclear plans.

The report cautioned that most of the programs were still immature - it noted that sustainable new reactor projects in the Middle East were at least 10 or 15 years away - and said motivations were mixed.

Countries such as Jordan, Morocco or Tunisia have comparatively few energy reserves and were spurred on at least in part by a desire for energy independence in an age of soaring oil prices.

But nuclear programs in those countries face major financial hurdles, the report said. Environmental concerns could limit development, too: Jordan's proposed nuclear site near the Gulf of Aqaba could damage the area's ecosystem, for example.

Oil-rich Saudi Arabia would largely be driven by the need to maintain its edge as a regional power, the report said.

While the conservative Sunni Arab kingdom has no reactors and little in the way of nuclear infrastructure, it is a longtime rival of Shiite Iran. The report said Saudi Arabia's strategic calculus could tip in the favor of a nuclear arsenal should Teheran acquire such weapons itself.

Still other countries, such as Egypt or Turkey, are motivated both by exhaustion over high energy prices and wariness of Iran, the report said. Turkey said in 2006 that it wanted to produce 5,000 megawatts of nuclear energy by 2015, the same year that Egypt announced that its first reactor would be built at El-Dabaa, on the Mediterranean coast.

Turkey's place in NATO and the prospect of EU membership would likely preclude a nuclear weapons program there, but the report accused Egypt of doing little to dispel "the lingering impression, that, as at times in the past, it is keeping its weapons options open."

The report was dismissive of Syria's nuclear prospects, saying the country's plans for civilian atomic energy had largely been put on ice. While last year Syria was the target of an IAF raid allegedly aimed at destroying a covert nuclear weapons program, the report said it made little sense for the country to secretly build nukes when it already had an arsenal of chemical weapons.

Other countries mentioned in the report included uranium-rich Algeria and even impoverished and politically unstable Yemen, which has said it wants to pursue civilian nuclear power despite an International Atomic Energy Agency assessment that it lacks a power grid capable of handling it.

The report said that it was difficult to squeeze nuclear weapons out of legitimate, IAEA-monitored nuclear power programs, but it warned that the perceived threat of an Iranian nuclear bomb increased the risk of civilian nuclear programs being diverted to military uses.

"Over time, Iran's program could become a powerful proliferation driver, building on regional rivalry, security concerns and one-upmanship," the report said.

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