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Showcasing Saudi Arabia's Missiles: Connecting the Dots

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The two-week-long April 2014 Sword of Abd Allah Exercise was a landmark event for Saudi Arabia's Strategic Rocket Force (SRF) and for the country's military in general. The parade that culminated the largest joint exercise ever held in the country represented the first time that Saudi Arabia's CSS-2 (or the Chinese designation DF-3) surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs), acquired from China in the 1980s, had ever been shown. The SSMs were paraded prominently on 28 April at the Hafr Al-Batin military base in front of an audience of high-ranking Saudi officials and attending foreign dignitaries, as well as highlighted in Saudi newspapers and on TV. The accompanying media accounts were standardized by and large and followed the still limited official narrative, although follow-on commentary elaborated for domestic and regional audiences on the importance of the event.

Although only this ageing liquid-fueled missile was put on display, in many ways, the unveiling of the missiles and the accompanying Saudi commentary did much to crystallize and underline the broader enduring themes of Riyadh's thinking. Such themes include its mistrust of Iranian policy and conviction that Tehran intends to continue its quest to acquire nuclear weapons, unease about the reliability of U.S. security guarantees, pique at some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states for their more benign outlook on Iran, national pride, faith in the effectiveness of the concept of deterrence, the portrayal of nuclear weapons and SSMs as a package, and a warning of the Saudi option to pursue a nuclear deterrent if Iran does so.

Unofficial spokesmen noted openly that the Saudi government wanted to send political messages to different audiences with the exercise and by publicizing its SSMs. Perhaps uppermost, as one Saudi commentator noted, was "a message specifically for [Saudi Arabia's] Iranian neighbor, who seeks to acquire nuclear weapons."¹ The same commentator saw the

MES Notes

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CSS-2, in particular, as “a message to those forces that harbor evil intent for the security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.”

As part of that message, the Saudi media revived a recurring theme: that Saudi Arabia could now provide an effective security umbrella for its neighbors. According to one commentator, with the Sword of Abd Allah Exercise, “Saudi Arabia has become a different country, one that has military deterrent power for all, and not just for its immediate neighbors,” and, moreover, “everyone has understood the message that the Kingdom is capable of defending its own holy lands as well as its allies in the region.”² Perhaps as a criticism or expression of disappointment with Riyadh’s traditional U.S. ally, some Saudi observers also claimed that the exercise and, in particular, the factor of the country’s SSMs, provided proof of Riyadh’s self-reliance, and that Saudi Arabia “does not need anyone to defend it as the western and the hostile media maintain.”³



Source: Al-Wi'am (Saudi Arabia), 29 April 2014

The Sword of Abd Allah Exercise also highlighted the importance of the domestic audience in securing the Saudi royal family’s legitimacy. Not surprisingly, Saudi press commentaries portrayed the CSS-2 as a source of national pride and saw the missiles as a significant achievement for the government. For example, one journalist claimed that learning about the CSS-2 had engendered “an enthusiastic response from the Saudi public.”⁴

In addition, some in the media hinted obliquely that Saudi Arabia might have assets beyond the CSS-2. One commentator, for example, noted that Riyadh “revealed only a small part of the advanced military systems in its possession.”⁵ More broadly, this same commentator also alluded to the relationship between SSMs and nuclear weapons, albeit indirectly. Alleging that Iran trumpets its own SSMs and its assumed nuclear weapons program, he countered that “nuclear weapons are not such a big deal,” specifically because “many Islamic countries have [also] acquired that ... The Kingdom, however, does not need to always say things openly and to respond to the Iranian farces by telling what it has.”

Significantly, an additional message was directed more openly to the local audience using local electronic newspapers, as these media outlets have a local readership and are not likely to attract international attention. Perhaps assuming that international audiences would make the appropriate deductions anyhow and wanting to ensure that domestic readers did not miss a key element, the specific point almost invariably raised in the local media was to the effect that the CSS-2 displayed during the exercise “is capable of carrying nuclear warheads.”⁶ That is, tying the SSMs to a potential nuclear capability may have been intended to reassure local and regional audiences that the country’s leadership is providing adequately for defense and is prepared to meet any potential threat, including a nuclear one. One Saudi electronic newspaper was particularly explicit with its hints on this score. Citing the CSS-2, this source underscored the “the nuclear dimension” of the message, thus openly hinting at a linkage between the SSMs and a nuclear capability. And, this observer went on to stress that the CSS-2 was not only



Source: Al-Sharq Al-Awsat (London), 29 April 2014.

nuclear-capable but that in the audience watching the parade was the chief of staff of “nuclear Pakistan” and suggested there was now a new alliance with “nuclear Pakistan., a country that many have speculated could provide nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia one day.”⁷

In addition, the Saudi edition of the *Al-Hayat* international Arabic-language daily, which the royal family owns, also suggested that the CSS-2 shown was not the only SSM in the national arsenal, as it spoke of the Saudis’ having “the East Wind missiles and other strategic missiles.”⁸ In effect, over the years, a variety of sources have reported that Riyadh had upgraded its SSM arsenal, possibly with the Chinese-made CSS-5 or the Pakistani-made Shaheen.⁹

In the days following the parade, the Saudi media basked in the reaction of the Israeli and Iranian media to seeing the SSMS, which the Saudi media has interpreted as surprise and alarm in those countries’ official circles. However, an unintended consequence may be the strengthening of the hardliners’ hand in Tehran on the nuclear issue.

Conclusions

Several conclusions may be drawn from the presence of the Saudi missiles at the Hafr Al-Batin parade:

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Amin Tarzi presented a paper entitled “Status and Politics of Persian Language in Afghanistan: A Brief Review” as part of the symposium “The Wide World of Persian: Connections and Contestations, 1500-Today” held at the Library of Congress, Wshington, DC.

First, Saudi Arabia considers its SSMS as a key component of its force structure and will continue to do so. In light of its threat assessment, focused especially on Iran, its growing mistrust of international guarantees, and its desire to display its independence, Riyadh can be expected to continue devoting significant assets to the SRF and to work to improve the latter’s material and human capabilities.

Second, the primary focus of Saudi Arabia’s SRF will continue to be on deterrence. However, given the fine line between deterrence and warfighting, and based on Riyadh’s past experience, if the situation were to become sufficiently grave, the Saudis would not hesitate to employ their missiles in a warfighting mode as well, and perhaps even preemptively.

Third, the apparent recent upgrade in the SSM force, if confirmed, is an additional indication that Saudi Arabia is likely to consider following suit if Iran succeeds in developing a nuclear

capability, especially given the Saudi view of SSM and nuclear weapons as an interrelated package and its frequent hints and warnings that it would do so. To some extent, Riyadh presumably sees an SSM capability as part of its deterrent effort designed to convince Iran not to pursue nuclear weapons by lending credibility to its threats to also acquire and be able to deliver nuclear weapons if Iran were to do so. At the very least, upgrading its SSM arsenal is an indication of Riyadh’s intent to have available in reserve an option to go nuclear in the future if necessary.

Fourth, the case of Saudi Arabia suggests that in some instances the international community’s leverage to prevent proliferation may be very limited. Admittedly, Saudi Arabia may be a special case, due to its unique position as an international oil powerhouse. However, other countries as well, whether thanks to political or economic advantages, may also be able to resist outside pressure or avert it altogether when they judge that their vital national security interests are at stake.

Fifth, although Saudi Arabia intends its SSMS to have a stabilizing effect in the region by deterring potential aggression and adventurism, such upgraded arsenals also open the way for further arms races and increased regional tensions. Enhanced capabilities can also contribute to escalation and have the potential for miscalculation in a regional crisis, which would be

especially risky if Iran and Saudi Arabia do eventually decide to acquire nuclear weapons. Counterproliferation efforts by the international community on the control of missile technology from potential suppliers and recipients must continue in order to promote genuine stability and to reduce the risk of unintended consequences.

Notes:

¹ Nayif Al-Asimi, "Sayf Abd Allah risala saudiya li-quwa al-sharr" [The Sword of Abd Abd Is a Saudi Message to the Forces of Evil], *Al-Watan* (Abha), 29 April 2014, www.alwatan.com.sa/Local/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=186428&CategoryID=5.

² Bandar Al-Dawshi, "Abr al-sarukh al-balisti Al-Saudiya tafrud halat al-samt ala al-mutarabbisin" [By Means of the Ballistic Missiles Saudi Arabia Silenced Those Who Are Lurking], *Sabq* (Riyadh), 30 April 2014, <http://sabq.org/yGYfde>. Hereafter, Al-Dawshi, "Abr al-sarukh al-balisti."

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mansur Al-Shihri, "Riyah Al-Sharq risalat itmi'nan li'l-shab wa-tahdhir li'l-aduww" [The East Wind Is a Message of Reassurance for the Population and a Warning to the Enemy], *Ukaz* (Jeddah), 1 May 2014, www.okaz.com.sa/new/issues/20140501/PrinCon20140501696350.htm.

⁵ Muhammad Hasan Mufti, "Sayf Abd Allah risala li-man yahummuh al-amr" [The Sword of Abd Allah Was a Message for the Intended Parties], *Ukaz*, 6 May 2014, www.okaz.com.sa/news/issues/20140506/PrinCon20140506697493.htm.

⁶ For example, "Li-awwal marra sawarikh Riyah Al-Sharq al-qadira ala haml ru'us nawawiya bi munawarat 'Sayf Abd Allah'" [For the First Time in the Sword of Abd Allah Exercise the East Wind Missiles That Are Nuclear-Capable], *Twasul* (Riyadh), 30 April 2014, <http://twasul.info/55974>, "Al-Salmi: Sayf Abd Allah tabath rasa'il mutaaddida" [Al-Salmi: Sword of Abd Allah Sends Multiple Messages], *Arkan* (Saudi Arabia), 30 April 2014, www.arkan-news.com/?p=1556, Salih Al-Quthami, "Zhuhur sawarikh Riyah Al-Sharq li-awwal marra tuthlij sudur al-saudiyyin" [The Appearance of the East Wind Missiles for the First Time Delights the Saudis], *Sada* (Saudi Arabia), 29 April 2014, www.slaati.com/2014/04/29/p181530.html, or "Al-Saudiya tastakhdim silah jadid li-awwal marra fi munawarat askariya" [Saudi Arabia Uses New Weapons for the First Time in Military Exercises], *Al-Rajul* (Saudi Arabia), 1 May 2014, www.arrajol.com.

⁷ Al-Dawshi, "Abr al-sarukh al-balisti."

⁸ Ahmad Ghallab, "Al-Saudiya tastarid quwwatha amam al-alam bi-Sayf Abd Allah" [Saudi Arabia Displays Its Power to the World with the Sword of Abd Allah Exercise], *Al-Hayat* (Saudi edition), 29 April 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Articles/20544569>.

⁹ Jeff Stein, "The CIA Was Saudi Arabia's Personal Shopper," *Newsweek* (New York), 29 January 2014, <http://mag.newsweek.com/2014/01/31/cia-saudi-arabias-personal-shopper.htm>.