Saudi Arabia on Friday unexpectedly rejected a temporary seat on the powerful U.N. Security Council, citing frustrations with the body's inability to punish the Bashar Assad regime for assumed chemical weapon attacks and to advance efforts to ban unconventional weapons in the Middle East, the New York Times reported.

A day earlier, Saudi Arabia and four other countries were elected to serve two-year terms on the Security Council beginning early next year. Riyadh had never before sought a seat on the 15-member body and its campaigning for one was seen by analysts as evidence of the nation's desire to be more active in pushing for a plan to end the Syrian civil war.

In turning down its seat on the council, the Saudi Foreign Ministry in a statement said "allowing the ruling regime in Syria to kill and burn its people by the chemical weapons, while the world stands idly, without applying deterrent sanctions against the Damascus regime, is also irrefutable evidence and proof of the inability of the Security Council to carry out its duties and responsibilities."

Security Council permanent member and veto-holder Russia has repeatedly refused to allow any resolutions to pass that sanction the Assad regime for its use of massive military force against Syrian civilians, including in the Aug. 21 sarin gas attack on a Damascus suburb that is estimated to have killed 1,400 people and for which the Syrian military is largely presumed to be responsible.

Riyadh also faulted the council for being unsuccessful in making "the Middle East a free zone of
That last line is seen as an allusion to Israel's widely assumed nuclear weapons stockpile. The United States, which also holds veto power, has shielded the Israeli government from formal Security Council criticism over its failure to join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Washington has also accepted Israel's reasons for not accepting an invitation to an international conference planned for last year that would have focused on establishing a ban on all nuclear, biological and chemical arms in the Middle East.