PRISME
Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive Security in the Middle East

From Asymmetry to Autonomy: Rethinking Arms Control in the Middle East

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Nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East remains a persistent challenge to both the global non-proliferation regime and regional peace and security. The continued presence of undeclared nuclear programs and the potential for further weaponization carry far-reaching implications, including the erosion of norms, heightened threat perceptions, and the risk of renewed arms races. Iran's nuclear program has emerged as the most recent and pressing case, with efforts to contain it undermined by the United States withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018. Since then, the situation has grown more volatile, with Iran accelerating uranium enrichment to unprecedented, near weapons-grade levels and Israel and the U.S. launching strikes on its nuclear facilities.

Renewed talks between the United States and Iran presented an opportunity to rethink arms control approaches in the Middle East and to reflect on lessons learned—or unlearned. While the current debate centers on Iran, it is neither practical nor sustainable to view its case in isolation from the broader proliferation landscape. Proliferation in the Middle East is deeply linked to regional security dynamics shaped by a legacy of externally imposed, non-inclusive, and inconsistently enforced non-proliferation practices, including nuclear exceptionalism and selective enforcement of norms, as discussed in Hassan Elbahtimy's contribution to this series.[1] These practices have created structural asymmetries—such as the sidelining of one regional state's possession of nuclear weapons —that continue to reinforce the very conditions driving proliferation today.

The recent Israeli and American attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities have disrupted an already narrow window for diplomacy, while also reigniting long-standing debates over the effectiveness of military approaches to proliferation threats—making it timely to recall the shortcomings of past coercive experiences in the Middle East.

These short-sighted approaches not only failed to produce sustainable solutions to proliferation challenges but also carried lasting normative consequences. They undermined the credibility of international law and non-proliferation norms by setting precedents of selectivity and exceptionalism, making transparency and disarmament optional for certain states.[2]

1 Hassan Elbahtimy, 'Whose Nuclear Disorder? The Middle East in Global Nuclear Politics', PRISME Initiative, 2025. https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/middle-east-global-nuclear-politics-hassan-elbahtimy/.

Any viable arms control framework must confront these structural asymmetries to avoid reinforcing them. Pragmatic yet ambitious frameworks for reimagining arms control in the Middle East, like the one proposed in this essay, must be grounded in reciprocity, inclusivity, agency, and normativity.

Broader regional engagement is also essential to provide the diplomatic support these frameworks require. Gulf Arab states—particularly since the rapprochement with Iran—have both the incentives and the opportunity to take a more active role in promoting sustainable, regionally owned solutions to nuclear risks.

Why Arms Control in the Middle East Continues to Fall Short

The JCPOA, the region's most recent arms control framework, was not lacking in technical assurances, robust verification mechanisms, or tough punitive clauses. It included restrictions and monitoring measures widely considered among the strictest and most intrusive in arms control history—and, for its objectives, it worked. Still, the agreement could have benefited from broader scrutiny of weaponization activities beyond nuclear material production, stronger regional cooperation and integration, and clearer oversight mandates.[3]

The JCPOA primarily aimed to make nuclear weaponization costs exceed its benefits, while leaving the underlying drivers of nuclear ambition—mainly regional security threats—unaddressed. Though differing on the root causes of regional proliferation, critics of the deal agreed that the motivations for pursuing nuclear capabilities persisted. No matter how stringent the JCPOA was, it could not, alone, fully resolve long-term concerns about Iran's intentions or broader regional proliferation risks.[4] In other words, agreements like the JCPOA, while temporarily addressing immediate non-proliferation risks, cannot solve deeper regional security problems—at least not through non-proliferation tools alone.

While Iran's case is undoubtedly a proliferation issue, it is also shaped by the region's security dynamics, a legacy of inconsistent international practices, and uncertainty surrounding the future of regional arms control. Chief among these factors is the unresolved Israeli nuclear program, which remains outside international verification and continues to fuel regional contention.

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2 For a detailed study on the shortcomings and "naivety" of coercive approaches to arms control see Coralie Pison Hindawi, 'The Controversial Impact of WMD Coercive Arms Control on International Peace and Security: Lessons from the Iraqi and Iranian Cases.' Journal of Conflict and Security Law 16 (3): 417–442. 2011. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krr017.

3 It is argued that further clarification and deliberation of the provisions related to inspection and verification activities including rights for IAEA could have reduced loopholes that could possibly be used to undermine the efficacy of established system at times of contestation.

4 It is suggested that some in the Obama administration may have viewed the JCPOA as a step towards expanding regional cooperation, fostering dialogue on additional security areas, and seeking the regionalization of some of the JCPOA's standards on compliance and fuel cycle restrictions. However, these ideas did not survive after the administration left office in 2016. See for example: Robert Einhorn, 'The JCPOA should be maintained and reinforced with a broad regional strategy', Brookings Institution, 2016.

Repeated noncompliance with arms control obligations often reflects either unfulfilled commitments or poorly negotiated bargains[5]—both of which apply to the treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in the Middle East. The essence of treaty compliance lies in reciprocity: states accept restrictions in exchange for others doing their part. The NPT is inherently asymmetrical. It allows the five nuclear weapons states (NWS) to retain their arsenals while prohibiting others from acquiring them. Non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS) accepted this imbalance with the expectation that the NWS would eventually disarm, refrain from threatening NNWS, and limit nuclear possession within the NPT framework.

In the Middle East, the bargain was broader. In return for indefinite NPT adherence, regional states were promised a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-free zone—an outcome that would require Israel's disarmament. Yet Israel never joined the NPT, and no substantial progress has been made toward that goal. Meanwhile, some leading states appear to be reinterpreting or deprioritizing these past commitments.[6]

This perceived inequity has deepened amidst selective enforcement of non-proliferation norms. Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Libya have faced swift international responses for violations of their NPT obligations, while Israel's nuclear weapons program has not encountered comparable scrutiny based on different yet relevant obligations under international law.[7]

The region's nuclear asymmetry, marked by this selective enforcement and one state's continued possession of nuclear weapons, perpetuates a spiral effect. Among other drivers of weaponization, asymmetry pushes emerging regional powers to pursue nuclear weapons (or other strategic capabilities) when conditions permit, in an effort to counterbalance rivals.[8]

Furthermore, the persistence of this asymmetry carries normative implications. It undermines the credibility of the non-proliferation regime and challenges its universality, while reinforcing a non-disclosure tier within the already two-tiered NPT system—a tier marked by exceptionalism and opacity. In this tier, certain nuclear-armed states remain permanently outside the regime and exempt from non-proliferation norms, while others are expected to comply indefinitely. Protecting this exceptionalism discredits the integrity of non-proliferation efforts and the states that advocate for them. These double standards are not only damaging but also politically and morally untenable.

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5 Abram Chayes, and Antonia Handler Chayes. 'The New Sovereignty: Compliance with International Regulatory Agreements'. Harvard University Press, 1995.

6 Almuntaser Albalawi, 'A Balanced Approach to Addressing Nuclear Risks in the Middle East While Preserving the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons', Peace Review, vol. 36, no. 2, 2024, pp. 238–250. https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2024.2337870.

7 Israel is not legally bound by the nonproliferation obligations under the NPT but by other international law instruments, such as UNSCR 487, adopted under Chapter VII, which demanded placing its nuclear program under IAEA safeguards. UNSCR 487 also considered Israel's attacks on Iraqi safeguarded nuclear facilities in 1981 a threat to the NPT and international security, as well as a violation of the UN Charter.

8 Héloïse Fayet, 'The Evolving Role of Nuclear Rhetoric in Iran's Strategic Calculus', PRISME Initiative, 2025.

More importantly, exceptionalism in the Middle East may weaken regional and domestic discourse on arms control. For instance, it may legitimize the absence of most relevant regional states from key international and regional disarmament forums—or worse, contribute to calls for reciprocal nuclear hedging by other regional actors. All of this hinders global disarmament progress and undermines regional non-proliferation efforts.[9]

The perceived double standards surrounding this exceptionalism—and the broader lack of progress in the NPT, particularly in disarmament and the establishment of a Middle East WMD-Free Zone—may also trigger renewed discussions about the legitimacy of the NPT's indefinite extension and the legality of withdrawal as an escalatory response to a stalled status quo.[10]

A Renewed Framework for Regional Arms Control

This long-standing asymmetry lies at the heart of the Middle East's security dynamics, shaped by conflicts and shifting threat perceptions. For Israel, its nuclear program has arguably served as a deterrent against numerically superior hostile neighbors. Yet this rationale has grown less persuasive over time, as Israel has achieved clear conventional military superiority and signed peace treaties with key regional states. Still, Israel's perspective appears unchanged: giving up nuclear weapons would not enhance security but increase vulnerability.

This perception may hold, particularly if states continue to believe that regional threats can be addressed solely through military power or by free-riding without making concessions or paying the dividends of collective security. However, several indicators suggest this approach may no longer be viable in the long run.

First, the scale of destruction in Gaza, combined with Israel's military threats, has intensified perceptions of Israel's unchecked use of force. As emerging powers in the region assert greater agency, balancing Israel has become a growing imperative for states long uneasy with an order shaped by unrestrained behavior and exceptionalism.[11]

Second, the human and strategic costs borne in the Iran-Israel war make the prospect of extended or expanded military action increasingly untenable. In Israel's case, achieving long-term objectives appears unlikely without sustained and deeper U.S. involvement—support Washington remains hesitant to extend.

9 Avner Cohen, 'Israel's Nuclear Opacity/Exemption: Should the World Continue to Support It?', Written Evidence Submitted to the UK Parliament, 2021. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/100021/html/.

10 Joelien Pretorius and Tom Sauer, 'When Is It Legitimate to Abandon the NPT? Withdrawal as a Political Tool to Move Nuclear Disarmament Forward', Contemporary Security Policy, vol. 43, no. 1, 2021, pp. 161–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2021.2009695.

11 Saudi Gazette, 'Saudi Arabia Condemns Israeli Threats of Nuclear Weapon Use Against Palestinians', Saudi Gazette, 25 July 2024. https://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/644465/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-Arabia-condemns-Israeli-threats-of-nuclear-weapon-use-against-Palestinians; On the shift of perceived threats and concerns about Israel's regional posture see Vali Nasr, 'The New Balance of Power in the Middle East', Foreign Affairs, 10 June 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/new-balance-power-middle-east-iran.

Third, despite the recent U.S. strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities (Fordow, Natanz, Isfahan) using bunker-busters bombs, whose long-term impact on Tehran's nuclear capabilities is still uncertain, the Trump administration appears torn on the path forward—signaling openness to further military escalation, while simultaneously pursuing a ceasefire and diplomatic re-engagement. This ambivalence reflects the enduring tension within the 'America First' doctrine between projecting strength abroad and avoiding sustained foreign entanglements.

Together, these indicators highlight the growing limitations of zero-sum, military-centric approaches to regional security in the absence of robust diplomacy and engagement.[12]

The link between Iran's and Israel's nuclear programs is arguably more visible than ever. In recent confrontations, both hinted at revisiting their nuclear doctrines – escalating regional alarm over their programs.[13] Iran's recent policy shifts are not solely reactions to international pressure or U.S. sanctions; they also reflect heightened perceptions of vulnerability driven by Israeli and American threats—further intensified by the most recent Israeli and American attacks.[14] For Israel, Iran's increasing nuclear latency and turn to direct confrontation have magnified the urgency of resolving Iran's nuclear threats. The problem is the belief that force is the only effective way to "surgically" eliminate Iran's capabilities—a view many experts strongly challenge. On the contrary, military action is more likely to reinforce pro-weaponization voices in Iran, disrupt international safeguards, encourage covert nuclear activities, and, most importantly, further diminish prospects for a diplomatic solution.[15]

In this context, the long-dismissed idea of giving up nuclear weapons in return for a region-wide ban on WMD may still appear threatening. Yet a realistic and forward-looking reassessment, especially given the limits of coercive strategies, could reveal it as a pragmatic and viable option for Israel and the wider region, particularly if embedded in broader arms-control and threat-reduction frameworks. However, if that realization comes only after another state acquires or openly pursues nuclear weapons, it may arrive too late.

It is unrealistic to expect highly politicized, time-sensitive negotiations such as the JCPOA to fold in wider regional arms-control elements. Still, the JCPOA could have served as a

12 Strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities are unlikely to eliminate its threshold capability entirely and may instead entrench an 'endless war' logic. See Tytti Erästö, 'Following Israeli attacks, Iran and other Gulf states could prevent endless war through regional non-proliferation cooperation', PRISME Initiative, 2025. https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/israeli-attacks-iran-gulf-regional-non-proliferation-cooperation-tytti-erasto/

13 The Straits Times, 'Israel PM Again Warns Iran After Top Diplomat Talks of Revising Nuclear Doctrine', 29 November 2024; The Times of Israel, 'Israel Modernizing Nuclear Capabilities, Upgrading Production Facilities – Report', 18 June 2024; Aurora Almendral, Amin Khodadadi, and Andrew Jones, 'Iran Signals Possible Change in Its Nuclear Doctrine', NBC News, 19 April 2025.

14 Hamidreza Azizi, 'Iran's Shifting Discourse on Nuclear Weaponization: Bargaining Tactic or Doctrine Change?', Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 6 November 2024. https://mecouncil.org/publication/irans-shifting-discourse-on-nuclear-weaponization-bargaining-tactic-or-doctrine-change/.

15 Kelsey Davenport, 'Israeli Strikes Risk Driving Iran Toward Nuclear Weapons', Just Security, 13 June 2025. https://www.justsecurity.org/114515/israeli-strikes-risk-driving-iran-toward-nuclear-weapons/.

foundation for complementary frameworks—parallel or sequential—that address root security and proliferation drivers.[16] Arms control works best when paired with such security architectures. Institutions like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the NATO-Russia Council, for instance, have supported arms control in Europe by promoting dialogue and transparency.

The absence of formal diplomatic relations—especially between Israel and Iran—renders bilateral arms-control talks unlikely. Broader regional processes, under UN auspices or other credible sponsors, therefore, offer more realistic pathways forward.

Such processes wouldn't need to start from scratch. Foundations already exist—most notably the Middle East WMD-Free Zone Conference and the Aqaba Process Initiative. Both remain open to Israeli participation and could become entry points for wider, parallel engagement on regional security and arms control.[17]

For any framework to succeed, it must rest on three often-overlooked principles. First, inclusivity: not merely inviting previously excluded voices but addressing the security concerns of all parties, including Israel and Iran, under consistent standards.

Second, normativity: establishing behavioral baselines and reinforcing them through practice. The JCPOA, for example, introduced reinforced verification and transparency measures that set a precedent. Future frameworks should entrench norms that prioritize compliance, transparency, and cooperation.

Third, cooperation: developing tangible incentives and fostering regional interdependence. Despite political obstacles, cooperation is a critical confidence-building measure. Greater regional integration would help sustain any framework and pave the way for broader cooperative security.[18] In the case of the JCPOA, economic incentives—particularly from Gulf Arab states—could have further encouraged parties to uphold the deal.[19] Cooperation can be scaled to political realities, starting with sub-regional or issue-specific initiatives and expand as momentum and trust grow.

16 Abdolrasool Divsallar, 'Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East: The Role of the WMD-Free Zone Initiative,' UNIDIR, 2025, https://www.doi.org/10.37559/MEWMDFZ/2025/CombatingWMD.

17 Almuntaser Albalawi, 'Will There Ever Be a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East?', Arms Control Today, January/February 2025. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-01/features/will-there-ever-be-wmd-free-zone-middle-east.

18 For examples of regional cooperation formats see Mehran Haghirian's four-track cooperation model, 'Nuclear Diplomacy in the Gulf: Exploring Pathways for Regional Nuclear Energy Cooperation between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE', PRISME Initiative, 2025.

19 Hamidreza Azizi, 'A Fragile Opening: Iran, the US, and the High-Stakes Return to Diplomacy', European Leadership Network, 11 April 2025. https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/a-fragile-opening-iran-the-us-and-the-high-stakes-return-to-diplomacy/.

The Case for Wider Regional Engagement in Arms Control Diplomacy

The war between Iran and Israel, alongside a deeper U.S. involvement, threatens regional stability and, in particular, endangers the Gulf's economic aspirations and security interests. It has already slowed tanker traffic and could further disrupt critical trade routes through the Strait of Hormuz, which handles about a fifth of global oil consumption. Strikes on nuclear or oil facilities would further pose severe environmental and health risks, including contamination of food and water sources in the region. Such actions could also push Iran to withdraw from the non-proliferation regime or pursue nuclear weapons—further undermining longstanding efforts to establish a Middle East WMD-free zone. Given these high stakes, regional states must act swiftly to ensure diplomacy remains viable.

Another reason for Gulf Arab states to adopt a more proactive stance is to ensure that any new agreement reflects broader regional interests on equal footing with those of other major players—something they felt was lacking in the JCPOA negotiations, which limited their support for the deal. The absence of Arab states from the process left Iran under no obligation or incentive to improve relations with its regional neighbors.[20]

Resolving standing compliance issues also serves the broader regional interest in enhancing peaceful nuclear cooperation and technology transfer, by easing proliferation concerns that have discouraged exporters from engaging in the region. For instance, resolving Iran's nuclear issue could reduce anxieties surrounding new nuclear energy programs in the region and facilitate potential U.S.–Saudi nuclear cooperation.

There are also compelling reasons to believe that both Iran and any future agreement could benefit from direct regional involvement. Given the deep mistrust and unmet expectations following the JCPOA, both Iran and the U.S. are likely to seek stronger assurances this time. Here, non-traditional mediators and guarantors may prove useful. For example, Iran may view the participation of certain Arab states—particularly those with ties to the Trump administration—as a stabilizing factor in sustaining diplomacy.

This involvement could extend beyond mediation. Since the JCPOA negotiations, relations between Iran and several Arab states have markedly improved. Tehran may now perceive economic and political guarantees from emerging Gulf powers as more credible—or at least more durable—than those of the original JCPOA signatories. Such guarantees may offer greater continuity than those of Western governments, which operate on shorter political cycles and have previously reversed course, as with the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA.

20 Critics also argue that the JCPOA allowed for retention of residual nuclear hedging capabilities, particularly Iran's enrichment capacity. These may have enabled, or at least sustained, Tehran's broader posture of regional interference.

The potential for trade and investment from Gulf Arab states also carries substantial weight—especially as Western partners struggle to convince their companies to re-invest in Iran after prior losses triggered by the snapback of U.S. sanctions.[21]

The Path Forward: Regional Autonomy

The Middle East arguably offers a clear example of deterrence's limitations—whether in traditional or sub-regional shared forms—as an approach to regional security. Collective security, by contrast, though often preached, has yet to be meaningfully attempted in the region, despite its success in other contexts, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as a viable path toward sustainable security.

Arms control and nuclear governance built on inclusive, consent-based approaches—as discussed throughout this essay—could offer a model for realizing collective security in the Middle East. Achieving regional autonomy is central to enabling such approaches, as agency empowers states to take ownership of their security concerns. It also helps bridge the legitimacy gaps that have hindered past efforts.

The U.S. and other external actors still have a role to play in enabling this transformation—especially if they are genuinely committed to pivoting away from past interventionist, heavy-footprint policies and allowing regional states to take the lead, as perhaps suggested by President Trump in his recent visit to the region.[22]

Supporting the region's pursuit of agency requires moving beyond the treatment of local actors as passive recipients, consulted only after decisions have been made. Instead, regional states should be engaged from the outset, consulted throughout negotiations, and, where possible, deferred to on matters with direct regional implications. External actors can also help strengthen the region's capacity for arms control diplomacy by investing in capacity-building initiatives that promote the exchange of experience and best practices.

21 Sarah Hucal, 'US Exit from Iran Nuclear Deal Rattles EU Companies Doing Business There', ABC News, 9 May 2018. https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-exit-iran-nuclear-deal-rattles-eu-companies/story?id=55042999.

22 Vivian Nereim, 'Trump Declares End to U.S. Nation-Building in the Middle East', The New York Times, 14 May 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/14/world/middleeast/trump-middle-east-nation-building.html.

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PRISME Initiative

PRISME aims to redefine the conception of "security" in the Middle East and North Africa, as the starting point for strategic relations between MENA countries and their European and North American partners. It does so in pursuit of effective, collaborative approaches to ensuring a more peaceful and stable future. To this end, PRISME sponsors dialogue and debate between foreign policy professionals across diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These include individuals in governments, thinktanks and academic institutions located in the MENA region, Europe and North America, with a specific focus on engaging young and emerging thinkers and practitioners. Its goal is to re-define security in the Middle East, broadening the definitions of what it looks like, for whom, how it can be achieved, and how outside actors can contribute to it.

SALAM Project

SALAM (Sustaining Alternative Links beyond Arms and the Military) proposes to rethink the centrality of the arms trade in international relations with and among Middle East & North Africa (MENA) countries.

It fosters and amplifies ideas from a network of scholars and practitioners working in and with the Middle East. Issues they will address include the arms trade's advertised role in cementing bilateral and multilateral ties between North America, Europe and the MENA region; the opportunity costs of over- or sole reliance on weaponry as security; and alternative modes of engagement that might redefine a shared strategic agenda.