

Whose Nuclear Disorder? The Middle East in Global Nuclear Politics

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The Middle East has long been situated at the heart of global nuclear debates, frequently portrayed as a region of enduring volatility, non-compliance, and proliferation risk.¹ From concerns over clandestine nuclear ambitions to accusations of obstructing multilateral arms control efforts, the region's nuclear politics are often cast in alarmist and exceptionalist terms. “We are always on the brink of a nuclear disaster” and “the region is peculiarly unique” are two recurring themes. Yet such portrayals of regional nuclear dynamics obscure more than they reveal.

Rather than arising from inherent regional dysfunction, many of the regional nuclear challenges are deeply entangled with how the Middle East and the global order inter-relate. This paper uses the term ‘nuclear disorder’ not to imply inherent regional chaos, but rather to describe a state of affairs where stable, equitable, and universally respected nuclear governance is absent, largely due to the interplay of the external and internal factors discussed herein.

The paper interrogates these dynamics according to the following structure. It begins by reflecting on the sources of problematic framing of the Middle East within global nuclear politics. This is followed by a section exploring three relational sources of regional nuclear disorder that invite thinking beyond essentialist tropes about regional nuclear exceptionalism. These can be summed up as: first, the persistent application of non-proliferation principles selectively; second, the impact of coercive strategies used to enforce these norms; and finally, the idea that regional nuclear aspirations are best understood not as signs of inherent deviance, but as expressions of a complex relationship with modernity and a broader struggle for global recognition.

Problematic Region?

In both the study and practice of nuclear politics, the Middle East is frequently portrayed as a uniquely problematic region, often seen in monolithic terms. Three sources of this widespread impression can be discerned.

First, the region is often portrayed as perpetually teetering on the brink of nuclear proliferation.² On one level, regional states are frequently depicted as inherently obsessed

1 For the purposes of this paper, the Middle East refers broadly to the region encompassing states from Arab League, Israel and Iran while acknowledging the diverse political and strategic realities within this geographic expanse.

2 James A. Russell, ‘A tipping point realized? Nuclear proliferation in the Persian Gulf and Middle East’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2008, pp. 521–537.



with acquiring nuclear weapons.³ On another level, the specter of a regional proliferation cascade dominates forecasts of the Middle East, reinforcing the idea that the region is always at high risk of rampant nuclear proliferation.⁴

Second, the Middle East is viewed as particularly resistant to cooperative arms control initiatives.⁵ Unlike other regions where formal or informal arms control mechanisms have taken root, the Middle East is frequently framed as immune to similar measures.

Third, it is seen as a perennial disruptor of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review process.⁶ Progress in these global conferences is often portrayed as contingent upon resolving contentious Middle Eastern issues, with several states in the region advancing positions on regional matters that are seen as unrealistic or obstructive.

Whether viewed as rife with nuclear ambition, impervious to arms control, or obstructive within international forums, the Middle East has acquired a reputation for nuclear notoriety. It appears, in various ways, to be uniquely capable of placing nuclear concerns at the forefront of the international agenda while simultaneously embodying a kind of intractability that generates frustration and resignation.

However, these characterizations reflect the symptoms of regional nuclear disorder rather than its causes. They are often underpinned by essentialist assumptions and orientalist stereotypes that persist in analyses of the region.⁷ These draw on enduring tropes that cast the Middle East as intrinsically unstable, violent, resistant to international norms, and inherently lawless—thereby implying that the region’s nuclear challenges stem from its inherent character.

This perspective obscures how much the regional landscape is shaped by the interaction of external and internal factors that ultimately contribute to and perpetuate nuclear disorder in the Middle East. In other words, the singular focus on regional dysfunction, intrinsic qualities or regional “exceptionalism,” masks the role of broader international interactions with the global order that shape the region’s nuclear landscape.⁸ To move beyond unhelpful tropes and foster more effective approaches to nuclear governance, it is essential

3 Henry Sokolski, ‘In the Middle East, soon everybody will want the bomb’, *Foreign Policy*, 8 February 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/08/in-the-middle-east-soon-everybody-will-want-the-bomb/>.

4 United States Congress, Chain Reaction: Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East, 2008, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-110shrg45233/html/CHRG-110shrg45233.htm>.

5 Claudia Baumgart and Harald Müller, ‘A nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East: A pie in the sky?’, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2004, pp. 45–58.

6 United Nations, ‘Consensus eludes Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference as positions harden on ways to free Middle East of mass destruction weapons’, UN Press, 22 May 2015, <https://press.un.org/en/2015/dc3561.doc.htm>

7 Said provided consistent critique to this approach. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, 1978; Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Pantheon Books, 1981; Fred Halliday, ‘“Orientalism” and its critics’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, pp. 145–163.

8 Mustafa Emirbayer, ‘Manifesto for a relational sociology’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 103, no. 2, 1997, pp. 281–317.



to recognize the interdependence between regional dynamics and the broader global nuclear order.

Selective Non-Proliferation

Non-proliferation stands as a foundational pillar of the global nuclear order. Rooted in the belief that the spread of nuclear weapons threatens both global and regional stability, the principle has been institutionalized through the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has over 190 member states. Yet, as seen through regional eyes, the practice of non-proliferation has often been marred by flagrant selectivity. Rather than applying uniformly, non-proliferation is widely perceived as discriminatory and politically motivated, leading to belief that it is an imposed ploy by external powers rather than a global public good. This perception undermines both the normative authority and practical efficacy of the non-proliferation regime in the Middle East, contributing significantly to a wider erosion of faith in global governance mechanisms, a trend observed across various international issues affecting the region.⁹

Crucially, this selective application operates on two interconnected levels—global and regional—both of which contribute to the persistence of nuclear disorder rather than its resolution.

At the global level, the foundational inequality embedded in the NPT between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states has long generated contestation.¹⁰ Although this distinction is legally codified, many in the Middle East view it as an affront to sovereign equality and a manifestation of broader global hierarchies. The treaty legitimizes the possession of nuclear weapons by five states while denying that right to others, creating a bifurcated system that breeds mistrust and resentment. Regional commentators and policymakers frequently critique this structure as inherently unjust, a mechanism that perpetuates dominance rather than disarmament. As one Egyptian diplomat once stated during NPT review conferences: “The bargain has not been kept”—a reference to the failure of nuclear-armed states to fulfil their disarmament obligations under Article VI of the NPT.¹¹ The sense of being permanently confined to a subordinate position within the international system fuels skepticism towards the non-proliferation regime as a whole.¹²

The second and more regionally specific dimension of selectivity pertains to the tolerance of Israel’s nuclear weapons program. Israel’s undeclared but widely acknowledged nuclear arsenal remains beyond the reach of international inspections and accountability mechanisms. For many in the region, this constitutes the core non-proliferation challenge

9 I thank Emma Soubrier for highlighting the broader global governance dimension of this dynamic

10 Nina Tannenwald, ‘The nuclear nonproliferation regime as a “failed promise”: Contestation and self-undermining dynamics in a liberal order’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2024,

11 Interview with Egyptian diplomat, 10th NPT Review Conference, New York, August 2022.

12 This adds to some of the key challenges for de-centering arms in the region as captured in Emma Soubrier, *Decentering Arms in Middle East Security*, Synthesis Paper, PRISME Initiative, January 2025.

facing the region going back to the 1950s onward.¹³ The Israeli program is seen not only as a direct and tangible threat but also as a damning example of the regime's inconsistency.¹⁴ Despite UN resolutions and longstanding calls for a Middle East Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone, Israel remains an exception—shielded by tacit support from many powers.¹⁵ This entrenched exceptionalism exacerbates perceptions of double standards and fosters a narrative in which non-proliferation is viewed not as a global objective, but as a selectively applied instrument of control. This sense of injustice will likely be further exacerbated by the most recent Israeli war on Gaza, which revealed an alarming tolerance for genocidal levels of violence.¹⁶

The combined effect of these global and regional inconsistencies is the erosion of faith in non-proliferation as a credible or equitable objective. Within the region, non-proliferation is increasingly perceived as a doubly hypocritical enterprise—one that both entrenches global power asymmetries and aligns itself with Israeli nuclear exceptionalism. As a result, whenever international focus shifts toward countries like Iraq, Libya, or more recently Iran, the issue of Israel's nuclear capability invariably resurfaces in regional discourse. This undermines the legitimacy of non-proliferation initiatives that fail to address regional concerns. Without addressing the selective application of non-proliferation norms, efforts to build a stable regional nuclear order will continue to be met with skepticism and resistance.¹⁷

Muscular Non-Proliferation

Non-proliferation policies applied to the Middle East have often relied on aggressive, coercive strategies that, while presented as necessary for international security, have produced significant destabilizing effects in the region. These strategies have ranged from overt military interventions—such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq under the pretext of eliminating weapons of mass destruction—to more targeted operations, including Israel's 1981 bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, and covert actions like sabotage and assassinations directed at nuclear scientists and infrastructure. Framed as preventive measures to halt nuclear proliferation, such approaches have involved coercion-based tactics that frequently bypass multilateral frameworks and legal norms. Yet, the impact of

13 Hassan Elbahtimy, 'Diplomacy under the nuclear shadow: Kennedy, Nasser, and Dimona', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2023, pp. 315–332; Hassan Elbahtimy, 'Missing the mark: Dimona and Egypt's slide into the 1967 Arab-Israeli War', *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 25, no. 5–6, 2018, pp. 385–397.

14 Thalif Deen, 'Israel's hypocrisy on a nuclear Middle East', *Jadaliyya*, October 2012, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27145>.

15 Victor Gilinsky and Leonard Weiss, 'The US hypocrisy about Israel's nuclear weapons must stop', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 18 March 2025, <https://thebulletin.org/2025/03/the-us-hypocrisy-about-israels-nuclear-weapons-must-stop/>.

16 Pankaj Mishra, 'The Shoah after Gaza', *London Review of Books*, 21 March 2024.

17 For exploration of how some Gulf states address Israel's nuclear question see Ludovica Castelli, 'De-securitisation by Silencing: Analysing Gulf States' Diplomatic Discourse on Israel's Nuclear Status', *PRISME Initiative*, 2025

these policies is often assessed narrowly, overlooking their broader consequences for regional stability and for perceptions of the non-proliferation regime within the region.

Although often defended as necessary responses to nuclear threats, the counterproductive consequences of such muscular strategies merit closer scrutiny.¹⁸ First and foremost, these policies exacerbate insecurity and reinforce the argument that nuclear weapons are essential for national survival. By targeting nuclear facilities or threatening military action, aggressors inadvertently elevate the strategic value of nuclear deterrence. This dynamic was notably visible following the Israeli strike on Iraq's Osirak reactor, which strengthened internal arguments within Iraq about the need for a clandestine nuclear program.¹⁹ Similarly, persistent threats against Iran's nuclear infrastructure have likely contributed to the perception that nuclear capability is the only reliable shield against coercion, further

entrenching hardline attitudes. As several analysts note, this securitization of Iran's program—amplified through persistent coercive measures—has hardened strategic discourse inside the country itself.²⁰

Second, these policies frequently operate outside the bounds of international legal and institutional frameworks, thereby undermining the very regimes they purport to uphold. For instance, the use of disputed intelligence to justify the Iraq War in 2003 significantly undermined the verification work by international organizations.²¹ By privileging unilateral military or covert actions over collaborative diplomatic channels, powerful states diminish the authority of global non-proliferation institutions and erode confidence in their capacity to mediate nuclear issues impartially.²² This erosion fosters a perception that non-proliferation norms are selectively applied, driven more by geopolitical interests than by universal principles.

Finally, the humanitarian costs of aggressive non-proliferation policies further alienate regional publics from the global non-proliferation agenda. The assassination of scientists, the imposition of broad and often indiscriminate economic sanctions, and the long-term societal consequences of conflict all contribute to a view of non-proliferation not as a collective good, but as a tool of domination. These actions not only inflict direct harm on individuals and communities, but also delegitimize the discourse of non-proliferation, associating it with suffering and repression rather than peace and security.

18 Ahmed Twaij, 'Let's remember Madeleine Albright for who she really was', Al Jazeera, 25 March 2022.

19 Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, 'Revisiting Osirak: Preventive attacks and nuclear proliferation risks', *International Security*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2011, pp. 101–132.

20 See Javad Heiran-Nia and Sharare Abdolhossein Zade, 'Navigating the Nuclear Impasse: Iran's Strategic Dilemma in the Trump Era', PRISME Initiative, 2025 and Héloïse Fayet, 'The Evolving Role of Nuclear Rhetoric in Iran's Strategic Calculus', PRISME Initiative, 2025.

21 Robert E. Kelley, 'Twenty years ago in Iraq, ignoring the expert weapons inspectors proved to be a fatal mistake', SIPRI Commentary, 9 March 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2023/twenty-years-ago-iraq-ignoring-expert-weapons-inspectors-proved-be-fatal-mistake>.

22 Christopher DeFrancia, 'Enforcing the nuclear nonproliferation regime: the legality of preventive measures', *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, vol. 45, 2012, pp. 705–742.

In sum, while the stated objective of these policies is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, their actual effects may be to encourage proliferation, undermine legal norms, and entrench societal resistance—thereby weakening, rather than strengthening, the global non-proliferation regime.

The influence of techno-nationalism

The desire for nuclear weapons in the Middle East is often framed through a reductive lens, drawing on long-standing stereotypes that portray the region as inherently volatile, irrational, or prone to conflict. These narratives obscure the more nuanced realities of nuclear dynamics by attributing proliferation ambitions to cultural or religious essentialisms rather than engaging with the strategic, political, and technological factors that drive such decisions. This framing not only distorts our understanding of state behavior in the Middle East, but also reinforces a narrative of exceptionalism—providing ammunition for exceptional measures in response. It treats nuclear desire as something innate to the region, rather than as a calculated response to regional insecurities, power imbalances, or aspirations for global status.

A more productive way to understand nuclear dynamics in the Middle East is through the region's complex relationship with modernity.²³ Many states in the region view nuclear technology—both civilian and military—as a potent symbol of national progress and modernization. This is because, in many postcolonial contexts, mastering such advanced technology signifies a break from past technological dependencies, a demonstration of indigenous scientific capability, and an assertion of sovereignty on par with established global powers. It becomes a tangible marker of a nation's ability to chart its own developmental path and compete in a modern world. This ambition to “catch-up” is often tied to a form of techno-nationalism, where scientific and technological advancement is directly linked to national pride and autonomy. For leaders seeking to position their nations as modern, sovereign, and capable on the world stage, nuclear capability becomes a powerful legitimating tool.

This complex entanglement of nuclear ambition with national identity and modernity is further illuminated by Itty Abraham's concept of nuclear ambivalence.²⁴ Abraham suggests that the civilian and military aspects of nuclear technology can become blurred in policy and public discourse, particularly within postcolonial settings where the pursuit of modernity and global recognition plays out. In the Middle East, this ambivalence is shaped by a deep-seated drive toward technological self-assertion, where nuclear power in any form becomes emblematic of autonomy, capability, and progress. This techno-nationalist sentiment, while varying in its specific articulations, has been echoed by leaders across diverse political systems in the region—from Egypt's historical ambitions under Nasser to

²³ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, University of California Press, 1991; Stephan Stetter, ‘The Middle East in global modernity: Analytic polycentrism, historic entanglements and a rejuvenated area studies debate’, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 26, no. 5, 2021, pp. 657–681.

²⁴ Itty Abraham, ‘The ambivalence of nuclear histories’, *Osiris*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2006, pp. 49–65.



contemporary statements by Iranian and UAE officials regarding their national scientific achievements. For example, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif once stated: ‘Now we have a science that is homegrown... Our scientists developed it [nuclear technology] in spite of all the odds from abroad. That is why it has become a source of pride, a source of national dignity. This is not about weapons. This is about respect. This is about dignity.’²⁵

Rather than being solely a pursuit of military advantage, nuclear technology is imbued with symbolic value, seen as a marker of entry into the ranks of modern, powerful states. This underscores the idea that nuclear desires are not born from inherent cultural traits or regional peculiarities, but from a broader, global struggle over modernity and recognition. The Middle East’s relationship with nuclear technology, therefore, is better understood within this wider postcolonial and global framework—one that reflects aspirations shaped by histories of marginalization, global hierarchies, and the persistent quest to redefine the region’s place in the world.²⁶

Conclusion

Understanding the wide array of factors contributing to regional nuclear disorder is key to developing effective policy responses to the region’s nuclear challenges. Reframing nuclear politics in the Middle East requires a fundamental shift away from essentialist narratives that isolate the region as uniquely problematic and a re-evaluation of what constitutes this ‘disorder’—seeing it not as an intrinsic quality but as a product of broader dynamics. The region’s perceived nuclear exceptionalism is not simply a function of internal characteristics or cultural pathologies, but rather a reflection of the unequal global order that governs access to nuclear technology, and the interests that underpin its selective application—globally, but also crucially within the region.

Aggressive, selective, and often extra-legal approaches to non-proliferation not only undermine the legitimacy of international regimes but also reinforce regional insecurity and entrench societal skepticism. Moreover, a deeper understanding of regional nuclear ambitions invites us to think beyond just military advantage. In the Middle East, nuclear technology is embedded in responses to modernity that fuse technological ambition, sovereign dignity, and aspirations for recognition within a global system historically marked by marginalization and hierarchy.

Understanding this complex interplay is essential for building a more just and effective nuclear governance framework for the region—one that can help move from disorder towards genuine, equitable order.

25 ‘Full interview with Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif’, NBC News, 4 March 2015, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iran-nuclear-talks/full-interview-iranian-foreign-minister-mohammad-javad-zarif-n317516>.

26 Hisham Soliman, ‘Promising a Sustainable Energy Future in a Diversified Economy: Overcoming the Risky Legacy of Nuclear Energy’. PRISME Initiative, 2025 and Almontaser Albalawi, ‘From Asymmetry to Autonomy: Rethinking Arms Control in the Middle East’, PRISME Initiative, 2025.



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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.