

Why arms control keeps failing in the Middle East

Recent US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, effectively joining Israel's war against Iran, marked the latest in a long series of Middle Eastern crises linked to real or suspected weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes. Rather than relying on international bodies such as the IAEA or OPCW, states in the region and global powers tend to favour deterrence, often resorting to pre-emptive force.

In line with Israel's Begin Doctrine, which holds that no hostile state should be allowed to acquire weapons of mass destruction, Israel—itself an undeclared nuclear power—has repeatedly carried out pre-emptive strikes against: Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981, a suspected Syrian facility in 2007, and most recently Iranian uranium enrichment centres and missile production capabilities. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq followed a similar pattern, based on claims of WMD despite ongoing IAEA inspections. No WMDs were found, undermining the credibility of the US' actions. During Syria's civil war, even after it joined the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013, the regime of Bashar al-Assad used chemical attacks against the civilian population, leading to US strikes in 2017 and joint strikes with France and the UK in 2018.

Iran's 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) was a rare diplomatic success, curbing its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. The subsequent US withdrawal in 2018 shattered the fragile trust built by the deal and reignited regional tensions. The US and Israel claim Iran did not comply with the deal, but the IAEA and European governments have stated that Tehran was in full compliance until the US withdrawal.

These episodes show that while diplomatic solutions, so-called "off-ramps", are possible, they tend to be short-lived. Caught in a security dilemma, many actors see arms control as naïve or dangerous, choosing to develop WMD for deterrence and act pre-emptively when they feel threatened. Israeli and US strikes on Iran's nuclear sites may push Tehran to pursue a bomb more openly and swiftly, risking a broader arms race with countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt, which have tolerated but never fully accepted Israel as the region's sole nuclear power.

Ultimately, arms control in the Middle East fails not because the tools are missing, but because trust remains elusive, the region lacks lasting stability, and too few leaders have the courage and freedom to rise above political survival or ideological rigidity in pursuit of a greater peace.

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