

آفاق إنشاء منطقة خالية من الأسلحة النووية في الشرق الأوسط: العقبات والمسارات المستقبلية

Prospects for a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East: Obstacles and Pathways Forward

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ملخص: استنادًا إلى الدروس المقارنة المستمدة من "معاهدة تلاتيلولكو" في أمريكا اللاتينية، و"معاهدة بيليندابا" في أفريقيا، ترى هذه الدراسة أن آفاق إنشاء "منطقة خالية من الأسلحة النووية في الشرق الأوسط" تعوقها العديد من العوائق التي تتفاعل معًا لعرقلة التوصل إلى اتفاق بشأن نطاق المعاهدة، ودخولها حيز التنفيذ، وسلطة التحقق، وآليات الإنفاذ. وأخيرًا، ترسم الدراسة مجموعة من السيناريوهات للفترة 2025-2035، وبخطوات عملية نحو إنشاء "منطقة خالية من الأسلحة النووية في الشرق الأوسط".

كلمات مفتاحية: منطقة خالية من الأسلحة النووية، الشرق الأوسط، الحد من التسليح، الأمن الإقليمي، عدم الانتشار، التحليل المقارن

Abstract: Drawing on comparative lessons from Latin America's Treaty of Tlatelolco and Africa's Treaty of Pelindaba, this paper argues that MENWFZ prospects are constrained by several interacting obstacles to impede agreement on scope, entry into force, verification authority, and enforcement. Finally, a set of scenarios for 2025–2035 maps plausible trajectories for the future. The paper concludes with practical steps towards the establishment of a MENWFZ.

Keywords: Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, Middle East, Arms Control, Regional Security, Non-Proliferation, Comparative Analysis

Introduction

Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZs) are among the most durable regional instruments supporting global non-proliferation. Since the Treaty of Tlatelolco (1967), additional regional treaties have established legally binding prohibitions on nuclear weapons across the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central Asia. Together, they cover more than 115 states and demonstrate how regional cooperation can advance disarmament objectives while addressing local security concerns.

The Middle East remains a conspicuous exception. Despite sustained diplomatic attention, numerous UN General Assembly resolutions, and broad international support, the region lacks a comparable zone. This absence is especially consequential given dense populations, recurring interstate and intrastate conflicts, and persistent proliferation anxiety surrounding Israel's undeclared arsenal and Iran's contested nuclear programme.⁽¹⁾

Efforts to establish a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (MENWFZ) date to 1974, when Iran and Egypt first advanced the proposal at the UN. The idea was later embedded in the bargain sustaining the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT): the 1995 NPT Review Conference adopted a Resolution on the Middle East that treated progress toward a zone as integral to the NPT's political legitimacy.⁽²⁾ The 2010 NPT Review Conference subsequently called for a regional conference in 2012 to begin negotiations on a zone free from weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. However, the process has remained fragile and contested.

Subsequent diplomacy illustrates both persistence and fragility. The planned 2012 conference did not convene, and later efforts shifted toward informal consultations and UN-facilitated processes aimed at sustaining dialogue without presuming immediate agreement on final status.⁽³⁾ This history matters because it shows that the main barrier is not the absence of proposals, but the repeated inability to translate declarations of support into mutually acceptable sequencing, verification, and assurance arrangements.

1 Nicholas L. Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of U.S. Nonproliferation Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

2 Harald Müller and Andreas Schmidt, "The Little-Known Story of Deproliferation: Why States Give Up Nuclear Weapon Activities", in: *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century*, eds. William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 124–158.

3 Jeremy Issacharoff, *The Consultations in Glion and Geneva: A View from the Negotiating Table* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2023); Tomisha Bino and Chen Zak Kane, "Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project: Final Report", United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 16/6/2023, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F36B>

The scholarly literature on NWFZs and MENWFZ dynamics provides a substantial foundation but also exposes a persistent mismatch between diagnosis and pathway design. Foundational work defines NWFZs as regional arrangements that prohibit the testing, production, acquisition, possession, or stationing of nuclear weapons within defined boundaries. Comparative studies show that successful zones typically combine (a) a catalytic moment or shared perception of the relevant threat, (b) credible regional leadership, and (c) institutional design that lowers entry costs while delivering credible verification.⁽⁴⁾ Latin America's path, for example, linked the Cuban Missile Crisis to flexible entry-into-force provisions and regional verification institutions; Africa's path linked anti-colonial norms and South Africa's verified rollback to a continent-wide treaty framework.⁽⁵⁾

MENWFZ scholarship has generally focused on why comparable enabling conditions have not been consolidated in the Middle East. Key accounts emphasize Israel's opaque arsenal,⁽⁶⁾ Iran's contested nuclear trajectory and its interaction with regional rivals,⁽⁷⁾ and the persistence of asymmetrical perceptions of threat that make regional consensus unusually difficult.⁽⁸⁾ More recent research has documented negotiation dynamics and regional perspectives in detail, including the 2013–2014 informal consultations and the obstacles identified by practitioners.⁽⁹⁾

Three analytical gaps motivate this study. First, while individual country programmes and bilateral rivalries are well covered, less attention is paid to systemic regional factors that differentiate the Middle East from successful NWFZ cases. Second, many accounts of failure emphasize immediate political disputes without specifying which

4 John R. Redick, "The Tlatelolco Regime and Nonproliferation in Latin America", *International Organization* 35, no. 1 (1981): pp. 103–134; Julio C. Carasales, "The So-Called Proliferator That Wasn't: The Story of Argentina's Nuclear Policy", *Nonproliferation Review* 6, no. 4 (1999): pp. 51–64; Jozef Goldblat, "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones: A History and Assessment", *The Nonproliferation Review* 4, no. 3 (1997): pp. 18–32.

5 David Mutimer, *The Weapons State: Proliferation and the Framing of Security* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000); Oluyemi Adeniji, *The Treaty of Pelindaba on the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2002).

6 Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991).

7 Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006); David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Ray Takeyh, *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

8 Müller and Schmidt, "Little-Known Story"; Gawdat Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007).

9 Issacharoff, *Consultations in Glion and Geneva*; Bino and Kane, "Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project".

structural constraints might be amenable to long-term change. Third, scenario-building has been underused as a method for translating diagnosis into plausible pathways and early indicators.

Accordingly, the paper asks: What are the principal obstacles to establishing a MENWFZ, and how do they differ from the challenges overcome in other regions? Which lessons from Latin America and Africa are relevant to Middle Eastern conditions? Given the current dynamics, what are the most plausible pathways forward over the next decade?

These questions are not merely academic. The Middle East includes states with advanced nuclear capabilities or ambitions, alongside volatile interstate rivalries, proxy conflicts, and a dense pattern of external security commitments. The absence of formal arms control mechanisms thus carries elevated risks for regional stability and for the credibility of the global non-proliferation regime.⁽¹⁰⁾

Methodologically, the paper pairs this comparative lens with a scenario-building approach. Scenario analysis is used not to predict outcomes but to structure uncertainty and to specify early indicators that distinguish between deadlock, incremental institutionalization, and the rarer conditions in which comprehensive commitments become politically feasible.

The paper offers an integrated framework linking four obstacles that are often treated separately – opacity, rivalries, trust deficits, and capability asymmetries – and shows how their interaction produces recurring sequencing and verification deadlocks. It draws on comparisons from Latin America and Africa to distinguish between technical design choices that can be prepared in advance and political conditions that must be cultivated over time. It concludes with a scenario-based pathway map for 2025–2035 that identifies early indicators and policy levers for incremental risk reduction even when comprehensive agreement remains out of reach.

Historical Context and Comparative Analysis

1. The Latin American Experience: Treaty of Tlatelolco

The Treaty of Tlatelolco, signed in 1967, established the first NWFZ in a populated region and remains a benchmark for negotiating regional denuclearization amid diverse national interests. Its history is especially instructive because it links political

10 Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*.

catalysts, institutional design, and verification arrangements to gradual but ultimately comprehensive regional adherence.

Opened for signature on 14 February 1967, in Mexico City, the Treaty of Tlatelolco is the founding instrument that made Latin America and the Caribbean the first densely populated region in the world to establish a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ). The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was the major trigger. The region's leaders understood that, in the absence of a legal framework, their countries could become targets or battlegrounds for the nuclear superpowers of the Cold War. In fact, the Mexican diplomat Alfonso García Robles was the principal architect of the treaty.⁽¹¹⁾ The 33 signatory states of this treaty commit to prohibiting the development, testing, use, manufacture, possession, or stockpiling of nuclear weapons within their territories. The treaty includes two crucial protocols. The first one binds external powers with territories in the area (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Netherlands), while the second commits the five recognized nuclear powers (China, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia) to respect the denuclearized status of the region and not to use nuclear weapons against member states.⁽¹²⁾

Furthermore, this treaty established OPANAL (Organization for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean), headquartered in Mexico City. It is the only nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) with a permanent organization dedicated to monitoring and ensuring compliance with commitments. One of the treaty's objectives is to ensure that economic resources are not diverted to nuclear weapons programmes, but rather devoted to social and cultural progress.

Rather than demanding immediate universal adherence, the treaty created pathways for gradual accession and allowed states to manage the domestic politics of commitment. This flexibility proved essential for late joiners, including states that initially retained nuclear ambitions but later accepted regional denuclearization as their strategies evolved.⁽¹³⁾

The treaty's institutional design also separated normative commitment from immediate technical maturity. States could accept the core prohibition while building safeguarding capacity over time, reducing the fear that early commitment would lead to an immediate

11 Redick, "Tlatelolco Regime and Nonproliferation".

12 Rafael Mariano Grossi, "Latin America's Road to a Region Free of Nuclear Weapons," in *Routledge Handbook of Nuclear Proliferation and Policy*, eds. Joseph F. Pilat and Nathan E. Busch (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 317–327.

13 Carasales, "So-Called Proliferator".

loss of sovereign control. This sequencing function – commitment first, gradual deepening later – proved important for sustaining participation through political transitions.

Verification arrangements balanced sovereignty and credibility. OPANAL provided a regional institutional anchor, while IAEA safeguards supplied technical assurance. This combined approach helped address fears of external interference without sacrificing confidence in compliance.⁽¹⁴⁾ Over time, the zone deepened as political circumstances changed – illustrated by Argentina and Brazil's nuclear cooperation and Cuba's eventual adherence – showing how patient, adaptive institutions can consolidate a prohibition norm⁽¹⁵⁾. Indeed, this treaty has served as a model for other nuclear-weapon-free zones in the South Pacific, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. It succeeded because there was political will before the establishment of the technical structure. In contrast, in the Middle East, the SESAME (Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East) research centre for physics, biology, and archaeology, established in Jordan, already constitutes a technical structure for collaboration between Israel and Middle Eastern countries, despite the absence of political will for cooperation in the nuclear field.

2. The African Experience: Treaty of Pelindaba

This treaty was adopted in Pelindaba, South Africa, on 2 June 1995 and officially entered into force on 15 July 2009. It prohibits the research, development, manufacture, stockpiling, acquisition, testing, possession, and deployment of nuclear explosive devices within the territory of the States Parties. In addition to disarmament, the treaty prohibits the dumping of radioactive waste and any armed attack against nuclear facilities in the area. Furthermore, it explicitly encourages the use of nuclear science and technology for peaceful socio-economic development.

To ensure compliance with these commitments, the treaty established the African Nuclear Energy Commission (AFCONE), headquartered in Pretoria, South Africa. Member states are also required to conclude comprehensive safeguarding agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The treaty currently has 43 States Parties, including Egypt and South Africa. It also includes three protocols addressed to nuclear powers and states with territorial responsibilities in the area. The two first protocols commit the five recognized nuclear powers (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) not to

14 Goldblat, "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones".

15 Jacques E. C. Hymans, "Theories of Nuclear Proliferation: The State of the Field", *The Nonproliferation Review* 13, no. 3 (2006): pp. 455–465.

use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against countries in the area. The United States has signed these protocols but has not yet ratified them. The third protocol addresses France and Spain regarding the territories under their jurisdiction in the area.

This treaty reflects a distinct pathway shaped by colonial legacies, external nuclear testing, and the prior existence of an indigenous nuclear arsenal. Its relevance for the Middle East lies particularly in the demonstration that nuclear reversal and subsequent regional prohibition can be verified and institutionalized.

Africa's relationship with nuclear weapons was shaped by external testing and by South Africa's apartheid-era programme. These experiences strengthened continental opposition to nuclear weapons as instruments of external domination and internal repression. The OAU's early denuclearization declarations signalled consensus, but implementation remained constrained until regional political conditions changed.⁽¹⁶⁾

South Africa's verified rollback in the early 1990s was the decisive turning point. The dismantlement demonstrated that an existing arsenal could be eliminated transparently under international verification and that reversal could become a source of leadership rather than stigma.⁽¹⁷⁾ That precedent helped legitimize the pursuit of a continent-wide treaty and supplied practical experience relevant to verification design.

Pelindaba's treaty architecture combined a regional authority (the African Commission on Nuclear Energy – AFCONE) with IAEA safeguards and incorporated provisions on transit and stationing intended to limit external nuclear presence.⁽¹⁸⁾ AFCONE is the executive body responsible for overseeing the implementation of the treaty. Its main missions include verification and compliance, environmental protection, and the promotion of peaceful uses of nuclear energy in health (radiotherapy), agriculture (pest control), and energy, while combating the illicit trafficking of nuclear materials and preventing nuclear terrorism on the continent.

The treaty's delayed entry into force underscores a broader lesson: even when consensus is high, ratification timelines can be extended by domestic politics and administrative capacity, making institutional persistence and patient diplomacy essential.

16 Adeniji, *Treaty of Pelindaba*.

17 David Albright, "South Africa's Secret Nuclear Weapons", *ISIS Report* (May 1994), accessed on 25/12/2025 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1CbB>; Peter Liberman, "The Rise and Fall of the South African Bomb", *International Security* 26, no. 2 (2001): pp. 45–86.

18 Adeniji, *Treaty of Pelindaba*; Goldblat, "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones".

The African experience with the Pelindaba Treaty offers several lessons for establishing a weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-free zone in the Middle East, including the crucial importance of mutual trust, robust verification mechanisms, and shared regional political will. The African case also underscores the value of a credible precedent for a rollback. The existence of a verified dismantlement process created a reference point for what “reversal” can look like in practice – an element missing from Middle Eastern diplomacy, where the focal nuclear capability remains undeclared.

3. Comparative Lessons for the Middle East

Comparison with successful NWFZ cases highlights both transferable mechanisms and sharp contextual differences. In Latin America and Africa, external nuclear risks contributed to convergent regional preferences for denuclearization. In the Middle East, external involvement has been enduring but divisive: Israel treats US security cooperation as indispensable, while Iran and some Arab states perceive US presence as threatening, hindering consensus on the external security environment.⁽¹⁹⁾

Two design-relevant lessons stand out. First, successful zones often use flexible legal architecture – especially entry-into-force provisions – to prevent any single state from vetoing the normative framework. Second, verification arrangements pair regional ownership with credible international technical support, creating institutions capable of managing compliance disputes without collapsing into politicized accusations.

Leadership patterns also diverge. Mexico and South Africa provide facilitation and a credible example, respectively. The Middle East lacks a comparable actor with both the capability and legitimacy to convene and sustain a process across rival camps; Egypt has sought that role but faces constraints in resources and credibility.⁽²⁰⁾ Finally, the presence of an undeclared nuclear arsenal changes the problem from prevention to rollback. Latin America denuclearized before any regional weapons acquisition, and Africa benefitted from a precedent-setting verified reversal. In the Middle East, a viable zone must ultimately address an existing arsenal alongside latent capabilities, raising the bar for sequencing, verification, and security assurance.

For the Middle East, the implication is that feasible progress is likely to require both political sequencing (creating conditions under which commitments are survivable) and institutional sequencing (building verification and compliance-management capacity before demanding final-status concessions).

19 Miller, *Stopping the Bomb*.

20 Müller and Schmidt, “Little-Known Story”.

This comparative frame also clarifies what not to expect: there will be no convergence on the core threat hierarchy, nor a credible mechanism to assure the most vulnerable actors that treaty drafting alone will not break the deadlock. The role of drafting and technical work is therefore preparatory, creating options that can be activated when political conditions shift.

Regional Obstacles to MENWFZ Establishment

1. Israeli Nuclear Capabilities and Policies

As a dissonant intruder into the region, Israel is by far the greatest obstacle to MENWFZ establishment. Israel is a rogue state widely considered to possess nuclear weapons and remains outside the NPT. Since the late 1960s it has pursued a policy of deliberate opacity – neither confirming nor denying possession – grounded in a perception of existential vulnerability.⁽²¹⁾ Most scholarly and intelligence assessments conclude that Israel developed an arsenal in the 1960s and maintains a sophisticated capability today.⁽²²⁾

Opacity has served multiple strategic functions. It sustains deterrence without the diplomatic and legal costs of overt declaration. It helps Israel avoid the isolation faced by other non-parties, while preserving freedom of action in regional crises.⁽²³⁾ Israeli strategic discourse treats nuclear capability as insurance against catastrophic defeat.

Israel's opacity is also embedded in the political economy of US-Israeli relations. Cohen notes that its opacity was institutionalized through understandings that limited the public “introduction” of nuclear weapons while reducing US pressure for formal NPT accession.⁽²⁴⁾ This arrangement insulated Israeli nuclear policy from many forms of multilateral scrutiny while maintaining deterrent ambiguity. In terms of MENWFZ diplomacy, the consequence is that Israel faces relatively low external costs for maintaining the status quo compared to the domestic and strategic risks it associates with disarmament.

The same posture, however, creates a central bargaining problem for a MENWFZ. Regional actors view Israel's undeclared arsenal as evidence of discriminatory international treatment

21 Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*; Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret*.

22 Hersh, *The Samson Option*.

23 René Louis Beres, “Israel's Nuclear Strategy Ambiguity: Disclosure Doctrine”, *Denver Journal of International Law & Policy* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1998): pp. 209–233.

24 Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret*.

and it is a driver of hedging incentives. In contrast, Israel views zone processes as a potential path toward asymmetric constraints in the absence of prior political normalization.

Many Arab states have treated Israel's arsenal as the primary proliferation driver and insist on parity as a precondition for credible talks. In contrast, Israel treats nuclear rollback as the culmination of a broader regional settlement. Egypt's long-standing position that disarmament must not be decoupled from the nuclear issue reinforces this sequencing gap and sustains pressure through NPT review politics.⁽²⁵⁾

Process experience reinforces the point. The 2013–2014 informal consultations showed that agenda setting becomes a proxy for deeper political contests: Israel sought to embed WMD issues within a broader regional security agenda, while many Arab participants sought to prioritize disarmament commitments and timelines.⁽²⁶⁾ Israel boycotts the annual sessions of the UN-mandated conference on the WMD-free zone, arguing that the forum is biased and does not address conventional security or terrorism issues.

The genocide that followed 7 October 2023, has further hardened Israeli perceptions of threat and reduced political bandwidth for nuclear restraint, underscoring how nuclear policy is linked to core security narratives. Israel's hegemonic culture reinforces this logic. Its nuclear arsenal is widely treated as a last-resort guarantee against existential defeat and against future nuclear emergence by others.

2. Geopolitical Rivalries and Competition

The Middle East is characterized by several simultaneous strategic competitions that prevent convergence around shared security priorities. Unlike regions where NWFZ negotiations were enabled by a broadly shared perception of the relevant threat, Middle Eastern threats are primarily internal to the region and are thus interpreted differently by each major actor, producing divergent rather than convergent preferences.

Since 2011, the fragmentation of the regional order – civil wars, proxy contests, and the rise of influential non-state actors – has further complicated nuclear bargaining. States prioritize different threats at different moments (regime survival, counterterrorism, the containment of Iran, or relations with Israel), making it difficult to sustain a stable negotiating coalition around a single, shared hierarchy of threat.⁽²⁷⁾

25 Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*.

26 Issacharoff, *Consultations in Glion and Geneva*.

27 Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*.

Iran illustrates how nuclear questions are embedded in wider rivalry. Tehran has historically supported a regional zone and framed nuclear weapons as incompatible with its doctrine, while insisting that Israel's disarmament is indispensable. At the same time, the discovery of undeclared enrichment activities and subsequent safeguarding disputes have entrenched scepticism about Iranian intentions and raised fears of its latent weapons capability.⁽²⁸⁾

The 2015 JCPOA temporarily reduced these concerns by rolling back enrichment capacity and expanding monitoring, but its partial unravelling has renewed anxieties about short breakout timelines and regional response options.⁽²⁹⁾ The “snapback” mechanism was activated by European powers in September 2025, reinstating international sanctions against Iran due to its failure to comply with enrichment thresholds. This event has reignited the internal debate in Iran on the need to modify its nuclear doctrine to ensure “ultimate deterrence”.⁽³⁰⁾ Even when framed as a civilian programme, Iran's mastery of the enrichment cycle, combined with periodic escalatory rhetoric, is interpreted by rivals as a hedge that could be weaponized under crisis conditions. Moreover, Tehran maintains stockpiles of enriched uranium at levels close to the weapons-grade threshold. For neighbouring countries, this technical capability makes any promise of a “weapon-free zone” difficult to verify without a control protocol far stricter than that of Pelindaba. Unlike the African treaty, where countries share a common vision, in the Middle East, the threat of withdrawal from the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) is often used as diplomatic leverage, which undermines the sustainability of any future regional treaty.

Security competition extends beyond the nuclear file. Iran's ballistic missile forces and regional proxy networks are central to its deterrence posture and are perceived as destabilizing by Israel and several Sunni Arab states. Conversely, the Arab states' reliance on external military partnerships and sanctions strategies is interpreted in Tehran as hostile containment. The resulting rivalry creates incentives for hedging: Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have signalled that they may pursue matching capabilities if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, fuelling concerns about a cascade of proliferation.

Regional realignments create both opportunities and complications. Normalization between Israel and some Arab states has produced limited security convergence on Iran,

28 Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran*.

29 Mark Fitzpatrick, “The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Avoiding Worst-Case Outcomes”, *The Adelphi Papers* 398 (2008): pp. 1–136.

30 Alexander K. Bollfrass, “Iran Nuclear Negotiations Snap Back to the Past”, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 24/10/2025), accessed on 17/02/2026 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2U0>

but it has not eliminated the fundamental dispute over the sequencing of Israel's nuclear status. Some actors see normalization as creating space for pragmatic dialogue, while others view it as reducing leverage for parity-based demands.

Arab positions are formally unified around a WMDFZ but operationally divergent. Egypt continues to emphasize universality and parity and has used NPT diplomacy to maintain pressure on the Middle East resolution; some Gulf states prioritize constraining Iran while keeping channels open for de-escalation; Jordan often emphasizes practical CBMs compatible with its peace treaty; and Syria's chemical weapons record and past covert nuclear activity create verification complications that would be unavoidable in any comprehensive process. The post-2003 Iraqi experience and the legacy of Libya's 2003 disarmament, followed by state collapse, further shape how elites interpret the risks of giving up strategic "insurance".

These divergences produce a collective action problem. Each actor seeks maximal assurance while minimizing its own vulnerability during sequencing. The result is a persistent trap: Israel resists nuclear rollback in the absence of normalization and credible constraints on the capabilities of hostile neighbours; Iran and many Arab states resist interim steps that appear to normalize Israel's exception; and key Arab actors disagree about whether incremental risk reduction enables or dilutes comprehensive parity.

3. Trust Deficits and Historical Grievances

The absence of basic trust among regional actors is a fundamental obstacle to any cooperative security arrangement that relies on intrusive verification. Even a strong treaty text cannot substitute for a minimum political willingness to share information, permit inspections, and resolve compliance disputes without treating them as instruments of a broader political struggle.

The depth of distrust is reinforced by the lived experience of conflict and perceived betrayal. Decades of wars and proxy conflicts have created a legacy in which each party can point to clandestine hostile activity or broken commitments as evidence that legal promises are insufficient. In such an environment, arms control becomes a prisoner's dilemma: actors fear being the party that accepts constraints first, only to face cheating or strategic exploitation.

Arab-Israeli distrust remains a central problem despite Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and more recent normalization steps with several Gulf states. Competing narratives about legitimacy, security, and regional intent sustain zero-sum interpretations of restraint and amplify fears that disarmament would enable rather than reduce coercion.⁽³¹⁾

31 Miller, *Stopping the Bomb*.

A parallel structure of distrust shapes Iran–Arab relations. Sectarian competition and memories of the Iran–Iraq War interact with contemporary proxy conflicts, leading Sunni Arab governments to treat Iranian-influenced operations as evidence of hegemonic ambition. Iranian officials, in turn, interpret Arab cooperation with Western powers as hostile alignment and a betrayal of regional autonomy.⁽³²⁾

Patterns of concealment and treaty evasion amplify the problem. Iran’s safeguarding disputes and Iraq’s historical WMD violations have demonstrated how states can operate within or around formal treaty commitments, while Syria’s chemical weapons episode illustrated the difficulty of verifying complete disarmament in wartime conditions. These precedents raise verification demands and intensify political sensitivities about inspection authorities and managed access.⁽³³⁾

Institutional weakness compounds distrust. The region lacks robust regional security institutions comparable to OPANAL or the African Commission that could sustain routine cooperation and manage compliance disputes. Earlier multilateral efforts, such as the 1990s Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) process, collapsed, reinforcing scepticism about regional forums and increasing transaction costs for any new initiative.⁽³⁴⁾ Without institutional memory and regularized technical contact, each process begins anew and remains highly vulnerable to spoilers and to shifts in domestic politics.⁽³⁵⁾

Domestic political constraints then feed back into mistrust. Leaders in multiple states face hardline constituencies that frame concessions as betrayal, while elite competition can incentivize symbolic toughness over pragmatic compromise. The result is low tolerance for uncertainty, which pushes parties toward maximalist verification demands and rigid sequencing positions rather than toward experimentation with managed risk.⁽³⁶⁾

4. Asymmetrical Capabilities and Security Dilemmas

Pronounced asymmetries in both conventional and non-conventional capabilities intensify security dilemmas in the Middle East. Israel’s widely assumed nuclear arsenal is combined with qualitative conventional superiority, while potential adversaries rely on asymmetric levers such as missiles, proxies, and, in some cases, latent WMD options.

32 F. Gregory Gause, “Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War”, *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, no. 11 (Jul. 2014), accessed on 29/12/2025 at: <https://acr.ps/hBy1C7U>

33 Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran*.

34 Miller, *Stopping the Bomb*.

35 Issacharoff, *Consultations in Glion and Geneva*.

36 Bino and Kane, “Middle East WMD-Free Zone Project”.

These imbalances create different incentives for different actors and complicate agreement on reciprocal obligations.

These asymmetries are not only nuclear. Israel's qualitative conventional superiority and technological edge, reinforced by external support, create incentive structures different from those found in more balanced regional systems. Iran has pursued asymmetric capabilities – especially missiles and proxies – to deter stronger conventional opponents and to signal that escalation would carry regional costs. The Gulf states have responded with heavy investment in advanced aircraft, air defences, and emerging drone- and missile-defence systems, but these purchases do not create an equivalent deterrent to a nuclear-armed state, while at the same time they may intensify arms race dynamics.

Delivery systems complicate the WMD agenda. Missile forces and armed drones play central roles in contemporary conflict, and regional actors often treat them as inseparable from deterrence and coercion. Yet missile limits are politically difficult and are not addressed by the NPT. A WMDFZ process that ignores delivery systems may be criticized as incomplete, while one that attempts to include them risks expanding the agenda beyond what is negotiable. Managing this tension is part of maintaining a balance between comprehensiveness and feasibility. In fact, Israel uses thermobaric bombs (or “vacuum bombs”), whose destructive capacity is not negligible compared to that of nuclear weapons. This weapon uses oxygen from the ambient air to generate a high-temperature explosion and a prolonged shock wave. It generates temperatures reaching 3,500 °C. The explosion consumes all the surrounding oxygen, creating a partial vacuum that can cause asphyxiation or the rupture of lungs and internal organs. Recent reports (February 2026) allege that Israel has used thermobaric munitions (such as the GBU-39 or the MK-84, enriched with tritonal) against the population of Gaza, causing casualties whose bodies were reportedly “incinerated” or “obliterated” without leaving any trace.⁽³⁷⁾

The result is a two-level security dilemma. At the conventional level, each side interprets defensive procurement as offensive preparation, encouraging competitive responses. At the strategic level, the nuclear backstop creates a non-equivalent risk: Israel fears that disarmament would remove the ultimate guarantor of survival while its adversaries retain other force multipliers; its adversaries fear that any arrangement that does not also constrain Israel's conventional dominance and external backing would still leave them vulnerable.

37 Mohammad Mansour, “Israel Used Weapons in Gaza That Made Thousands of Palestinians Evaporate”, Al Jazeera , 10/2/2026, accessed on 19/02/2026 at: <https://bit.ly/4cGwpwQ>

Even among non-nuclear states, capabilities and timelines are uneven. Some states have advanced civil nuclear programmes and technical infrastructures that would shorten hedging timelines, while others have minimal technical capacity and would rely on external suppliers. These differences shape preferences over safeguarding stringency, fuel-cycle restrictions, and the legitimacy of additional verification beyond global norms.⁽³⁸⁾

Economic, geographic, and alliance asymmetries further sharpen incentives. Resource disparities shape procurement capacity and technological autonomy, while geography affects perceived vulnerability and tolerance for protracted conflict. External security relationships may reduce nuclear requirements for some actors while raising threat perceptions for others, creating divergent preferences over the intrusiveness of verification and the credibility of enforcement.⁽³⁹⁾ Collectively, these asymmetries raise the bar for treaty obligations to be perceived as both equitable and strategically safe.

Taken together, these obstacles are mutually reinforcing. Opacity and latent capabilities keep worst-case threat assessments alive; rivalries make each actor demand that others move first; trust deficits raise verification demands and politicize compliance; and capability asymmetries make “equal obligations” feel unequal in strategic effect. The result is that technical solutions that look straightforward in isolation – stronger safeguards, clearer definitions, or model protocols – rarely succeed unless they are embedded in a sequencing strategy that reduces perceived vulnerability at each step. This deadlock explains why MENWFZ diplomacy repeatedly returns to the same procedural disputes and why incremental, institution-building approaches often dominate the feasible set.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Comparative Assessment of Pathways

The obstacles described above do not imply that the MENWFZ agenda is inert; instead, they imply that feasible progress is likely to be incremental and path-dependent. Across historical cases and contemporary initiatives, three pathway families recur, each with distinct trade-offs between ambition and feasibility.

38 Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

39 Ibid.

A central lesson from comparative experience is that progress often precedes, rather than follows, complete political reconciliation. In Latin America, treaty design allowed states to join as domestic and regional conditions matured; in Africa, treaty architecture was negotiated alongside broader political transformation and verified rollback. For the Middle East, this implies that pathway design should focus on lowering the political cost of entry, in parallel with building confidence in verification.

First, incremental confidence-building measures (CBMs) can reduce misperception and establish limited cooperation without requiring immediate resolution of the most contentious nuclear questions. Examples include transparency measures, incident-prevention mechanisms, communication hotlines, and joint technical training. Their advantage is near-term feasibility; their limitation is that they can be dismissed as insufficient or as substitutes for addressing the core nuclear issue.

However, the region's prior experiences also suggest limits to a purely technical approach. Technical cooperation can be sustained even amid political tension, but it rarely forces the resolution of core status and recognition disputes. For CBMs to function as pathway devices rather than as endpoints, they must be explicitly linked to later-stage obligations and framed as measures that expand feasibility rather than as substitutes for disarmament.

Second, subregional or issue-specific arrangements may provide intermediate steps. Subregional forums can allow states with partial alignment to develop verification habits and technical standards, potentially creating templates for broader adoption. However, subregionalism risks hardening blocs if it is perceived as exclusionary or as reinforcing a security hierarchy.

Subregional arrangements can also be designed to avoid bloc formation by emphasizing open architecture: standards and procedures developed in a smaller forum should be explicitly portable to a broader treaty framework, with accession ramps and observer mechanisms that reduce exclusion dynamics.

Third, crisis-driven opportunities can create windows for rapid institutional change, as external shocks did in Latin America and as systemic transitions did in Africa. Crisis moments can lower political barriers to concessions, but they are unpredictable and can just as easily accelerate escalation and proliferation pressures. A durable strategy therefore requires institutional infrastructure and draft design options to be maintained so that crisis windows can be used for risk reduction rather than destabilization.

An additional pathway device is treaty drafting in parallel with political dialogue. Drafting can clarify tradeoffs, create standard definitions, and reduce the transaction costs of

future bargaining. However, drafting also risks deepening distrust if it is perceived as attempting to bind absent parties or to lock in asymmetric obligations. The key is to treat drafting as preparatory, transparent, and reversible until the relevant parties are ready to assume binding commitments.

2. Structural Obstacles and Systemic Change

Beyond immediate political disputes, the feasibility of the MENWFZ is shaped by structural conditions that affect bargaining space over time. The region is multipolar, with several states possessing distinct mixes of military, economic, and ideological capabilities, and with no single actor able to impose a settlement or credibly guarantee one. This structure reduces the likelihood of a decisive “grand bargain” and increases the importance of incremental sequencing.

The multipolar structure implies that successful settlement is more likely if (a) a temporary alignment among major powers reduces external veto points, or (b) regional actors develop sufficiently dense institutional ties that compliance disputes can be managed without threatening regime survival. In the absence of these conditions, negotiation processes tend to oscillate between maximalist demands and procedural deadlock.

Identity conflicts further constrain compromise. Competing narratives around legitimacy, sovereignty, and regional order elevate the symbolic stakes of arms control and make verification disputes easier to politicize. In practice, this means that technical proposals are often evaluated through the lens of recognition, status, and perceived moral equivalence rather than through narrow cost-benefit analysis.

Identity conflicts also interact with domestic legitimacy. Because several regimes rely on external threat narratives for internal cohesion, concessions can be politically costly even when strategically sensible. This contributes to a preference for ambiguity and hedging, which, in turn, heightens verification demands and makes compromise harder to sell domestically.

Economic interdependence patterns also differ from regions where NWFZs are embedded in broader cooperation. Heavy reliance on hydrocarbons and externally oriented trade structures has historically produced fewer region-wide institutions capable of sustaining confidence building and dispute resolution. While these structural factors are not immutable, they suggest that a MENWFZ is more likely to emerge as a long-term institutional project than as a near-term diplomatic event.

Taken together, these structural conditions suggest that MENWFZ progress depends on building institutional capacity and on sequencing commitments in ways that reduce the domestic and strategic vulnerability associated with early concessions.

3. Asymmetric Deterrence and the Deterrence Dilemma

Deterrence dynamics in the Middle East differ from those in symmetric dyads that underpin many classic arms-control deals. Israel's nuclear monopoly is intended to deter multiple adversaries simultaneously, but those adversaries cannot deter Israel in the same way and instead rely on conventional, proxy, and missile strategies. This asymmetry makes mutual reductions politically non-equivalent: Israel would be asked to relinquish an existing deterrent, while others would be asked to relinquish options they may not currently possess.

This point is reflected in historical experience: Israel's nuclear monopoly did not prevent major conventional war in 1973, nor missile attacks in 1991, and it has limited relevance against many non-state threats. Some analysts therefore argue that nuclear weapons contribute little to day-to-day security and that a MENWFZ could reduce catastrophic escalation risks without materially worsening deterrence at lower levels. Others, including many Israeli strategists, contend that the nuclear arsenal primarily deters existential attack and WMD use and provides a counter-threat to future nuclear emergence, even if it does not deter lower-level aggression.

The stability–instability logic sharpens the dilemma. A nuclear monopoly may discourage full-scale war while leaving incentives for asymmetric tactics and persistent coercion, which can make rivals more willing to test boundaries under the assumption that escalation will be contained. Removing nuclear weapons might, in principle, force greater reliance on conventional deterrence and diplomacy, but it also heightens fears that conventional imbalances and external alliances could be exploited.

The implication for MENWFZ design is that technical verification alone cannot resolve the deterrence dilemma. Any credible pathway requires parallel assurance mechanisms – political, conventional, and external – capable of substituting for nuclear “insurance” while reducing incentives for asymmetric escalation.

4. Defining the Zone: Scope and Verification Challenges

Even if political will improves, parties must still agree on basic treaty parameters: scope, geography, sequencing, verification authority, and enforcement. The shift from a purely

nuclear-free zone to a broader WMD-Free Zone is politically attractive because it promises parity, but it is institutionally demanding. Nuclear verification benefits from mature IAEA safeguards, whereas chemical and particularly biological verification is more complex and often relies on a mix of declarations, challenge inspections, and confidence measures under the CWC and BWC frameworks.

The choice between a nuclear-free zone only and an integrated WMDFZ remains contested. A nuclear-only approach can simplify verification and allow early movement on safeguards and fissile material issues. An integrated approach promises parity and addresses the region's history of chemical weapons use and allegations of use. However, it multiplies verification challenges and requires states that have not joined global conventions to accept new obligations. In practice, many regional actors favour an integrated WMDFZ precisely because it avoids singling out any one state, but this preference adds complexity to sequencing and institutional design.

The geographic definition typically follows the long-standing WMDFZ formulation: the members of the Arab League plus Iran and Israel. Expanding membership to peripheral actors can be framed as addressing relevant capabilities (e.g., NATO nuclear sharing) but is also viewed as a potential stalling tactic. At the same time, overlapping obligations with other regional treaties (such as the African NWFZ for some states) raise technical questions about consistency and institutional coordination.

Geographic scope is also politically charged because it intersects with external security architectures. Some proposals have argued for the inclusion of adjacent states or for addressing NATO nuclear sharing as part of a comprehensive approach. Others view any expansion as a way of delaying agreement among the core parties. A workable approach is to maintain the established geographic definition for treaty obligations while allowing observer status or associated measures for adjacent actors whose capabilities affect regional perceptions.

Sequencing and entry-into-force provisions are often the most politically salient design choices. Some actors demand NPT universality as a prerequisite; Israel rejects any up-front requirement to accede as a non-nuclear-weapon state. One pragmatic response is flexible entry into force: a treaty could enter into force among ratifying states which specifies that disarmament timelines and the most intrusive obligations apply to each state only upon its accession, reducing the capacity of any single holdout to veto the entire framework. Tlatelolco's use of flexibility offers a precedent for designing entry ramps that preserve the legal architecture even when universal participation is delayed.

A phased structure can also be applied to WMD categories. For example, the treaty could create parallel tracks: immediate commitments on non-acquisition and safety, followed by time-bound milestones for chemical and biological declarations, and then nuclear dismantlement steps once political conditions and assurance mechanisms meet specified thresholds. The key is to avoid creating a de facto permanent hierarchy in which the most politically difficult obligations are indefinitely deferred.

Verification and enforcement create a further feasibility hurdle. Given the deep mistrust among them, states will demand intrusive inspections and robust mechanisms to detect clandestine programmes. A credible regime would probably require a combination of enhanced IAEA safeguards, specialized regional inspections, and coordination with the OPCW for chemical disarmament. Nevertheless, such intrusiveness raises sovereignty concerns and can be perceived as discriminatory if obligations in this region appear stricter than those accepted elsewhere. Compliance and enforcement provisions also face the risk of politicization: without agreed procedures for dispute resolution and credible consequences for violations, parties fear that allegations will become instruments of strategic competition rather than pathways to remediation.

Design choices can be clarified through five practical questions that negotiators would need to answer:

1. Scope: NWFZ only or integrated WMDFZ, and how to sequence obligations across WMD categories.
2. Geography: which territories are covered, how to treat transit and deployment, and how obligations relate to other regional treaties.
3. Entry into force: whether obligations are universal from the outset or phased by accession, and what incentives and pressures encourage holdouts to join.
4. Verification: what combination of IAEA safeguards, regional inspections, and OPCW/BWC-related mechanisms is required, and how to ensure symmetry of intrusiveness.
5. Enforcement: What dispute-resolution and consequence mechanisms can function in a politicized environment without becoming tools of strategic accusation?

Answering these questions requires treating treaty design as a bargaining device rather than a purely technical exercise. Flexible entry ramps and managed access models can lower political entry costs, but only if they are paired with credible assurance that the most sensitive obligations will ultimately apply to all parties and that compliance disputes will be handled institutionally.

One practical approach is to separate the establishment of verification institutions from the most politically charged declarations. Parties can begin by agreeing on inspection principles, information protection rules, and managed access procedures; conduct joint training; and establish channels for technical data exchange. These steps build competence and predictability, and may reduce the fear that inspections will be used for espionage or political humiliation. When combined with phased entry-into-force provisions, early verification preparation can make later-stage commitments less disruptive because institutions and personnel already exist to implement them.

5. External Powers: Supporters or Spoilers?

External powers are a double-edged determinant of MENWFZ prospects. Their security commitments, rivalries, and diplomatic influence shape local perceptions of threat. Nevertheless, their formal buy-in – primarily through treaty protocols that provide negative security assurances – are likely to be necessary to make a zone credible.

In successful NWFZ cases, nuclear-armed states ultimately reinforced credibility by signing protocols that provided negative security assurances and by accepting constraints on stationing and deployment consistent with treaty obligations. In the Middle East, comparable assurances would be central, as regional actors worry that disarmament could expose them to coercion by nuclear-armed outsiders and regional rivals.

The United States remains pivotal because of its alliance with Israel and security relationships with several Arab partners. Washington has supported the MENWFZ/WMDFZ objective rhetorically but has generally aligned with Israel's insistence that disarmament follow political normalization. Historical practice has often insulated Israel's nuclear posture from multilateral scrutiny, contributing to perceptions among Arab states that the 1995 bargain is not implemented consistently. The 2015 NPT Review Conference outcome, in which disagreement over the Middle East language blocked consensus, reinforced this perception.

Assurance politics are therefore complex. For a treaty to be credible, the nuclear weapon states would need to sign protocols pledging not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons

against zone parties. Nevertheless, major powers have historically attached reservations to NWFZ protocols and have been sensitive to provisions that might constrain transit or deployment flexibility. In the Middle East, assurances can also become entangled in rivalry. For example, offering a no-use pledge to a state seen as adversarial may be politically difficult domestically, while withholding such assurances undermines the incentives for that state to accept constraints.

Precedents from other zones illustrate the challenges of negotiation. Protocol signatories have often issued interpretive statements limiting the scope of assurances, and disputes over transit rights or the definition of covered territories have delayed ratification. In the African case, for example, provisions on transit and stationing were politically salient, and implementation was gradual. Similar debates in the Middle East would probably centre on naval access, overflight, and basing arrangements, reinforcing the need to anticipate external actors' operational concerns when drafting the language of the protocol.

The UN has served as convener and repository for draft principles, providing procedural continuity when regional politics are volatile. Other major powers can either widen or narrow the feasibility depending on their alignment. Russia and China have incentives to support the process to increase diplomatic leverage and reduce escalation risks, but they also operate within a context of broader geopolitical competition that can undermine coordinated P5 action. European actors have played a supporting role through Track II dialogue and technical work on parameters, keeping channels open during official deadlock and generating incremental proposals for sequencing and verification.

Overall, external actors can expand feasibility by aligning incentives, providing assurances, and supporting verification; they can also undermine feasibility when their rivalries amplify local suspicions. For the zone agenda to move forward, external engagement is most useful when it is coordinated and reduces, rather than exacerbates, the perception that commitments will be applied selectively.

Pathways Forward: Scenarios for 2025–2035

Scenario analysis is used here to translate the preceding diagnosis into forward-looking pathways. The scenarios are stylized – not forecasts – and are intended to clarify how different combinations of conflict dynamics, leadership choices, verification arrangements, and external guarantees can change the feasible set of outcomes. These scenarios seek to establish a range of possible futures to test strategic resilience.

The three scenarios below range from continued deadlock and rising proliferation risk, through incremental risk-reduction and partial legal architecture, to comprehensive agreement under unlikely but identifiable conditions. The weights are illustrative and should be read as conditional on regional and international trajectories rather than as probabilistic predictions.

Table 1. Illustrative scenario weights for 2025–2035

Scenario	Description (shorthand)	Illustrative weight
1	Continued deadlock and proliferation risks	High
2	Incremental steps and partial arrangements	Medium
3	Breakthrough and comprehensive agreement	Low

1. Scenario 1

Continued Deadlock and Proliferation Risks (pessimistic). In this scenario, current negative trends persist: regional rivalry remains acute, diplomatic processes remain formalistic, and the zone agenda becomes increasingly disconnected from security realities. Iran continues to expand its sensitive nuclear capabilities and shorten its breakout timelines, while Israel maintains opacity and emphasizes freedom of action. Arab states remain rhetorically committed to a WMDFZ but focus operationally on immediate deterrence and regime security.

Early indicators include a sustained absence of meaningful participation in negotiations on the part of key actors, rising enrichment levels and stockpiles, repeated crises involving missile exchanges or proxy escalations, and intensified domestic political incentives to signal resolve rather than compromise. External power rivalries that reduce coordinated pressure or incentives for restraint would further entrench this path.

In this environment, proliferation pressures intensify. If Iran approaches a threshold posture, rivals may accelerate hedging strategies, including the pursuit of latent capabilities, expanded civil nuclear infrastructures with dual-use potential, or security arrangements designed to substitute for indigenous deterrence. The risk of cascade dynamics rises as each actor assumes others are moving and seeks to avoid strategic surprise. Crisis management remains underinstitutionalized, increasing the likelihood that conventional escalation, miscalculation, or sabotage could trigger rapid nuclear escalation in a region with limited cooperative mechanisms. In a moment of utter panic fuelled by the Iranian

regime's belief that US-Israeli strikes could end its existence, a retaliatory strike against the Israeli nuclear facility at Dimona is highly likely. On 21 March 2026, Iran, in the midst of a confrontation with the United States and Israel, bombed the city of Dimona. An Iranian ballistic missile struck a residential neighbourhood in this southern Israeli city, causing heavy damage. The projectile was not intercepted by air defence systems. However, strategic nuclear facilities were not hit, and no abnormal levels of radiation were detected. In this context, Israel's nuclear response could completely destroy the city of Tehran and Iranian nuclear facilities. The impact of such strikes would dramatically affect the entire region.

The non-proliferation regime also comes under strain. Persistent failure to implement the Middle East resolution continues to generate contestation within NPT review cycles, while regional actors become more sceptical that diplomatic commitments deliver security benefits. The main implication is that, without parallel risk-reduction architecture, the MENWFZ objective recedes and the region's security dilemma becomes more tightly coupled to proliferation incentives.

Strategically, the scenario creates a feedback loop: as the zone agenda stalls, actors invest more in unilateral deterrence and hedging, which, in turn, makes verification and sequencing harder. Humanitarian risk also rises because dense populations and critical infrastructure heighten the catastrophic consequences of escalation.

The policy implication is that even if a comprehensive agreement is infeasible, limiting the likelihood that crises translate into rapid proliferation requires, at a minimum, a modest architecture of crisis communication, safety cooperation, and monitoring arrangements that keep nuclear decision-making out of the fog of regional conflict.

At the global level, this path aggravates NPT legitimacy disputes. The persistent inability to advance the Middle East resolution becomes a recurring flashpoint in review cycles. At the same time, states on opposite sides of regional rivalries use multilateral forums to contest standards and enforcement. As confidence erodes, governments may seek alternative security hedges – expanded sensitive fuel-cycle expertise, new procurement pathways, or external security guarantees – further tightening the link between regional insecurity and proliferation incentives.

2. Scenario 2

Incremental Steps and Partial Arrangements (status quo plus). In this scenario, a comprehensive agreement remains out of reach. However, the region avoids overt

proliferation and develops a limited institutional architecture that preserves the WMDFZ horizon while reducing near-term risks. The key driver is not complete strategic reconciliation but a pragmatic recognition that unmanaged escalation and proliferation pressures threaten all major actors and is costly for all.

This scenario can unfold even without complete reconciliation if key actors perceive that limited cooperation reduces the risk of catastrophic outcomes while preserving deterrence and domestic legitimacy.

Conditions that sustain this scenario include: partial stabilization of regional crises and improved crisis communication; continued, if imperfect, monitoring constraints on the most sensitive nuclear activities; and modest political space for technical engagement under UN auspices or through parallel Track II channels. Israel may continue to avoid formal participation but reduce active opposition to preparatory work; Iran and the Arab states may accept that incremental steps can complement, rather than replace, comprehensive parity.

Policy levers and institutional moves in this scenario can be organized as a compact “risk-reduction stack”:

- ✦ Transparency and incident prevention: hotlines, deconfliction arrangements, and pilot notification measures for high-risk activities (e.g., selected missile tests).
- ✦ Nuclear and radiological safety: joint exercises, emergency-response protocols, and information-sharing on safety standards.
- ✦ Verification preparation: technical working groups on safeguards baselines, managed access models, and sequencing options for later-stage commitments.
- ✦ Drafting partial legal architecture: a framework treaty text with flexible entry-into-force provisions, allowing early ratifiers to commit while leaving explicit accession ramps for holdouts.
- ✦ External assurances: calibrated discussions of negative security assurances and incentives for participation, structured to avoid creating permanent exemptions.

The immediate effect is limited but non-trivial: cooperation becomes possible on issues that are politically less symbolic, and a shared vocabulary develops for verification, compliance management, and dispute resolution. Significantly, partial legal architecture can precede full participation if it creates credible entry ramps rather than hardened blocs. The principal risk is that incrementalism is interpreted as legitimizing exceptional status or substituting for disarmament. Mitigating this risk requires explicit linkage in the

process design: interim measures should be framed as steps that increase the feasibility of comprehensive commitments, not as end states.

A second track in this scenario is subregional, issue-specific cooperation that can later be “scaled” into a broader treaty architecture. Examples include Gulf incident-prevention mechanisms, safety and security cooperation around civil nuclear facilities, and agreed procedures for investigating unusual events. The design principle is portability: subregional arrangements should be drafted so that other states can join later, minimizing bloc formation.

Early indicators for Scenario 2 include sustained attendance and substantive agenda-setting in UN or equivalent forums; the creation of standing technical working groups; modest transparency steps that can survive political shocks; and observable restraint in the most escalatory nuclear activities. The principal failure mode is reversion to declaratory politics in which incremental measures are portrayed as capitulation or as legitimizing exceptional status.

A plausible institutional outcome in Scenario 2 is the creation of a standing regional secretariat (even if small) tasked with maintaining draft treaty text, coordinating technical work, and hosting inspection and managed access training. Over time, such infrastructure can shift debate from abstract principle to operational detail: what facilities are covered, what inspection rights exist, and how disputes are adjudicated. This does not substitute for political settlement, but it changes the cost structure of future bargaining by ensuring that a negotiation-ready architecture exists when opportunities arise.

3. Scenario 3

Breakthrough and Comprehensive Agreement (optimistic). In this scenario, a confluence of political shifts produces sufficient trust and assurance to negotiate a comprehensive MENWFZ/WMDfZ agreement. Preconditions would probably include significant progress on regional normalization and conflict reduction, credible constraints on latent nuclear options, and a diplomatic environment in which external powers align to underwrite assurances and provide verification support.

Such a breakthrough would be likely to be catalysed by significant reductions in perceived existential threats: durable ceasefires or conflict settlements, deeper normalization, and credible limitations on the missile and proxy escalations that currently substitute for nuclear symmetry. External powers would need to converge on an assurance package that is seen as credible by the stakeholders.

In this scenario, Israel may be forced to acknowledge that a verified, enforceable treaty – embedded in broader peace and security guarantees – can substitute for opacity as the foundation of deterrence. Iran would accept durable, intrusive verification and long-term constraints in exchange for security and economic benefits. Meanwhile, key Arab states would accept parallel obligations on chemical and biological capabilities and would support robust verification institutions. Negotiations focus on sequencing that makes reciprocal moves politically survivable, potentially including phased implementation with clearly defined milestones and reciprocal triggers.

A plausible sequencing model would combine reciprocal political milestones (recognition, non-aggression commitments, and constraints on destabilizing capabilities) with reciprocal verification milestones (safeguarding upgrades, declarations, managed access inspections, and eventual dismantlement steps). The goal is to make each concession conditional on verifiable movement by others, reducing the political vulnerability of early movers.

Verification would be demanding. A comprehensive agreement would require declaration and dismantlement procedures for any existing arsenals, the disposal of weapons-usable materials, and sustained monitoring with the authority to investigate suspicious sites. A regional verification body, linked to the IAEA and OPCW, would probably be necessary to provide both regional ownership and technical credibility. Enforcement would need to combine institutional dispute resolution with credible collective responses to violations, including UN Security Council involvement and pre-agreed consequences. While unlikely in the near term, this scenario provides an organizing target: it clarifies which political and institutional thresholds must be crossed and which preparatory steps in Scenario 2 can reduce the distance to comprehensive commitments.

Implementation would be staged. Early phases might emphasize transparency, safeguarding upgrades, and the establishment of inspection authorities; later phases would address dismantlement and long-term monitoring. This staging is not only technical but political: it allows leaders to demonstrate reciprocal compliance before accepting the most irreversible obligations.

A comprehensive agreement would also need to address the most politically sensitive elements of rollback: the accounting for and disposal of weapons-usable materials, the future of enrichment and reprocessing capabilities, and the protection of legitimate peaceful programmes. A phased approach – combining monitored storage, verified dismantlement milestones, and long-term safeguards – can reduce fears of strategic surprise while maintaining the irreversibility needed for credibility.

Early indicators for Scenario 3 would therefore include: credible regional peace and security guarantees; significant progress on acute rivalry dyads; acceptance of intrusive verification in principle; coordinated external engagement linking incentives and assurances to measurable compliance; and domestic political signals that compromise is survivable.

Conclusion

The pursuit of a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (and, more broadly, a WMD-Free Zone) remains a central but unrealized element of regional and global non-proliferation strategies. This paper has argued that repeated diplomatic endorsement has not translated into implementation because four obstacles reinforce one another: Israel's nuclear opacity and conditionality; Iran-centred rivalries and contested sequencing preferences; profound trust deficits grounded in conflict history and compliance concerns; and pronounced capability asymmetries that elevate verification and assurance requirements.

At a minimum, preserving the zone agenda requires avoiding a false choice between maximalist comprehensive demands and disengagement. Comparative experience suggests that flexible legal architecture and verification preparation can be built even when political reconciliation is incomplete. The key is to ensure that interim measures do not become comfortable substitutes for disarmament, but instead operate as sequencing devices that change incentives and build institutional capacity.

Examples from other regions show that success is possible when regional actors converge on threat perceptions, credible leadership emerges, and treaty design lowers entry costs while providing verification credibility. The Middle East currently lacks these enabling conditions. However, the comparative cases also show that institutions can be built gradually and that political shocks and systemic transitions can open windows for rapid progress. The key implication is that MENWFZ feasibility should be treated as an institutional project that can be advanced incrementally, rather than as a single diplomatic event contingent on immediate comprehensive peace.

The scenario analysis clarifies a pragmatic policy posture. The pessimistic trajectory highlights how unmanaged rivalry can tighten the coupling between security dilemmas and proliferation incentives. The incremental scenario shows that partial architecture – if explicitly linked to comprehensive goals – can reduce risks, preserve normative momentum, and create entry ramps for reluctant actors. The breakthrough scenario, though unlikely in the near term, identifies thresholds that can guide preparatory work, including verification models, sequencing options, and assurance packages. Given the

relentless threat from the United States and Israel to launch strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, Scenario 1 appears the most likely. In this dire situation, the Gulf states must use their limited leverage over the United States to avert this scenario, as they will suffer far more than the US, whose territories will remain untouched while those of the Gulf states could become virtually uninhabitable. The risk of confrontation increases the likelihood that Iran will resort to expanding its nuclear capabilities, conceived as the ultimate means of defence and deterrence. A race to develop nuclear weapons could follow in other countries in the region under the pretext of civilian use.

In concrete terms, this implies a disciplined agenda centred on deliverables:

- ✦ Sustain a regularized multilateral process focused on drafting and technical work (definitions, safeguarding baselines, managed access models), not only declaratory statements.
- ✦ Institutionalize risk-reduction CBMs – communication, deconfliction, and safety cooperation – explicitly linked to later-stage WMD restraint obligations.
- ✦ Develop verification-ready infrastructure, including options for a regional verification body linked to the IAEA and OPCW, and protocols for compliance dispute resolution.
- ✦ Draft flexible treaty architecture with phased entry-into-force provisions and credible accession ramps that minimize veto points while preserving the symmetry of ultimate obligations.
- ✦ Coordinate external incentives and assurances so that guarantees and benefits are conditional on measurable compliance, reducing perceptions of selective application.
- ✦ Reform the United Nations system in order to reduce the dominance of the five permanent members and to impose effective means to compel states to respect international law.

These steps preserve the forward-looking scenario by creating observable indicators of movement across pathways: the presence or absence of deliverables, the durability of CBMs under stress, and the extent to which verification practices are institutionalized help distinguish between deadlock, incremental progress, and conditions for breakthrough. They also help maintain geographic and temporal balance by addressing the core survival concerns of Israel, the security concerns of Iran, and those of the key Arab actors simultaneously, rather than treating the zone as a single-issue exercise.

Two cautions follow. First, scenario pathways are conditional on political and strategic choices that cannot be assumed; abrupt conflict escalation can overwhelm incremental institutions. Second, verification design is necessary but not sufficient: without a minimally shared commitment to treat compliance disputes as solvable problems rather than as instruments of rivalry, even robust mechanisms can become politicized. These limits reinforce the paper's central recommendation: verification preparation should be combined with disciplined, confidence-building sequencing to lower the domestic and strategic costs of participation.

Taken together, these steps do not resolve the region's political conflicts. They do, however, preserve the MENWFZ horizon as a structured set of institutional options, reduce the likelihood that crises will translate into rapid proliferation, and create a platform that can be activated if and when political conditions shift. The central contribution of this paper is to connect comparative lessons and scenario-based pathways to a concrete sequencing logic: the zone remains a long-term opportunity, but progress depends on disciplined preparation and incremental risk reduction that keeps comprehensive commitments politically imaginable.

It is clear that the application of international law is complex, as there is neither a world government nor a global police force. Its application relies on diplomatic, economic, and legal mechanisms, primarily managed by the United Nations and specific treaties. Reforming the United Nations could be a major step towards establishing a real international legitimacy that could definitively ban the production and use of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction.

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