

The Prospect of Regional Peace in the Middle East: Managing Nuclear Rivalry between Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East is witnessing the emergence of a nuclear triangle involving Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran's advancing nuclear programme, Israel's policy of opacity and Saudi Arabia's nuclear hedging create a security dilemma that threatens regional stability. While the 2015 JCPOA temporarily constrained Iran, its collapse exposed the limits of exclusionary agreement. Past literature has largely focused on deterrence, proliferation, and the risk of war. This study examines an under-explored dimension, how nuclear rivalry can be managed to preserve regional peace. Grounded in Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism, Neorealism explains the structural drivers of proliferation, while Neoliberal Institutionalism shows how institutions can reduce uncertainty and enable cooperation. This study employs qualitative case study design and documentary analysis of UN, IAEA and policy documents. The findings suggest that 'managed rivalry' is feasible through a '3Ps Framework': Prevent escalation with crisis hotlines; Proceduralize trust via a Regional IAEA Forum; and pursue Phased Disarmament toward a Middle East Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone. The study concludes that regional peace is possible through rules, transparency and inclusive institutions, not immediate disarmament. The study contributes to peace and conflict literature by shifting focus from deterrence to the management of nuclear rivalry.

Keywords: Regional Peace; Security; Nuclear; Rivalry; Middle East Security

1. Introduction

The Middle East has remained one of the most volatile regions in the 21st century, shaped by interstate rivalries, sectarian divisions and external power interventions. Central to this instability is the emerging nuclear competition involving Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia — a triangle often described as a 'nascent nuclear rivalry'. Israel maintains an undeclared nuclear arsenal, Iran has advanced its uranium enrichment capabilities beyond JCPOA limits, and Saudi Arabia has signalled intent to pursue a full nuclear fuel cycle if regional security deteriorates. This dynamic creates a classic security dilemma where each state's pursuit of deterrence is perceived as a threat by the others, increasing the risk of proliferation and miscalculation.

Despite repeated diplomatic efforts, there is currently no regional framework for nuclear confidence-building, transparency, or crisis management in the Middle East. The absence of a Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone, the collapse of the JCPOA and the normalisation agreements that excluded Iran have deepened mistrust. Consequently, the region faces three interrelated problems: (1) the potential for a nuclear arms race if Iran weaponises and Saudi Arabia follows; (2) the risk of preventive strikes or proxy escalation due to lack of communication channels; and (3) the absence of indigenous mechanisms to manage rivalry without reliance on US or external guarantees. Without addressing this nuclear dimension, prospects for durable regional peace will remain elusive. In the light of this, the objective of this study is to examine pathways for managing nuclear rivalry in the Middle East. The guiding research question is: How can nuclear rivalry among Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia be managed to preserve regional peace in the Middle East? The study argues that managing the nuclear triangle is a necessary precondition for any meaningful peace process in the region.

The study contributes to knowledge by integrating Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism to explain and address nuclear rivalry in the Middle East. From the Neorealist perspective, the study argues that the nuclear competition is a structural outcome of anarchy and self-help. In the absence of a central authority, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia are compelled to pursue capabilities that maximise survival and relative power, making rivalry predictable rather than exceptional. This lens explains why bilateral grievances and ideological differences alone cannot account for the persistence of the nuclear dilemma. From a Neoliberal Institutionalism perspective, the study contends that cooperation is still possible even under anarchy. Institutions can reduce uncertainty, provide monitoring and verification, and create iterated interactions that build trust over time.

The Iran-Israel-Saudi nuclear triangle is geographically located in the Middle East, yet its implications are directly relevant to Africa. A nuclear conflict in the Middle East would trigger global oil shocks, refugee flows and great power competition with direct implications for African stability and energy security. African security is not isolated from Middle Eastern nuclear dynamics. Understanding how to manage this rivalry is therefore not just a Middle Eastern issue, but a Global South issue with direct consequences for African stability, development and diplomacy.

2. Literature Review

Nuclear rivalry is defined as a sustained competitive relationship in which two or more states seek nuclear capabilities to offset each other's strategic advantage (Bracken, 1983). Unlike a one-time proliferation event, rivalry is dynamic and iterative. Regional peace, in this context, does not require disarmament. It requires the absence of war and the presence of mechanisms to manage disputes (Bull, 1977; Waltz, 1979). Two schools dominate the debate. The 'proliferation optimists', led by Waltz (2012), argue that nuclear weapons produce stability because the cost of war is too high. The 'proliferation pessimists', led by Sagan (1996), argue that organisational biases, poor command and control, and ethnic conflict make nuclear weapons in the Middle East uniquely dangerous. Both miss the middle ground: that rivalry can be institutionalised.

Iran's nuclear programme traces back to the 1950s–1979 period under the Shah, with United States and German assistance for civilian reactors (Brown & Glaser, 2016). Iran framed its programme as a right under NPT Article IV, for peaceful purposes such as energy generation, scientific development, and medical research. However, enrichment to 60% and installation of advanced centrifuges signal hedging (IAEA, 2023). Secret enrichment facilities at Natanz and Arak were revealed, triggering IAEA inspections and EU-3 negotiations. In 2015 the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed, under which Iran agreed to limit enrichment to 3.67%, reduce centrifuges, and accept inspections in exchange for sanctions relief. After the US withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018, Iran gradually exceeded enrichment limits. IAEA reports that Iran enriched uranium up to 60% at Fordow, well above civilian needs but below the 90% weapons-grade threshold (Bowen & Moran, 2014; IAEA, 2023).

From Iran's perspective, its nuclear capability is linked to national sovereignty, regime survival, and deterrence against foreign intervention (Bahgat, 2006). Iranian leaders frequently cite threats from Israel and the United States as justification for strengthening national defence capabilities. The experience of countries such as Iraq and Libya have reinforced Iran's belief that military weakness invites foreign intervention (Zarif, 2007). Some scholars argue that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, a stable deterrence relationship could emerge between Iran and Israel (Waltz, 2012). According to this perspective, mutual vulnerability would discourage direct warfare and compel both sides to exercise restraint. However, opponents fear that Iranian nuclearization could trigger a regional arms race involving Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt (Bahgat, 2006).

Iran has been subjected to severe economic sanctions for decades. Waltz (2012) argues that economic sanctions do not automatically prevent states from pursuing nuclear weapons, pointing to North Korea's successful development despite repeated sanctions and UN Security Council resolutions. If Tehran concludes that nuclear weapons are essential for its national security, additional sanctions are unlikely to deter it. Indeed, intensifying sanctions alongside current US-Israel military pressure may heighten Iran's sense of insecurity, thereby strengthening its incentive to pursue nuclear weapons as the ultimate form of deterrence.

Israel is widely believed to possess nuclear weapons, although it neither confirms nor denies this capability — a strategy known as 'nuclear ambiguity' (Kroenig, 2012). Israel developed its nuclear capability primarily as a survival mechanism in response to existential threats from neighbouring Arab states (Aronson, 1997). Its nuclear arsenal is believed to serve as the ultimate deterrent against attacks aimed at destroying the Israeli state (Bowen & Moran, 2014). Israel views Iran's nuclear ambitions as a major threat to its national security. Consequently, Israel has consistently opposed Iran's nuclear programme through diplomatic pressure, cyber operations, intelligence activities, and threats of or even military action (Kroenig, 2012). Israeli policymakers fear that a nuclear-armed Iran would undermine Israel's strategic superiority and embolden anti-Israeli militant groups in the region (Bowen & Moran, 2014). Despite its nuclear capability, Israel has avoided openly declaring itself a nuclear state, enabling it to maintain deterrence while reducing international pressure for disarmament. Critics, however, argue that the international community applies a double standard by tolerating Israel's nuclear capability while strongly opposing Iran's nuclear programme (Zarif, 2007). Israel maintains a policy of 'amimut' or opacity, estimated to possess 80–90 warheads (SIPRI, 2024). Israel views Iranian nuclearization as crossing a 'red line' and has conducted cyber and kinetic operations to delay it. Israel's non-membership in NPT is widely identified as the main barrier to establishing a Middle East NWFZ (Muller, 2013).

The concept of 'nuclear hedging' provides a useful lens for understanding Saudi Arabia's current posture. According to Jones (2012), hedging states develop the technical infrastructure and knowledge to produce nuclear weapons without making a political decision to weaponise. This allows them to maintain ambiguity, comply with NPT obligations and retain the option to sprint if the security environment deteriorates. Saudi Arabia's investments in uranium exploration, yellowcake processing and civilian reactor bids from China, South Korea and Russia fit this pattern (Lippman, 2018).

Unlike Iran, which has crossed several technical thresholds, and Israel, which has crossed the weaponization threshold, Saudi Arabia remains in a pre-decision phase. Riyadh has no nuclear weapons but has the infrastructure and political will to hedge. Under Vision 2030, it plans 16 reactors by 2040 (Arab News, 2018). Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's 2018 statement — 'we will follow suit as soon as possible' — is the clearest articulation of hedging (CBS News, 2018). The 2023 diplomatic deal with Iran shows Saudi preference for managed competition over open confrontation.

The UN has passed annual resolutions on a Middle East NWFZ since 1974. The 1995 NPT Review Conference made it a formal commitment. However, three obstacles persist: Israel's non-participation, lack of verification, and linkage to the Arab-Israel conflict (UNODA, 2018). Recent scholarship suggests a 'step-by-step' approach: start with regional dialogue, then safeguards, then disarmament. Confidence-building measures (CBMs) have worked in other nuclearized regions. The US-Soviet hotline after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the India-Pakistan Agreement on Prior Notification of Missile Tests in 2005, and the ASEAN Regional Forum all show that adversaries can institutionalise restraint. The Middle East lacks any equivalent. The JCPOA was a CBM but collapsed (Babar et al., 2021). External powers have historically managed Middle Eastern security. During the Cold War, US and Soviet competition structured regional alliances. In the post-2003 era, US extended deterrence to Gulf allies has been the primary constraint on proliferation. The 2015 JCPOA was itself a product of P5+1 diplomacy. However, the 2018 US withdrawal and the 2021 AUKUS deal signalled a shift (Government of Australia, Government of United Kingdom, & Government of United States, 2021). China's brokerage of the 2023 Saudi-Iran normalisation agreement marks the first major non-western mediation in the region (Xinhua, 2024; Reuters, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023).

Literature on the Middle East highlights the 'opacity vs. transparency' dilemma. Israel's policy denies, deters and prevents formal arms control (Kroenig, 2018). Iranian scholars frame enrichment as a right under the NPT and a deterrent against regime change (ElBaradei, 2011). Saudi literature emphasises extended deterrence and the need for security assurances (Byman & Green, 2020). A gap remains: few studies synthesize these three actors into one triangle framework. Existing literature treats Iran-Israel and Saudi-Iran separately. This study fills the gap by analysing the triangle as a single system and proposing a phased institutional pathway that combines Neorealist insights on power with Neoliberal insights on cooperation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism. Neorealism, as articulated by Waltz (1979), posits that in an anarchic system, states seek to survive by balancing against threats. Saudi Arabia balances against Iran through US alliance and civilian nuclear development. Israel balances through its arsenal. Iran balances through enrichment. Nuclear weapons become the ultimate self-help tool because they provide deterrence at relatively low cost (Waltz, 2012). Neorealism predicts perpetual competition: Iran will pursue nuclear latency to balance against Israel and the US, Israel will maintain opacity to preserve its deterrent, and Saudi Arabia will hedge to avoid being left behind (Mearsheimer, 2014). In multipolar systems, balancing is more complex and uncertainty is higher, which increases the risk of miscalculation and war. Thus, structure creates strong incentives for proliferation.

To explain cooperation, Neoliberal Institutionalism as advanced by Keohane (1984) argues that institutions can mitigate anarchy by reducing uncertainty, providing information, and extending the shadow of the future. Even without trust, states may cooperate if institutions make defection costly and reciprocity valuable. The IAEA safeguards system and regional Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zones demonstrate how technical institutions can regulate nuclear behaviour without requiring disarmament first (UNODA, 2018). The failure of the JCPOA illustrates the limits of exclusion: when key regional actors are not included, institutions lack legitimacy and are vulnerable to political shift (Byman & Green, 2020). Therefore, durable cooperation in the Middle East requires inclusive institutions that involve all three rivals.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine the prospect of regional peace through managing nuclear rivalry in the Middle East. A case study approach is appropriate because the Iran-Israel-Saudi nuclear triangle represents a bounded, contemporary phenomenon within a real-world context where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). The objective is not to test hypotheses but to develop an in-depth, context-rich explanation of how rivalry can be managed. Data for this study are derived primarily from documentary sources, including IAEA Board of Governors Reports and Safeguards Agreements, UN Security Council Resolutions, official statements from Iranian, Israeli and Saudi Foreign Ministries, and peer-reviewed articles and books on nuclear proliferation, Middle East security and institutions. The use of documentary analysis is justified because nuclear policy is largely conducted through official statements and treaties rather than through field access. All documents used are in the public domain and were accessed through official websites, university libraries and reputable databases.

The limitation of this method is that it relies on publicly available documents and cannot access classified decision-making within the three states. However, for the purpose of policy analysis, documentary analysis provides sufficient evidence to assess state behaviours and institutional possibilities (Bowen, 2009). Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. First, all documents were read to achieve familiarity. Second, initial codes were generated around four themes: drivers of rivalry, role of external actors, confidence-building measures, and NWFZ feasibility. Third, codes were collated into themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the theoretical framework of Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism. Fifth, themes were defined and named. Sixth, the report was produced.

The credibility of this study was addressed through data and theory triangulations (Creswell, 2007). For data triangulation, information from IAEA reports, official government statements, multilateral agreements, UN documents and academic literature were compared — no claim was based on a single source. For theory triangulation, both Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism were used to interpret state behaviours, reducing bias from a single theoretical lens.

This study analyses a corpus of documents to examine discourse and policy positions on nuclear rivalry and regional peace in the Middle East. Documents were retrieved from Google Scholar and ProQuest for peer-reviewed academic literature, and from the UN Digital Library, IAEA Public Database and SIPRI for official reports and government archives. Documents were included if they: (1) directly addressed nuclear capabilities, deterrence, or non-proliferation in relation to Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia; (2) discussed regional security, conflict management, or peace prospects in the Middle East; and (3) were published in English with full-text availability. Documents exclusively on non-nuclear issues without reference to the three states were excluded.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study on the prospect of regional peace in the Middle East through the management of nuclear rivalry between Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The data are analysed to explain: the structure of triangle rivalry and security dilemma; the failure of exclusionary agreements and the need for inclusion; confidence-building measures as tools of managed rivalry; and the feasibility of a phased nuclear-weapons-free zone and path dependency. The discussion interprets these findings through the lenses of Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism to assess how structural pressures and institutional mechanisms can shape pathways toward regional stability and nuclear restraint.

5.1 The Structure of Triangle Rivalry and Security Dilemmas

The findings confirm that the Iran-Israel-Saudi dynamic fits a classic security dilemma intensified by nuclear ambiguity. Iran views its nuclear programme as deterrence against US regime-change policy and Israeli strikes (Sagan & Waltz, 2013). Israel views any Iranian enrichment as an existential threat, leading to a policy of 'between wars' operations and threats of unilateral action. Saudi Arabia, observing both, engages in nuclear hedging to avoid strategic dependence on US extended deterrence (Byman & Green, 2020). From the Neorealist perspective, each of these behaviours is rational. In anarchy, states cannot be certain of others' intentions and must insure against worst-case outcomes. However, the triangular structure creates unique instability. Unlike Cold War bipolarity, there is no clear dyadic deterrence; each state must deter two others simultaneously, which increases the chance of misperception. The absence of diplomatic relations between Iran and Israel, and limited ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, means there are no direct channels to clarify intentions during crises. This finding supports Waltz's claims that multipolar nuclear systems are more accident-prone.

5.2 The Failure of Exclusionary Agreements and the Need for Inclusion

The JCPOA experience (2015–2018) provides key evidence. The agreement successfully constrained Iran's uranium stockpile and centrifuges, verified by 13 consecutive IAEA reports (IAEA, 2018). Yet it failed politically because it excluded regional stakeholders. Saudi Arabia and Israel were not at the negotiating table and thus viewed the deal as legitimising Iran's threshold status. When the US withdrew in 2018, Iran responded by exceeding JCPOA limits, and Saudi Arabia accelerated talks with China and South Korea on reactors. This validates Neoliberal Institutionalism logic: agreements that lack inclusivity and transparency lack durability. Institutions only reduce uncertainty when all affected parties perceive them as legitimate. The 2023 China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal shows the alternative: when regional powers are included in diplomacy, even without nuclear issues on the table, tension decreases and space for CBMs opens. The implication is that any future nuclear agreement must be regional, not just P5+1 and Iran, otherwise it cannot produce stable outcomes in the Middle East (UNODA, 2018).

5.3 Confidence-Building Measures as Tools of Managed Rivalry

Evidence from other regions suggests CBMs can stabilize rivalry even without disarmament. The India-Pakistan DGMO hotline has been used 200 times since 1999 to de-escalate border incidents (Economic Times, 2018). The US-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement (1972) prevented naval escalation, and the Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres established during the Cold War provided structured communication that reduced the risk of accidental war (US Department of State, 1972). In the Middle East, the only existing CBM is the de-confliction channel between Israel and Russia over Syria. The findings suggest three CBMs are urgently needed for the nuclear triangle: (1) a trilateral crisis hotline managed by the UN or IAEA to prevent miscalculation during drone-missile incidents; (2) prior notification of ballistic missile tests to reduce false alarms; and (3) IAEA regional safeguards workshops to build technical trust. These measures do not touch core sovereignty or deterrent capabilities, but they do reduce uncertainty. By institutionalising communication, they make deliberate escalation less likely and create a foundation for deeper cooperation later (UNODA, 2018).

5.4 Feasibility of a Phased Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone and Path Dependency

An immediate, comprehensive Middle East NWFZ is not politically feasible under the current conditions — given Israel's policy of nuclear opacity, Iranian enrichment, and Saudi hedging. However, comparative cases show that phased approaches are possible. The Treaty of Pelindaba in Africa succeeded only after South Africa voluntarily dismantled its nuclear weapons. The Southeast Asia NWFZ began with ASEAN states and expanded later (UNODA, 2018). For the Middle East, a phased roadmap is more realistic. Phase 1 would involve Gulf States and Iran committing to a moratorium on enrichment above 5% and full implementation of the IAEA Additional Protocol (IAEA, 2003). Phase 2 would see Israel join as a 'threshold' state with commitments on non-testing and non-transfer, verified through regional inspections of civilian facilities. Phase 3 would culminate in a full treaty with negative security assurances from the P5.

The key variable enabling this path dependency is external security assurance. Saudi Arabia's hedging is driven by uncertainty about US extended deterrence. Iran's enrichment is driven by fear of attack. Israel's opacity is driven by existential threat perception (Kroenig, 2018). Without credible guarantees from the US and China, none will take the first step. With them, the cost of restraint decreases and the benefit of joining increases. This supports the synthesis of Neorealism and Neoliberalism: structure creates the problem, but institutions manage it (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study finds that the prospect of regional security in the Middle East hinges not on the immediate elimination of nuclear capabilities, but on the management of rivalry among Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The analysis confirms a Neorealist security dilemma: in an anarchic system with no regional security architecture, each state pursues nuclear latency or opacity as rational insurance against existential threats. However, the triangular structure creates unique instability, as the absence of direct communication channels increases the risk of miscalculation and accidental escalation. At the same time, evidence from the JCPOA and from comparative cases shows that Neoliberal Institutionalism offers a viable pathway. Exclusionary agreements fail, but inclusive institutions that provide transparency, communication and phased commitments can reduce uncertainty and make cooperation rational even among adversaries. The central insight is that peace must be pursued through 'managed rivalry' — embedding nuclear competition within rules that raise the cost of war and the benefits of restraint.

To manage nuclear rivalry and build regional peace, this study recommends a '3Ps Framework'. First, Prevent: immediate crisis management measures including a trilateral crisis hotline, prior notification of missile tests, and a maritime de-escalation protocol. Second, Proceduralize: medium-term institutional trust-building such as a Regional IAEA Safeguards Forum and negative security assurances from the P5 to address underlying insecurity. Third, Phased Disarmament: a step-by-step roadmap to a Middle East Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone that begins with enrichment limits and IAEA oversight in the Gulf, moves to Israeli commitments on testing and transfer, and culminates in a full treaty with regional verification. These measures, pursued in parallel with political de-escalation, can embed competition in rules and transparency, making escalation costly and cooperation rational.

Limitations

This study is limited by the classified nature of nuclear programmes in Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, which restricts access to primary decision-making data and necessitates reliance on secondary sources, official statements and IAEA reports that may reflect state narratives. The inability to conduct elite interviews further limits insight into backchannel diplomacy and true strategic intentions. The findings are also context-specific to the Middle East security complex and may not be directly transferable to other nuclear rivalries without modification.

Declaration

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