



By: **Mohamed ElBaradei**

# A just peace and an inclusive security architecture are the best defenses against nuclear proliferation



In 1966, the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China not only were the only countries that possessed nuclear weapons; they also had enough wisdom to recognize the dangers posed by nuclear proliferation.

Despite their many and deep political differences, they arrived at a consensus to halt the further dissemination of “nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.”

Under the resulting 1970 Nuclear Nonproliferation **Treaty** (NPT), non-nuclear states agreed not to pursue nuclear weapons and to accept International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards on all their nuclear activities.

In return, the five nuclear-weapon states committed to negotiate “in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race ... and to nuclear disarmament.”

With 191 signatories, the NPT is the most widely adopted international agreement after the United Nations Charter. The only countries not to adhere to it were India, Pakistan, and Israel. Each went on to develop nuclear weapons. North Korea, which initially joined the treaty, later withdrew to build its own nuclear arsenal.

The five original nuclear-weapon states did not keep their end of the bargain regarding disarmament. On the contrary, they have been using AI and other technologies to modernize their arsenals.

The world's nuclear warheads **total** more than 12,000 and have become the preeminent sign of a country's power and prestige.

## A badge of invincibility

Just listen to Russia's leaders. Throughout their war in Ukraine, they have brandished their nuclear arsenal as a badge of invincibility.

They know that the risk of a nuclear holocaust

will deter all other powers from challenging them directly.

Similarly, because North Korea has armed itself with nuclear weapons, the US has taken a softer approach in dealing with it, relying on diplomacy and economic incentives.

By contrast, in Libya, Muammar al-Qaddafi agreed to abandon his nascent nuclear program and ended up dead, following a NATO aerial campaign against his regime.

## Nuclear-weapons states have no intention of fully disarming

Among the lessons that have emerged in recent decades are that nuclear-weapons states have no intention of fully disarming.

Worse, there is now only one nuclear arms-control **treaty** between Russia and the US (New START), and it is due to expire next February.

The most powerful deterrent for any state is possession of nuclear weapons or membership in an alliance that offers a nuclear umbrella (like NATO).

Around 30 states either have nuclear weapons or enjoy such protection. The rest of the world, meanwhile, must hope that the nuclear powers remain on their best behavior.

## A lack of comprehensive security arrangements

The situation is especially fraught in the Middle East, a region **plagued** by wars, violence, instability, and a lack of comprehensive security arrangements.

Add the fact that Israel is the only state in the region known to have nuclear weapons and you have the makings for chronic insecurity.

The wild card, of course, has been Iran, a country that has endured violence and tumult

since the 1950s, when a US- and UK-organized coup ousted the country's first democratically elected government.

In the 1980s, Iraq invaded Iran with the support of Western powers and neighboring countries determined to crush its fledgling Islamist regime.

Following eight years of brutal violence, with Iraq deploying chemical weapons extensively, the Islamic Republic came to the predictable conclusion that it needs to master nuclear-weapons technology.

According to the IAEA, US, and other intelligence agencies, however, that program essentially ended in 2003.

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For the last 20 years, the challenge has been to get Iran to come clean about its past undeclared activities. After a period of sanctions, US President Barack Obama decided to pursue diplomacy. The idea was to use economic incentives and various technical measures to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and pressure it to reveal its past undeclared nuclear activities.

These were the main features of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, Russia, France, the UK, and the US), plus Germany and the European Union, signed in 2015.

This framework was functioning as intended, with full compliance by Iran, until President Donald Trump abruptly withdrew the US from the agreement in 2018.

Arguing that the JCPOA was only a stopgap measure, he insisted on a deal that would control not only Iran's nuclear program but also its "disruptive" activities in the Middle East (such as its support for Hamas, Hezbollah,

and the Houthis in Yemen).

As a result, Iran refused to implement some of the JCPOA's key inspection measures and started to enrich uranium to a level approaching weapons-grade.

During Joe Biden's term as president, the US tried unsuccessfully to revive the JCPOA. When Trump returned to the White House this year, he demanded that Iran "surrender" its right to enrichment altogether.

Following a few rounds of desultory talks between the US and Iran, Israel and the US, lacking credible evidence of a nuclear-weapons program, launched their illegal attack against Iranian nuclear and military targets.

The ostensible aim was to destroy all of Iran's nuclear fuel-cycle facilities, though there have also been murmurings about triggering regime change in Iran – a stark reminder of the rationale for the similarly illegal military interventions in Iraq and Libya.

## Resolving the Iran nuclear question

The root cause of nuclear proliferation is a state's sense of insecurity or aspiration to increase its power and influence.

Iran's focus on nuclear capability stems from a yearning to prevent foreign interference, a sensitivity to the region's security imbalance, and a desire to be recognized as a regional power.



*The only solution to Middle East nuclear proliferation is to engage in dialogue based on mutual respect, meaningful security assurances – Mohamed ElBaradei*

Far from curtailing its nuclear ambitions, the use of force and humiliation is just as likely to strengthen its resolve. We saw this in Iraq after Israel destroyed its research reactor in 1981.

The only solution to Middle East nuclear proliferation is to engage in dialogue based on mutual respect, meaningful security assurances (which can be achieved through stringent technical and inspection protocols), and economic incentives (be it the threat of sanctions or a promise to lift them).

In other words, resolving the Iran nuclear question ultimately will require a return to a JCPOA-like agreement – albeit one of unlimited duration, perhaps supplemented with an agreement on the scope of Iran's missile program.

Addressing the longstanding challenges to peace and security across the Middle East ultimately will also require a comprehensive agreement that deals with the Palestinian question, Israel's nuclear weapons, and economic and social development needs.

A just peace and an inclusive security architecture are the best defenses against nuclear proliferation. Since knowledge cannot be "obliterated," bombing your way to a deal will invariably prove counterproductive, threatening to bring our world one step closer to nuclear Armageddon.

Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General Emeritus of the International Atomic Energy Agency and a former vice president of Egypt, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, jointly with the IAEA.