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Assessing the Efficacy of Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Aftermath of Israel–Iran War (2025)

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Abstract

The paper critically evaluates the future of a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (MENWFZ) in the wake of a war between Israel and Iran in 2025. It puts the discussion into the context broader regional disarmament initiatives dating back to 1974, the logic of deterrence, and the consequences of asymmetric warfare on non-proliferation. The article operationalises existing literature through a qualitative, analytical approach based on secondary sources to establish the feasibility of the zone. The research argues that the strategic efficacy of a MENWFZ has never been more evident, but with the challenges exposed by the war, its practicability is lower than ever. A combination of factors, such as opaque Israeli nuclear capabilities, Iran's re-adjusted bargaining position, more mistrust and torn alignments among the great powers collectively reduce the margins of consensus. Drawing upon historical precedents, as well as post-war developments, the paper finds that a MENWFZ remains less a practical roadmap than a normative reference point, whose viability requires a fundamental adjustment in regional security logic.

Key Words: Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (MENWFZ), Nuclear Non-Proliferation, Israel–Iran Conflict, Regional Security Dynamics, Arms Control.

Introduction

The Middle East has traditionally held a paradoxical role in global nuclear politics: a region characterised by extreme security volatility, constant inter-state tensions, and intermittent wars, yet lacking the open deployment of nuclear arms apart from the undeclared weapons of Israel. Ever since the joint Egyptian-Iranian proposal at the United Nations in 1974, the idea of a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (MENWFZ) has remained a recurring theme of regional disarmament rhetoric (Hassid, 2024).

It has been ratified by the UN General Assembly in a series of resolutions, and anchored in the 1995 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review and

Extension Conference which sought to link the indefinite extension of the NPT with practical measures towards the creation of a nuclear and WMD-free zone (UNGA, 2023). Over the decades, this proposal presented a feasible course of action to avoid nuclear proliferation, develop regional trust, and assimilate the Middle East into the wider scheme of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZ) created in the other regions of the world.

The eruption of the Israel-Iran war in 2025 has not only increased strategic relevance of a MENWFZ, but has completely changed the parameters of its viability. In contrast to the previous analyses, which mostly evaluated the zone against stable inter-state relationships and abstract proliferation risks, this paper places the MENWFZ in proximity to the urgent and concrete impacts of active war. The war demonstrated the weakness of the regional security systems, the actual risk of a nuclear cascade, whether deliberate or accidental, and how attempting to hit nuclear sites can adjust the nuclear deterrence equation in a remarkably short time. In this regard, a binding MENWFZ is less of a normative objective, but perhaps, a necessary mechanism needed to mitigate nuclear hazards, entrench verification, and reinstate some predictability on regional security. However, this very conflict has also stiffened security positions, rooted suspicion, and prompted nuclear hedging by states seeking to preserve strategic options, generating an operational environment radically different from that considered in earlier literature.

In this context, the guiding research question of the study is: To what extent would a MENWFZ be strategically effective in improving regional security and reducing nuclear risks after the 2025 Israel-Iran war, given the interplay between regional security dilemmas, deterrence dynamics, and the strategic interests of external powers?

This paper argues that the 2025 Israel-Iran war has paradoxically increased strategic efficacy and urgency of a MENWFZ. However, it is less viable today than it was at most previous junctures. It was more feasible in the previous decades when the technological obstacles to nuclear weaponisation were greater, there was at least some consensus between great-power interests, and the regional diplomatic mechanisms were stronger. However, the idea did not come to fruition because of structural political differences, especially on sequencing between disarmament and conflict resolution. The war has broken the trust in the region, militarised nuclear facilities, intensified hedging behaviour among regional powers, and undermined institution and diplomatic conditions required to create a plausible zone in the modern age.

The analysis is carried out in four sections. First, it traces the chronological development of the MENWFZ proposal, specifying the phases of relative feasibility, and the main reasons why it never managed to culminate. Second, it looks into the strategic environment after 2025, evaluating the reason why the substantive efficacy of the zone has been higher than ever. Third, it questions the political and institutional hindrances that make the zone inaccessible at the current stage. Lastly, it speculates upon the larger Implications for the regional security governance and the non-proliferation regime, arguing that without a structural transformation in the regional relations, the MENWFZ will continue to remain a politically distant but strategically viable dream.

This paper is a qualitative and analytical research addressing the transformed security paradigm caused by the war between Israel and Iran in 2025. Drawing out of the traditional analyses, it is not replicative of the previous discussions, but rather reinterprets secondary sources, such as academic works, policy articles, and official pronouncements, through the prism of an ongoing regional warfare. By so doing, it creates a situation-specific framework, which mediates theoretical insight and the transformative influence Middle Eastern nuclear politics, to provide an original contribution to the literature on regional disarmament and security governance.

Literature Review

Decades of competing security interests, structural asymmetries, and the gradual erosion of arms control norms have shaped the vision of a MENWFZ. According to the existing scholarship, nuclear secrecy in Tel Aviv, disputed nuclear weapons in Tehran, and the transforming geopolitical environment have been the fundamental obstacles to development.

Tanvir, Abbas, and Ishaque (2021) place the issue within the structural imbalance of the non-proliferation regime: Iran, which is a signatory to the NPT and has already proven its adherence to the regime through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is subjected to the intensive scrutiny, whereas Israel, which possesses the undeclared arsenal, has never been subject to verification (Tanvir et al., 2021). To them, excluding Israel of any disarmament requirement weakens not just the MENWFZ proposal but also the broader credibility of the global non-proliferation norms.

In accordance with the asymmetry argument, Mason (2025) examines the feasibility of the MENWFZ in the context of heightened instability following the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. His analysis presents a three-sided dilemma, encompassing nuclear non-disclosure of Israel, Iranian nuclear enrichment capability and the probability of Saudi Arabia developing latent nuclear ambitions, insisting that all three must be settled simultaneously (Mason, 2025). Mason suggests an incremental strategy that would unify retroactive security guarantees, the resumption of the US-Iran relations, and the US withdrawal of the nuclear facilities in Turkey (Mason, 2025). Although he acknowledges MENWFZ as an objective, though certainly not an immediate one, he argues that its realisation is conditioned by institutionalised deterrence dogma, great power competition and lack of regional confidence.

In contrast to the emphasis on political sequencing by Mason, Mian (2021) proposes a normative-institutional glide-path approach. He combines the obligations of the NPT, Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (ANWFZT) with strict, time-bound restrictions on fuel-cycle activities, arguing for a nuclear energy-free zone that would improve verification and minimise the risk of proliferation (Mian, 2021). His model, inspired by the JCPOA and cooperative verification regimes, such as the Brazil-Argentina Agency of Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC), presumes that suspicion progressively be replaced by transparency and confirmable restraints. However, he acknowledges that it can only be achieved by political goodwill, which is elusive.

The complexity of the generating such will is highlighted by Hassid (2024), who attributes the failure of NWFZ diplomacy to the combination of factors, including security dilemmas and norm diffusion theory. Using the example of Egypt, Iran, and Israel, he demonstrates that the obstacle to normative convergence includes divergence in threat perceptions, the impact of great power rivalry, and unresolved regional disputes. Incremental policies, such as CTBT ratification, economic interdependency and cooperative security settlements, probable entry points but they cannot replace a more profound political reconciliation (Hassid, 2024).

A similar warning can be noticed in the international regime theory analysis by Babashahi and Dehshiri (2024), which frames MENWFZ stalemate as an outcome of Israeli nuclear opacity, degradation of trust structures, and unresolved interregional tensions (Babashahi & Dehshiri, 2024). They recommend gradual confidence-building that starts beyond the WMD sphere, evolving into expanded partnerships to provide a base upon which disarmament negotiations can eventually occur. There is a realistic pragmatism in their sequencing, which maximalist disarmament proposals lack, yet they, too, recognise the difficulty of sustaining momentum in the absence of mutual security guarantees.

Taken together, the literature reveals three dominant threads: the structural asymmetry created by Israel's undeclared arsenal, the persistence of mutual distrust amplified by regional and global rivalries, and the tension between normative aspirations and political feasibility.

Literature Gap

The literature on analysis of the MENWFZ overflows with pre-existing geopolitical backgrounds, with most of the analysis not taking into account the transformative effects of the 2025 war between Israel and Iran. The war has radically changed the regional security landscape, militarising strategic locations, heightening hedge policies, and constricting diplomatic spaces. Yet, its consequences for the operationalisation of the zone have not been analysed methodically. This paper bridges that divide by evaluating how the post-war security environment increases the strategic utility of MENWFZ while simultaneously making it less viable in the short term, thereby providing a context-specific framework of its gradual development within the new constraints.

Theoretical Framework

Structural realism offers the most fitting lens through which to examine the idea of a MENWFZ. At its foundation, the theory maintains that the global system operates in an anarchic environment where no supreme power exists to regulate conduct or safeguard states (Kumari, 2023). In such a setting, survival becomes the main objective for states, and this pushes them to act in ways that maximise their own security relative to others (Kumari, 2023). The result is a recurring pattern of competition, balancing, and mistrust. These dynamics are particularly visible in the Middle East, where rivalries run deep and power is distributed unevenly.

From this perspective, the MENWFZ cannot be treated as only a legal or normative project. It is instead a reflection of strategic choices made by states trying to cope with insecurity in an anarchic order. Israel, as the sole nuclear-capable state in the Middle East, has strong reasons to resist disarmament and preserve its advantage. Neighbouring states such as Iran, by contrast, view a MENWFZ as a means of

reducing that imbalance and creating some form of restraint. External powers support the idea only to the extent that it prevents new actors from entering the nuclear domain and thereby protects the global nuclear hierarchy.

Deterrence, often discussed in terms of denial or punishment, also fits within this structural realist understanding. In the Middle East, where not all actors openly possess nuclear weapons, deterrence does not produce a stable equilibrium. Instead, it works more as signalling and balancing behaviour, shaped by perceptions of vulnerability and capability. This makes the MENWFZ debate less about universal disarmament norms and more about how states respond to structural constraints, the distribution of power, and the security dilemmas that dominate the region.

Historical Context of the MENWFZ

The idea of a MENWFZ is not a recent diplomatic creation. It first took shape in the early 1970s, when Iran, then under the Shah, and Egypt jointly proposed a legally binding ban on developing, acquiring, and deploying nuclear weapons in the region at the United Nations (Hautecouverture & Mathiot, 2011). This proposal emerged in a period defined by the aftermath of the 1973 Arab–Israeli War, a surge in oil-driven economic growth across several Arab states, and comparatively open channels of dialogue between major regional powers (Hautecouverture & Mathiot, 2011). At the time, nuclear capabilities in the Middle East were far less developed than they are today, making such a zone easier to verify and less threatening to entrenched security doctrines.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the concept attracted cautious but genuine interest from multiple capitals, including some that are now far more resistant. The NPT, which entered into force in 1970, provided a normative framework for the discussion. Egypt, for example, tied the MENWFZ proposal to broader Arab security objectives, while Iran, prior to the 1979 revolution, aligned its position with Washington’s non-proliferation agenda. Even Israel, widely believed to possess nuclear capability, maintained its policy of “nuclear ambiguity” and refrained from rejecting the idea outright (Youvan, 2024). From 1980 onwards, the UNGA endorsed the MENWFZ annually by consensus, a degree of rhetorical alignment that is difficult to imagine in today’s political climate (Arms Control Association, n.d.).

The relative feasibility of the zone in those earlier decades rested on three factors that have since disappeared. First, most Middle Eastern states still faced significant technological barriers to developing nuclear weapons, leaving a wide window for preventive diplomacy. Second, although the region was already marked by deep political conflict, sectarian divisions and transnational proxy networks had not yet become as entrenched as they are today (Nasirzadeh et al., 2024). Third, external powers, notably the US and the Soviet Union, saw value in Middle Eastern non-proliferation as a shared interest, even amid Cold War competition (Brands, 2007). Fourth, the established nuclear powers were driven by a desire to prevent new entrants into the nuclear arena, thereby safeguarding their strategic supremacy. In this context, a MENWFZ aligned with their objectives, reflecting a broader pattern of support for NWFZs worldwide as mechanisms for sustaining nuclear hierarchies and hegemony. Collectively, these dynamics created a structural and strategic environment in which the MENWFZ seemed both desirable and feasible.

Despite these favourable conditions, the MENWFZ never came into being. The central obstacle was the absence of a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace settlement. Israel’s insistence that recognition and peace precede disarmament directly clashed with Arab states’ demand that Israel first acknowledge and dismantle its nuclear arsenal (Brands, 2007). This sequencing dispute created a structural deadlock. The 1979 Iranian Revolution compounded the impasse, replacing a pro-Western monarchy with a revolutionary regime hostile to the US and its allies, and thereby undermining trust in multilateral security arrangements (Middle East Institute, 2025).

While the US has expressed nominal support for a nuclear-free Middle East, its strategic priorities have consistently centred on maintaining Israel’s qualitative military edge (Hamdi, 2018). This approach diluted the credibility of disarmament proposals and weakened enforcement provisions. The result has been a protracted stalemate in which political preconditions, issue linkages, and great-power alignments have combined to keep the NWFZ out of reach.

Events in the 1980s and 1990s reinforced the fragility of nuclear restraint without a formal treaty. The 1981 Israeli strike on Iraq’s Osirak nuclear facility sent a clear signal that nuclear infrastructure would be treated as a legitimate military target, prompting secrecy and hedging rather than transparency (Spector & Cohen, 2008). The 1990s briefly revived momentum: the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference adopted a resolution calling for both a MENWFZ and a broader WMD free zone in the region (UNIDIR, 1995). Yet optimism from the Madrid peace process evaporated with the collapse of Israeli–Palestinian negotiations and the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000.

By the early 2000s, the chances of establishing the zone had further diminished. For instance, the US-driven military intervention in Iraq in 2003 shaped a new regional calculus: nuclear capability, or even the suspicion of it, could serve either as a deterrent against intervention or as a trigger for pre-emptive strikes (Kraglund, 2014). States that might once have embraced a binding prohibition began preserving strategic ambiguity or latent capabilities. Meanwhile, the diplomatic frameworks that could have brokered a comprehensive agreement had withered, replaced by fragmented, issue-specific negotiations lacking the political capital or legitimacy to launch a treaty process.

Therefore, the failure of MENWFZ in its early decades was not due to a lack of perceived benefits, but to the intractable sequencing dispute between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Over time, successive upheavals eroded the trust and institutional capacity needed to bridge that gap. Ironically, the very developments that later made such a zone more urgent also made it far harder to achieve.

The 2025 Israel-Iran War and Regional Nuclear Dilemmas

In mid-June 2025, a sudden military confrontation between Israel and Iran vividly illustrated both the complexity and the fragility of deterrence in the Middle East. The confrontation started on June 13, triggered by Israel’s sweeping airstrikes against more than 100 Iranian targets, including the Natanz and Fordow enrichment facilities, the Isfahan nuclear complex, and residential areas (Chughtai, 2025). These strikes reportedly killed senior nuclear scientists and commanders, alongside at least 610 civilians, with thousands injured and nearly nine million displaced from Tehran.

Israel's actions reflected its enduring reliance on ambiguity and deterrence by denial, combining nuclear opacity with advanced missile defence and pre-emptive offensive capability (Przybylak, 2020).

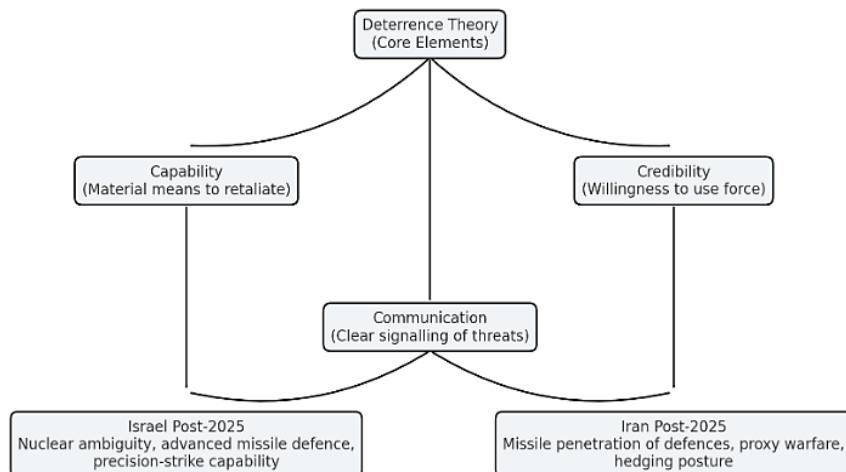
Iran retaliated with up to 1,000 ballistic missiles and drones directed at Tel Aviv, Haifa, and key military sites (The Express Tribune, 2025). Although allegedly 90 per cent were intercepted with US assistance, the contested nature of these figures and the lack of independent verification leave uncertainty. Yet, those that penetrated defences inflicted politically significant damage. The US direct intervention on June 22, through “bunker-buster” strikes on Tehran's nuclear infrastructure, underscored the asymmetry: even an NPT signatory could face devastating pre-emptive attacks, while Israel remained shielded by its posture of nuclear ambiguity (The Express Tribune, 2025). In the aftermath, Iran intensified internal repression, arresting more than 21,000 individuals, including alleged spies, migrants, and cyber-criminals, in a show of domestic control and regime resilience.

The war exposed the limitations of mapping Cold War deterrence models onto the Middle East. Unlike the bipolar stability of that era, today's regional order is fragmented, with multiple state and non-state actors, asymmetries of power, and ideological imperatives shaping decision-making. In this environment, political survival and legitimacy often weigh as heavily as rational strategic calculation. Israel has adapted by avoiding nuclear disclosure while signalling capability, thereby complicating adversaries' calculus (Mednick, 2025). Iran, by contrast, has pursued strategic hedging: developing missile capabilities, leveraging allied militias, and preserving latent nuclear infrastructure. These are measures designed to disperse risk and complicate Israeli or US attempts at decisive outcomes without crossing the nuclear threshold (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2025).

The 2025 war brought these dynamics into sharp relief. Israel's denial-based methods inflicted severe costs but could not prevent Iranian retaliation, however constrained (EADaily, 2025). For Iran, even limited strikes had symbolic power, bolstering claims of resistance and deterrence through endurance. Yet the joint US–Israeli operations also highlighted a dangerous precedent: regional states perceived to be edging toward nuclear capability may now feel compelled to accelerate hedging strategies or clandestine programmes, driven by fears of pre-emptive destruction. This raises the prospect of a nuclearisation cascade across the Middle Eastern region, amplifying the strategic risks of instability.

From MENWFZ perspective, the lessons cut both ways. On the one hand, the vulnerabilities exposed in 2025 could make such a zone more attractive, lowering the risk of escalation and pre-emptive strikes. On the other, without credible alternative security guarantees, some states would see renouncing nuclear options as giving up a core element of deterrence, especially in a region split between NPT and non-NPT members.

Figure 1 sketches these dynamics. It maps the three pillars of deterrence, capability, credibility, and communication, onto the post-war postures of Israel and Iran. The result is not a binary picture. Some elements have been reinforced, while others have been undermined. This, in essence, is the MENWFZ paradox: the same factors that make restraint desirable also make it politically precarious.

Figure 1: *Conceptual Map- Deterrence Dynamics in Middle East Post-2025 Israel–Iran War**(Author's own illustration)*

MENWFZ in the Post-2025 War Context

The 2025 Israel–Iran conflict has once again placed the MENWFZ on the table. For decades it was treated as more of a diplomatic slogan than a realistic mechanism. Yet the war showed how easily conventional clashes in the region can touch the nuclear threshold (Zarif, 2025). Strikes on nuclear-related facilities, mutual threats of escalation, and the role of proxies all combined to underline just how fragile deterrence has become (Jan, 2025). In this context, the idea of a binding regional prohibition no longer looks abstract. It could, in fact, serve as one of the few practical brakes on further escalation (Jan, 2025). Just as importantly, it would give the IAEA some of the authority it has lost and reintroduce a degree of predictability to regional security relations (UNSC, 2025).

Several Muslim-majority states, including Pakistan, Turkey, and Gulf countries, issued joint statements condemning Israel's strikes on Iran and urging an urgent regional disarmament framework under UN auspices (Al-Janidi & Sio, 2025). Javad Zarif, then serving as Iran's foreign minister, proposed the Menara initiative, which envisions peaceful nuclear cooperation and shared verification mechanisms as an incremental step toward a full nuclear-free zone (Wintour, 2025). The IAEA has also highlighted its readiness to support regional dialogues, citing its experience in establishing safeguards in other nuclear-weapon-free zones.

The following section will discuss how effective such a nuclear-free arrangement could be in enhancing regional security, and whether the prevailing political realities make it a feasible goal in the post-war environment.

The Question of Efficacy

When viewed against the background of the war, the efficacy of such a zone seems more obvious than it did before. The conflict revealed, very starkly, the destabilising

consequences of nuclear opacity. Israel and Iran embody two very different trajectories, yet both expose the limits of the current non-proliferation order (Wintour, 2025). Israel continues to stand outside the NPT, with an undeclared arsenal estimated at 80-200 warheads, while rejecting any form of verification (Borger, 2014). Iran, by contrast, signed the NPT, accepted intrusive inspections, and under the JCPOA reduced enrichment to 3.67 per cent with a capped stockpile of 300 kilograms. Between 2016 and 2018 the IAEA repeatedly confirmed compliance (UNSC, 2025).

Despite this record, Iran remained under sanctions, faced sabotage operations, and ultimately endured direct airstrikes in July 2025. The message is unmistakable: transparency does not buy security, while opacity remains politically protected (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024). That imbalance eats away at the credibility of the global non-proliferation regime. A MENWFZ, if it could be made real, would at least level the playing field by subjecting all parties to the same standards of verification and inspection.

The July 2025 suspension of cooperation with the IAEA should also be seen in this light. Iran's decision was not a blanket rejection of safeguards but a signal that compliance had ceased to provide protection (Stimson Center, 2025). If a state can fully comply yet still face coercion, the incentive to remain compliant collapses. Here too lies an argument for a regional treaty: by embedding verification in a collective framework, rather than leaving it hostage to unilateral coercion, a MENWFZ could restore some of the lost utility of compliance.

There is also a geopolitical dimension. In the aftermath of the war, Iran leaned more heavily on Russia and China, underscoring the limits of Western-led initiatives (Mappes et al., 2025). At the same time, no major power, whether aligned with the West or not, has an interest in an uncontrolled nuclear spiral in the Gulf. This overlap of interests, however narrow, could provide a window of opportunity. The IAEA's Director General Rafael Grossi noted in July 2025 that Iran remained open to technical-level talks if inspectors were allowed back (Yong, 2025). Even at a moment of high hostility, the machinery of verification still held some traction. That should not be dismissed too quickly: it suggests that the idea of a regional framework is not entirely out of reach.

Finally, the war highlighted how the absence of an agreed framework leads to the same destructive cycle: sanctions invite retaliation, which in turn invites strikes, and the process repeats. Mid-July 2025 discussions between Iran and the E3, followed quickly by renewed sanctions threats in August 2025, were just the latest iteration (Davenport et al., 2025). A MENWFZ would not solve every regional rivalry, but it could at least provide a rules-based alternative to this pattern. Its efficacy therefore lies less in lofty disarmament goals and more in its potential to break a familiar and damaging cycle.

Conflict, Alignments, and the Limits of Regional Disarmament

Turning from the question of why a MENWFZ might be desirable to whether it could actually be achieved brings the discussion into much harder territory. When examined against political realities, the prospects look bleak. Long-standing patterns

of mistrust, rival threat perceptions, and the way deterrence has become embedded in national security doctrines all cut against the possibility of genuine progress.

Israel's entrenched opacity remains a critical obstacle. Israel's refusal to acknowledge its nuclear arsenal, even in the wake of high-profile military escalation, illustrates that its posture is non-negotiable (Pirzio-Biroli, 2025). The 2025 conflict reinforced the centrality of Israel's nuclear ambiguity, which Tel Aviv views as essential for compensating conventional vulnerabilities and countering Iran's regional network of proxies. Any verification regime that would require Israel to disclose capabilities is thus infeasible under current strategic logics.

Iran, meanwhile, has shifted into a more defiant position. In July 2025 it suspended cooperation with the IAEA and expelled inspectors, signalling that verification itself would now be wielded as a bargaining tool (Murphy, 2025). Demands for reparations and binding security guarantees soon followed. From Tehran's point of view, this was a way to raise negotiating capital and frame itself as the aggrieved party. Yet to Israel, the US, and much of the West, such demands looked less like legitimate security concerns and more like obstruction (Gambrell, 2025). The result is a stalemate in which each side reads the other's behaviour as proof of bad faith.

Furthermore, regional alignments have deepened the cleavage rather than bridged it. Unlike in the 1970s and early 1990s when the US, Russia, and European powers occasionally found common cause in regional non-proliferation, today's fractured great-power environment is shaped by competing strategic alignments. Iran's post-war pivot toward Russia and China, which offered alternative diplomatic platforms outside Western-led regimes, signals the emergence of parallel security architectures (Nuriyev, 2025). This reduces the likelihood of Iran returning to an IAEA-centric, multilateral arms control framework. Simultaneously, Gulf Arab states, while supportive of non-proliferation in principle, are reluctant to press Israel on nuclear transparency, fearing the exposure of their own security reliance on US extended deterrence (Esfandiary, 2025). The divergent threat perceptions: Israel prioritising Iran, Iran prioritising both Israel and US coercion, and Gulf States balancing between both render consensus unattainable in the short to medium term.

In addition, the escalation cycle of sanctions and strikes creates an unstable environment for treaty negotiation. With Washington and its European allies threatening punitive measures by late August 2025, and Tehran responding by accelerating enrichment, the region risks entering a sanctions–strikes feedback loop. In such a context, the preconditions for a MENWFZ, i.e., mutual restraint, verifiable transparency, and regional dialogue, are not merely absent but structurally inverted. Escalation incentivises secrecy and hedging rather than compromise.

Institutional limitations compound these problems. The Arab League and the United Nations continue to endorse the idea of a MENWFZ, but neither possesses the means to enforce it. The 1995 NPT Review Conference resolution on the matter was never implemented, and after 2025, consensus among regional and external powers has become even harder to secure. Without a credible guarantor able to reconcile Israeli and Iranian concerns, a role the US, EU, Russia, or China are unlikely to assume, the proposal risks remaining rhetorical rather than operational.

Therefore, the conflict has not created momentum for a MENWFZ but rather deepened the barriers to it. Nuclear asymmetries are sharper, mistrust is more

entrenched, and external alignments pull states further away from cooperative security frameworks. The idea of a MENWFZ therefore persists more as a normative aspiration than a workable plan. Its eventual realisation would depend on a fundamental rethinking of regional security arrangements, one that goes well beyond the immediate post-war grievances and resets the terms of engagement altogether.

War Outcomes and MENWFZ Preconditions

The following table contrasts key preconditions before and after the war, highlighting their implications for feasibility.

Table 1: *Shifting Preconditions for a MENWFZ: Structural Constraints before and after the 2025 Conflict (Author’s own compilation)*

Precondition for MENWFZ	Pre-2025 Status	Post-2025 Shift	Strategic Implication
Mutual Restraint	Limited but episodically sustained (e.g., JCPOA period provided temporary de-escalation)	Collapsed following airstrikes, missile exchanges, and direct US involvement	Escalation incentives outweigh restraint, eroding the foundational trust required for a zone.
Verification & Transparency	Iran subject to intrusive IAEA safeguards; Israel opaque but strategically stable	Iran suspended IAEA cooperation; Israel further entrenched its opacity	Verification has become politicised and the credibility of inspection regimes severely weakened.
Regional Dialogue	Sporadic forums; Arab states occasionally endorsed disarmament without institutional follow-through	Post-war initiatives (e.g., Menara proposal, Gulf statements) lacked cohesion	Emergence of rhetorical convergence without actionable mechanisms, reducing dialogue to symbolic gestures.
External Guarantors	Historically uneven engagement by the US, Russia, and EU in arms control efforts	Fragmented alignments: US openly sided with Israel, while Iran deepened reliance on Russia and China	Absence of a credible neutral broker reduces feasibility of negotiations and undercuts enforcement prospects.

Regional Relevance of NWFZ beyond the Middle East

The rationale for a MENWFZ extends well beyond the Middle East, carrying implications for neighbouring states whose security would be directly affected by further nuclearisation in the region. For Pakistan, additional nuclear powers in its extended neighbourhood would complicate deterrence dynamics and impose new strategic pressures (Amin, 2023). Turkey, at the intersection of Europe and the Middle East, has strong incentives to avoid a nuclearised environment that could destabilise NATO's southern flank (Dwyer & McLean, 2015). Likewise, the Central Asian republics, already party to the Central Asian NWFZ, would see their security undermined if their southern frontier became nuclearised. Even North African and Mediterranean states would benefit indirectly, as instability in the Middle East risks spilling into adjacent zones. Thus, a MENWFZ is best understood not only as a regional disarmament ideal but as a broader stabilising mechanism, the pursuit of which necessitates pragmatic and incremental policy steps.

Policy Recommendations

Given the present deadlock, policy prescriptions must be pragmatic rather than aspirational. The MENWFZ is not within reach in its purest form, but there are incremental steps that could prevent further deterioration and, in the longer run, make a zone less of a fantasy.

Shift from grand bargains to functional agreements

Expecting Israel or Iran to accept sweeping disarmament frameworks is unrealistic. Instead, regional and extra-regional actors should press for functional accords, such as restrictions on fissile material production, or limits on missile ranges, that can be verified without requiring Israel to abandon opacity or Iran to surrender its negotiating leverage. Precedents exist: the 1994 Agreed Framework between the US and North Korea, while imperfect, demonstrated that issue-specific deals can at least freeze sensitive activities for extended periods. Similarly, the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, though bilateral, shows how narrowly defined restrictions can succeed where grand bargains fail.

Elevate regional verification mechanisms

The IAEA cannot bear this burden on its own, particularly since Iran has suspended its cooperation. The global monitoring could be enhanced by a Middle East-specific verification project based on the regional expertise (e.g., Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE). A valuable model is the Agency for the Prohibition of nuclear weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (OPANAL), established under the Tlatelolco Treaty: regional participants created verification procedures tailored to their security environment that did not overcome international control but instead supplemented it. A similar Middle Eastern system would de-politicalise inspection and reducing the Western hypocrisies.

Introduce security assurances short of guarantees

The US or Russia will not write hard guarantees of non-use against the Middle Eastern nations. Nevertheless, through calibrated political guarantees, like renegotiated negative security guarantees of the UN Security Council, the temperature can be reduced without the need to make binding guarantees. Even non-binding assurances can have diplomatic credibility, as evidenced by the 1995 NPT

Review Conference resolution on the Middle East along with security guarantees by the five recognised nuclear-weapon states. The assurances, though not transformative, could serve as confidence building steps and decrease incentives for nuclear hedging.

Link arms control to post-war reconstruction.

The claim of Iran to reparations and other economic concessions should not be dismissed out of hand. Rather, reconstruction aid may be contingent on restrictions against escalation on the nuclear front. There are also historical precedents: The Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA) was able to successfully negotiate a relief of sanctions in exchange of restrictions on the Tehran's enrichment programme. This suggests that nuclear restraint could be effectively incentivised with economic advantages. A post-war setting where the infrastructure investment or international assistance is conditioned on verifiable armament steps, negotiations would be conducted not on the abstract concept of disarmament, but on actual economic recovery.

Keep the MENWFZ alive as a long-term anchor.

Even if immediate prospects are dim, abandoning the idea entirely would cede narrative ground. Regional forums, such as the UN's annual MENWFZ conference, should be maintained, not as venues for breakthroughs but as reminders that nuclear exceptionalism in the Middle East is not an accepted status quo. Historical persistence has mattered elsewhere: The African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (Pelindaba Treaty) took decades to materialise, but its slow gestation ensured that the idea was never lost from regional diplomatic agendas. Similarly, keeping the MENWFZ alive sustains political pressure and prevents the notion of indefinite nuclear exceptionalism for Israel or Iran from becoming entrenched.

Conclusion

The 2025 Israel–Iran war reaffirmed both the urgency and the impracticality of a MENWFZ. The conflict revealed how fragile deterrence in the region remains, as conventional clashes rapidly approached nuclear thresholds. It also exposed the dangers of asymmetry between Israel's opacity and Iran's contested transparency, which generates mistrust and perverse incentives. In principle, the strategic rationale for a MENWFZ has never been stronger: it offers a mechanism to reduce escalation risks, embed verification, and restore predictability to regional security dynamics. Yet, the very conditions that make the MENWFZ desirable also make it unattainable.

The way forward, therefore, lies in pragmatism rather than maximalist ambitions. Incremental confidence-building, such as functional accords on fissile material, restrictions on missile ranges, regional verification mechanisms, calibrated security assurances, and integration with post-war reconstruction, could generate precedents for restraint. At the same time, sustaining the MENWFZ as a normative aspiration in UN and regional forums is essential to prevent nuclear exceptionalism from becoming permanent.

Ultimately, the feasibility of a MENWFZ depends less on disarmament diplomacy in isolation than on a broader reordering of the regional security architecture. Only

once rival states can move beyond immediate grievances will meaningful arms control become possible. Until then, the MENWFZ must serve as a compass, an orienting principle for long-term stability in an otherwise volatile landscape.

Conflict of Interest

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