

NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

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ISSUES

- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent disruption of nonproliferation diplomacy, mainly the postponement of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review Conference from April 2020 to August 2021, have stalled discussions on establishing a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East.
- The normalization process that began among Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain et al. through the 2020 Abraham Accords provides a non-NPT opening and venue for regional security and nonproliferation conversations. However, the emerging security dynamics as a response to the Accords remain to be seen.
- With the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran steadily decreased its nonproliferation commitments as a response to the U.S.-led “maximum pressure” campaign and sanctions regime crippling the Iranian economy. Beyond rhetoric, Iran escalated its nuclear program, passing legislation and announcing plans to install additional, advanced centrifuges to enrich uranium beyond 20% and stall IAEA inspections.
- The UAE became the first Arab nation to launch its civilian nuclear energy program at the Barakah plant, and other nations in the region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey, continue to make progress in their nuclear energy plans, raising concerns about the regional security implications of this sudden expansion in the number of critical facilities.
- The U.S. has 123 agreements for peaceful cooperation, named after the Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act, with Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, and the UAE. The agreement with Morocco is set to expire in May 2021 with rolling 5-year extensions, while that with Egypt is set to expire in December 2021 and would need to be renegotiated. While considered in 2018, official negotiations with Saudi Arabia on a 123 agreement were never launched due to their reluctance to forego enrichment.

US INTERESTS

- Restore U.S. leadership through multilateralism and promotion of the global arms control and nonproliferation regime.
- Restore credibility with the Iranian leadership and P5+1 partners that if Iran comes back into full compliance with its nonproliferation commitments, the U.S. will provide full sanctions relief.
- Address Iran’s escalatory nuclear rhetoric, paths toward highly enriched uranium, and further progress toward a potential nuclear weapons program. Were Iran to develop a nuclear weapon, it could alter the regional balance of power and potentially lead to a cascade of nuclear proliferation.
- Restore the credibility of U.S. leadership in the civilian nuclear energy market and promotion of best practices in nuclear safety, security, and safeguards, as well as proliferation-resistant designs for newcomer nations.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Restore bilateral and multilateral diplomatic dialogue with Iran to identify verifiable milestones toward nonproliferation compliance in return for waiver of sanctions and easing of access to international energy and financial markets, while also maintaining pressure on Iran’s ballistic missile program and use of proxies to destabilize the region as essential concerns.
- Reignite arms control and regional security conversations through technical and policy channels to build confidence.
- Revive the WMD free zone conversation not just through the NPT Review Conference process, but also the Abraham Accords.
- Lead bilateral engagements with regional nuclear newcomers to promote U.S. best practices.