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One thing is certain

Negotiations are the only way to permanently end Iran's nuclear programme

Since the start of Israel's Operation Rising Lion on 13 June 2025 and the subsequent US air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in Fordo, Natanz and Isfahan, the risk of uncontrolled escalation and a regional conflagration in the Middle East has increased dramatically. It is still unclear how badly the nuclear facilities were actually damaged by the Israeli and US attacks. While President Donald Trump spoke of a 'spectacular military success', *The New York Times* stated, citing a preliminary report by the Defense Intelligence Agency, that the Iranian nuclear programme may have been delayed by less than six months.

Additionally, Tehran is believed to have already moved some of its enriched uranium to secret locations in advance. Whether the attacks have ultimately stopped Iran's nuclear programme permanently or have merely strengthened the mullah regime's conviction that nuclear armament is necessary remains highly questionable at this stage.

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Yet one thing is certain: Iran must never be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons. The country must comply with all its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, because a nuclear-armed Iran could trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, with serious consequences for international security. We must also have no illusions about the regime in Tehran: it brutally oppresses its own people, destabilises the entire region with its proxy strategy, supports Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine and is involved in terrorist activities as far afield as Europe. For years, the mullah regime has deliberately fuelled the spiral of escalation and sought to create facts on the ground in order to make the path to a nuclear bomb irreversible.

Nevertheless, current events show that Iran's nuclear programme probably cannot be permanently destroyed through military means alone. Although the regime has been severely weakened both domestically and internationally, Iran still has significant conventional capabilities and can continue to destabilise the region through its proxies, such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthi militias, which have also been severely weakened. Besides, it is by no means certain that a regime change would actually lead to a liberal and democratic Iran — or whether it would plunge the country and the regional order further into chaos.

Finding a workable solution

Against this backdrop, negotiations remain the only realistic way to permanently end Iran's nuclear programme. The parties to the conflict must now urgently return to the negotiating table. It is a positive sign that the US president has recently announced a ceasefire between Israel and Iran. Now is the moment to resume the negotiations on a new nuclear agreement that began in Oman on 12 April 2025. According to US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff, initial direct and indirect talks between Tehran and Washington have already taken place.

The big challenge now is to find a workable solution that takes into account the legitimate interests and security concerns of Israel and its Arab neighbours, and the state of a weakened Iran. One possible approach would be to revisit the idea of a regional nuclear consortium between Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which was already discussed in previous talks in Oman. This proposal has been well received in both Washington and Tehran and could serve as the basis for a new nuclear agreement. A collective use and distribution among several states would not only create transparency, but also significantly reduce the risk of a national nuclear go-it-alone policy. This would, of course, require Iran to credibly and verifiably renounce nuclear armament. At the same time, a new agreement would have to include robust and binding guarantees to prevent a unilateral withdrawal such as that by the US from the 2015 Vienna Agreement (JCPOA).

Ultimately, a new nuclear agreement going beyond the termination of Iran's nuclear programme could perhaps even be the first step towards a comprehensive regional security architecture in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. In the medium and long term, the creation of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction would be conceivable, as proposed by the Gulf Research Centre in Dubai in 2004 and supported by the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League in 2005. Admittedly, the idea of such a zone in the Middle East may seem utopian

given the current wars and tensions. But this is not the case. As recently as 16 June 2025, 21 Arab and predominantly Muslim states issued a joint declaration calling for a zone free of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

It is crucial to initiate a process to create a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East.

There are already six nuclear-weapon-free zones around the world: Antarctica, Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, Central Asia and the South Pacific. They all prove that such zones are feasible if there is a common interest and a common will. This is clearly still lacking in the Middle East. However, in view of the recent escalation, bold and forward-looking political and diplomatic initiatives are now needed.

The advantage of a nuclear-weapon-free zone is obvious: on the one hand, it creates a regional process of trust through effective verification mechanisms and the clear renunciation of a category of weapons. On the other hand, the nuclear-weapon states and thus the permanent members of the UN Security Council can lend additional international legitimacy to the treaty regime through an additional protocol.

It is crucial to initiate a process to create a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East. A new nuclear agreement with Iran would be an important first step in this direction and could help to reduce tensions and deep mutual mistrust in the region and improve the prospects for regional disarmament. This would be in the interests of both Iran and Israel.

These efforts should also be embedded in comprehensive and institutionally anchored security cooperation based on confidence-building measures along with enabling continuous and reliable dialogue between regional actors.

This is precisely where Europe, which has so far been more of a spectator in current events, can play a constructive role thanks to its experience with the OSCE and its involvement in the JCPOA negotiations. A new diplomatic push for a nuclear agreement or even the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East would be an important and urgently needed signal far beyond the region at a time of growing global tensions and geopolitical upheaval.



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