

Key Issues for the 2026 NPT Review Conference

WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The ongoing war in the Middle East, along with attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025, has serious implications for the NPT regime, from the relevance of international law to the impact on non-proliferation and safeguards implementation. Debates on the issue at the Review Conference will likely further exacerbate the divisions among States Parties

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched a series of airstrikes against Iran, targeting various military sites as well as Iran's political and military leadership. The attacks came eight months after the Twelve-Day War, during which Israel and the United States severely damaged Iran's nuclear capabilities.

In [announcing the military action](#), US President Donald Trump explained that the "objective is to defend the American people by eliminating imminent threats from the Iranian regime." However, there has been no evidence that Iran was preparing to attack the United States or its forces in the region.

President Trump's statement further suggested nuclear non-proliferation as the justification for military action: "They've rejected every opportunity to renounce their nuclear ambitions, and we can't take it anymore." Yet, unlike the June 2025 attacks, nuclear facilities were not the primary targets, and indeed few nuclear sites have been hit during the ongoing war in the Middle East. While Iranian leadership did [vow to rebuild](#) its nuclear facilities damaged in the June 2025 war, there were no indications prior to the February 2026 attacks that Iran had reconstituted its nuclear capabilities in any significant way. Iran and the United States were [engaged in negotiations](#) regarding Iran's nuclear programme on the eve of the attacks.

Unilateral military action, launched without the UN Security Council authorisation, violates international law, and the use of non-proliferation as justification damages the credibility of the NPT. International community, however, has not been united in its response to the June 2025 attacks and the current war. Many leaders, especially in the West, have shied away from unequivocally condemning the war, and some focused on criticizing Iran for retaliating against the Gulf states that did not participate in the attacks. One can expect accusations of double standards in the Review Conference discussions on the matter.

On 12 June 2025, the IAEA Board of Governors (BOG) [found Iran in non-compliance](#) with its safeguards obligations for the failure to answer the Agency's questions regarding undeclared nuclear material and past activities. Iran has not yet come back into compliance. It is impossible to assess with confidence whether Iran intended to improve its cooperation with the Agency, but the fact that the first strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities began the day after the non-compliance resolution creates room for arguments that it did not have much of

a chance. Compliance issues have never been easy for the Review Conferences to address, but the current war will likely make the debates even more difficult and politicized.

Military action against Iran caused severe disruption in safeguards implementation in the country. In response to the June 2025 attacks, Iran [suspended](#) its cooperation with the IAEA, stopping all verification activities. It has subsequently allowed IAEA inspections at the facilities that were not affected by the attacks, but the Agency has not yet had access to, or received updated information about, the affected sites, including all the enrichment facilities. The location and condition of more than 400 kg of 60% enriched uranium also remains unknown, as [reported by the Director-General](#) in February 2026. There is no prospect of a return to full safeguards implementation until Iran and the United States reach an agreement on the end of the war and the future of the nuclear programme. With the passage of time, however, the continuity of knowledge on Iran's nuclear materials might be lost forever, creating uncertainties for the future.

While Iran's nuclear capabilities have been set back in the near term, the war might have solidified Iranian leadership's determination to acquire nuclear weapons in the long term. Concerns about the possibility of Iran's withdrawal from the NPT might also feature in the Review Conference debates, along with renewed questions about appropriate response to cases of withdrawal.

The war is also compounding global proliferation pressures that have already been on the rise in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and concerns about the reliability of US security assurances. Current and future leaders in different parts of the world are wondering if nuclear weapons are the best guarantee of national security and regime survival. The normalisation of such arguments is dangerous, but the subject might be too politically sensitive to address head-on at the Review Conference. Still, States Parties could highlight the risks of the further spread of nuclear weapons and reiterate their commitment to non-proliferation.