

Overview and Recommendations from Track II Technical Discussions on the Biological Weapons Dimensions of Implementing a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East and North Africa

For presentation to the 7th Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention

Since 2010, a task force has convened under the auspices of Track II engagement to discuss the technical parameters of implementing a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While the goal of establishing a zone is shared in principle by all governments in the region—as well as the broader international community—political and strategic realities continue to make achievement of that goal elusive. Recognizing these high level obstacles, the task force was formed to explore more specific technical challenges that might emerge under potential WMDFZ implementation—“technical” being interpreted broadly to include the various technological, scientific, and organizational elements that might go into formation of a zone.

The task force is composed of policy and technical experts from throughout the region, acting in their private capacity, in addition to facilitators and observers from Europe and the United States. The group elected for an initial focus on the biological weapons (BW)-specific dimensions of a WMDFZ, an area which—by comparison to other WMD issues—offered the fewest political obstacles to constructive discussion. Early meetings included subject matter expert presentations and discussion on the fundamentals of biological weapons, arms control under the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), the role of confidence building measures in assuring BTWC compliance, and the responsibilities of the scientific community in controlling BW-relevant materials, technology, and expertise. Having established a common baseline of understanding, participants subsequently presented and discussed regional perspectives on BW, including policy, threat perceptions, and prospects for cooperation. Recognizing common ground, the task force—and specifically a subgroup of life sciences experts—explored possible foundations for a regional framework on addressing BW threats, as well as opportunities for near term confidence building and cooperation.

Task force discussions suggested agreement on certain common principles or pillars that should support a zone free of biological weapons, regardless of the mode of implementation. These include:

- **Prevention** of the acquisition or use of biological weapons by malevolent actors;
- **Detection** of outbreaks of infectious disease in the region, including those that could potentially result from acts of bioterrorism;
- **Response** and mitigation in the event of an attack using biological weapons.

Each of these pillars should additionally be supported by solid foundations of **awareness and general education** across regional stakeholder communities (public, private, and governmental). It is the sense of the task force that these three pillars should serve as guiding foundations for near term confidence building and cooperation on addressing BW threats, as shown in Figure 1 below.

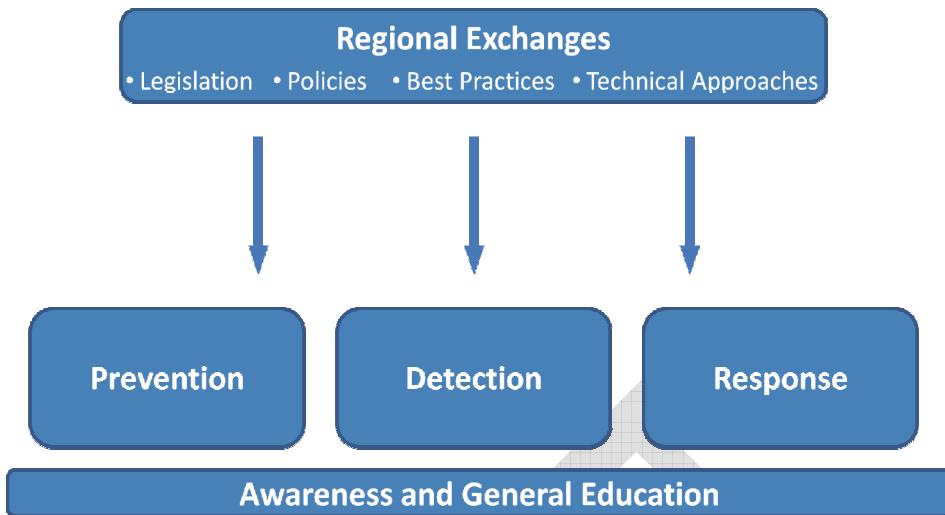


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for regional confidence building measures

Confidence building on each pillar would include regional exchanges of information on relevant national legislation, policies, best practices, and technical approaches currently implemented in the countries of the region (areas the Task Force has already begun exploring). Such exchanges would begin at the basic level of orientation seminars; as confidence is built and collaborative relationships developed, exchanges could advance to training, cooperative implementation, and possibly even integrated capacities for addressing biological threats. The Task Force developed topical ideas for CBM activities under each pillar, with over 20 proposed activities in total. Examples include:

Prevention

- Regional workshops and/or seminars on biorisk management
- ...
- ...

Detection

- Application of molecular diagnostic techniques to biothreat agents
- ...
- ...

Response

- Collaborations between public health and law enforcement authorities to address forensics issues that may arise in the aftermath of a biological event
- ...
- ...

Importantly, none of these activities would necessarily require binding political commitments, nor should they impose unnecessary burdens on legitimate bioscience activities. Many of these activities, if implemented, could also help countries realize additional benefits in terms of capacity to manage biological risks and detect and respond to infectious disease outbreaks.

Some of the proposed CBM activities are similar in certain respects to efforts already undertaken by countries in the region on a unilateral or multilateral basis to increase their respective national capacities to address natural or man-made biological threats. Certain governments have independently undertaken efforts to raise public awareness on biological threats and build capacities for response and mitigation in the event of an attack, including large-scale exercises involving a multitude of crisis-management stakeholders. Others have implemented legislation to regulate civil sector biological research involving high-risk agents. In some cases, awareness-building on bio safety and security best practices has even been implemented through university bioscience curriculums.

Examples of cross-national collaboration include the Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS), which brings together Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian public health experts in jointly monitoring and addressing outbreaks of infectious diseases and food-borne illnesses. The Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conferences (BBIC) have brought together experts from throughout the MENA area to discuss common biological risks and regional mitigation strategies. In addition to collaboration on functional issues of mutual national concern, these activities have helped build important connections and networks across scientific communities.

Existing efforts like those described represent important steps in the direction of confidence building. However, few if any activities currently undertaken are truly regionally inclusive, incorporating all major country stakeholders. Moreover, few if any have been framed in the broader context of regional confidence building on managing biological threats, or the even broader context of supporting a WMD free zone. It is the sense of the task force that initiatives involving all stakeholders, within a guiding framework for regional confidence building, should be undertaken and existing activities adapted where appropriate. The group will explore potential mechanisms for accomplishing this in future meetings.

The task force looks forward to the outcomes of the 7th BTWC Review Conference. The group's activities on BW will continue to be informed by the experience and framework of the BTWC, and continued efforts will be made to interface with the review and intersessional processes. The Middle East presents a complex political environment for controlling biological weapons. However, the task force has demonstrated that common ground can be found for productive exchange and cooperation.