

## **Implementing a WMDFZ in the Middle East: Track II Insights on the Technical Dimensions**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of establishing a Middle East weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) is shared in principle by all governments in the region. Political and strategic realities continue to make achievement of that goal elusive. For the past year and a half, the authors have participated in Track II discussions on the technical implementation parameters of a zone. The discussions brought together policy and technology experts from throughout the region, with an initial focus on biological arms control challenges. The interactions have yielded important insights, not only on specific technical issues, but also on how regional and global policymaking communities might move forward on advancing the broader WMDFZ question. This article provides an overview of the discussions, including key insights and recommendations.

### **Background**

The governments of Egypt and Iran first proposed the formation of a Middle East nuclear weapons free zone in 1974. That call—and the subsequent call for a zone free of all WMD—has been endorsed by every government in the region, as well as the General Assembly of the United Nations. Despite unanimous rhetorical support, there has been little progress toward actual implementation. The impasse stems from contentious disagreements regarding the actual mechanisms of implementation, including the fundamental relationship between implementation and a broader regional peace process. A formal, multilateral diplomatic dialog on arms control—let alone free zone implementation—has not existed since the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks of the 1990s. The 2010 NPT Review Conference did conclude with a call for a 2012 regional meeting on the issue. However, the prospects for that event remain in question, including whether or not key regional players will elect to participate.

Where official “Track I” diplomatic dialogs prove challenging—as is presently the case on a Middle East WMDFZ—unofficial “Track II” interactions offer an alternative venue for exploring policy options. Track II forums bring together experts from all sides in a confidential setting, under strict rules of non-attribution, to discuss contentious issues and brainstorm policy recommendations. Ideally, Track II participants are in a position to transmit the insights from these interactions to official channels, potentially influencing the Track I discourse.

For the past year and a half, the authors have participated in Track II discussions on the technical dimensions of implementing a WMDFZ in the Middle East. These discussions emerged out of a larger regional security dialog facilitated by the UCLA Center for Middle East Development. A task force of policy and technical experts from throughout the region (in addition to representatives from Europe and the United States) has elected to look beyond the high level political disagreements impeding progress, and instead explore more specific technical challenges that might emerge under WMDFZ implementation—“technical” being interpreted broadly to include the various technological, scientific, and organizational elements that might go into formation of a zone. While not alone in exploring the WMDFZ issue, the task force is

unique in its focus on the problem's technical dimensions, the diversity of expertise it brings to the table, and its ongoing meeting schedule.

### **Proceedings**

The task force met four times in 2010. The group opted for an initial topical focus on biological arms control challenges, which seemed to offer the fewest political obstacles to discussion (at least compared to chemical and nuclear arms control). In order to establish a base level of common familiarity with the issues, participants were briefed by subject matter experts on the fundamentals of biological weapons (BW), biological safety and security, 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. Participants were even given a tour of an actual biological research laboratory to demonstrate key concepts in context.

Initial discussions revolved around three primary subjects: the challenges inherent in verifying biological arms control compliance; common threat perceptions on non-state actor acquisition of BW (which seem to outweigh concerns regarding state acquisition); and the significant awareness and capacity gaps the region faces on biological safety, security, and nonproliferation fundamentals. These discussions included the presentation of position reports drafted by the participants, detailing the diversity—and in some cases convergence—of regional perspectives on various elements of biological arms control and the larger WMDFZ question. Major insights from the deliberations are addressed in the recommendations below.

By the second meeting, it was decided that dialog would benefit from formation of a technical experts subgroup. This subgroup, consisting of regional bio-sector experts, could explore highly specific technical and scientific issues in more depth than the main group consisting largely of subject matter generalists. The experts subgroup met initially on the margins of the last 2010 task force meeting, outlining an ambitious agenda and work plan for the future. As the main group moves forward on exploring other topics, it is hoped the subgroup can continue progress on the bio front, including identifying specific opportunities for regional cooperation and confidence building on bio safety and security technical issues of common concern.

The main group also considered its options for reaching out to the Track I level, as well as other Track II forums addressing similar issues. In particular, the December 2010 BTWC Review Conference looms large as a potential venue for sharing the group's insights on the bio dimension. Discussion ended in 2010 with a clear sense that the group should continue meeting into the indefinite future. Several new topics outside the BW realm were proposed for future discussion, though there was firm conviction among participants that BW should also remain on the agenda.

### **Insights and Recommendations**

The following high level insights and recommendations represent the sense of the authors, based on the discussions and participant contributions. They are not intended to represent a consensus viewpoint of the larger group.

On regional biological arms control and its relationship to WMDFZ implementation:

- By contrast to chemical and nuclear weapons, there appears to be greater regional consensus on biological weapons issues, including common perceptions on the limited military utility of BW, threats posed by non-state actor acquisition, and the importance of facilitating regulated yet unobstructed peaceful applications of dual use bio technology. This makes bio a promising starting point for substantive multilateral engagement and confidence building on WMDFZ implementation. However, it is important that bio-related activity not take place within a vacuum of discussion or engagement on the chemical and nuclear fronts, which multiple regional actors still see as the most important and pressing areas of contention. Failure to simultaneously address nuclear and chemical challenges may nullify any positive benefits gained from progress on bio.
- Discussions repeatedly reinforced a sense that awareness and capacity in fundamental biological safety and security areas remains low throughout the region and across stakeholder communities (including government, the private sector, academia, and even security institutions). The awareness/capacity gap represents a serious impediment to effective implementation of a regional biological weapons free zone (let alone a larger WMDFZ) and suggests a need for domestic capacity building as a key prelude to progress on institutionalization of an actual zone. This is very likely also true in other WMD issue areas.
- Participants from all countries recognize the substantial challenges inherent in verifying compliance with biological arms control commitments. However, there is still a regional sense that the lack of a BTWC verification protocol remains a significant shortcoming in the global biological arms control regime, particularly if the regime is to eventually serve as the basis for controlling BW under a Middle East WMDFZ. At the least, this sentiment merits continued regional conversation on the issue, further exploring the role confidence building exchanges might play in addressing trust deficits and at least partially serving the ends of verification.
- Binding political commitments are probably a non-starter given current circumstances in the region. However, there may be value in exploring the utility of non-binding declarations, statements of principle, or even codes of conduct on biological arms control and peaceful uses of biotech in the Middle East. These documents could be drafted at the Track II level, circulated to governments for comment, and ultimately utilized as a Track I confidence building measure, allowing regional governments to indicate their agreement (at least in principle) on certain fundamental pillars of a regional biological weapons free zone.

On the larger issue of a regional WMDFZ:

- Despite mounting expectations, prospects remain uncertain for the 2012 free zone conference called for in the NPT RevCon final document, including the participation of key regional stakeholders. It is important that certain details be clarified as soon as possible, particularly on organization, sponsorship, venue, and especially the agenda. Group discussions emphasized the importance of not overloading the conference agenda

and setting realistic expectations for what might constitute a successful outcome (e.g. regional agreement to continue discussions through a mutually agreed upon process).

- When discussing a Middle East WMDFZ, issues of scope continue to loom large. The geographic boundaries of a potential zone still require conceptual clarification, particularly as regards certain states bordering or connected to the region, including Pakistan and Turkey. The expected roles and responsibilities of outside powers, particularly nuclear weapon states, must similarly be clarified. Technical scope also requires continued deliberation, particularly on delivery systems (namely ballistic missiles, but possibly also cruise missiles and even long range strike aircraft) and strategic balance issues vis-à-vis conventional arsenals.
- It is important to bring a wider variety of actors into the conversation on WMDFZ implementation. In addition to government-level representation from all relevant countries, representatives from the non-government sector and civil society should also be present. Discussions have suggested that successful and sustainable implementation of a zone will require buy-in and participation across a wider range of regional stakeholders than simply governments. Recent events in the region have only reinforced this sense.
- The task force attempted to move past political deadlock by finding common ground on technical challenges. Despite this, deliberations continue to reinforce a sense that the conversation on WMDFZ implementation – particularly on process and institutionalization – cannot be disconnected from the political conversation on a comprehensive regional peace. A consensus “roadmap” for implementation may be unattainable (and perhaps even undesirable); there must however be a clear sense of how the implementation process will relate in parallel or sequence with broader strategic developments.

On the role of Track II in facilitating progress toward a regional WMDFZ:

- The group has demonstrated that it is possible to bring regional parties together in an unofficial setting and have a constructive discussion on substantive issues—technical or otherwise—related to WMDFZ implementation. Experience with the task force suggests efforts are most successful when organizers and facilitators establish a clearly bounded topical focus for the conversation from the outset, recognizing the limits of what can be accomplished in a Track II setting and carefully accounting for the preferences and sensitivities of all participants. Efforts that attempt to address too broad a range of issues, or immediately tackle the most contentious policy challenges, are unlikely to move the discussion past political talking points.
- Forums addressing a regional WMDFZ have multiplied in recent years, particularly following the outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference. While a diversity of dialogs is beneficial, there is a sense of disconnect between the various initiatives, occasionally resulting in repetitious agendas, duplication of effort, and scheduling conflicts. Organizers and facilitators would do well to better promote awareness, networking, coordination, and exchange across the various initiatives.