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## TASK FORCE DEVELOPS RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS DIMENSIONS OF IMPLEMENTING A WEAPON-OF-MASS-DESTRUCTION FREE ZONE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A high-level task force examining technical issues related to the establishment of a Weapon of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East has developed a series of recommendations for a process that could ultimately lead to the abolition of biological weapons in the region, a key element of such a zone.

The Task Force is a multi-year “Track II engagement” of former Middle East officials and experts which has been meeting since 2010. The Task Force was formed to explore the specific technical challenges that might emerge as a result of implementing a WMDFZ—“technical” being interpreted broadly to include the various technological, scientific, and organizational elements that would likely go into the formation of the zone.

In its work, the Task Force identified three pillars that should support a zone free of biological weapons. These include:

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

The attached paper presents an overview and the recommendations of the Task Force, including various projects and initiatives that the Task Force is examining under each of the three pillars. The paper was presented and circulated in Geneva, Switzerland, during the 7<sup>th</sup> Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.

The James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) has been an active participant in Task Force discussions leading to the group’s recommendations. CNS also leads a related program known as the **Middle East Next Generation Initiative** that seeks to build long-term arms control and nonproliferation capacity in the Middle East through training workshops for the next generation of Middle East experts. In conjunction with these workshops, the Middle East Next Generation Initiative integrates these rising officials and specialists into the ongoing Track II engagement on these issues. In this time of turmoil in the Middle East, the involvement of younger experts in the debate on regional security is essential for ensuring that arms control and nonproliferation policy issues will continue to receive careful attention as new leaders take the helm in a number of regional states.

For additional information on the paper or the task force, please contact  
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- For a comparative chart of NWFZ provisions and status, see <http://cns.miis.edu/inventory/pdfs/apmnwfcz.pdf>  
CNS NWFZ Clearinghouse: [http://cns.miis.edu/nwfc\\_clearinghouse/](http://cns.miis.edu/nwfc_clearinghouse/)

# **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 7<sup>th</sup> Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention**

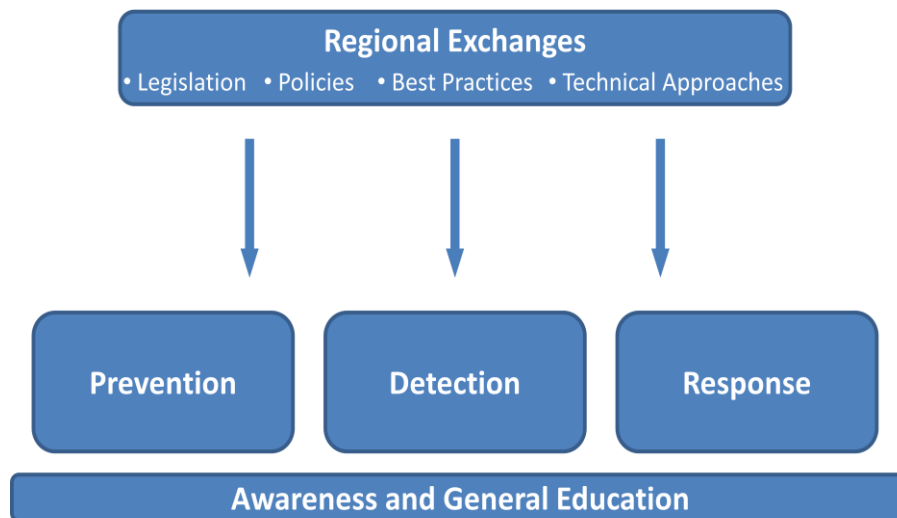
Since 2010, a task force has convened under the auspices of Track II engagement to discuss the technical parameters of implementing a weapons of mass destruction free zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While the goal of establishing a zone is shared in principle by all governments 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 assessing 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 regional 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 cross-cutting foundations of **awareness and general education** across regional stakeholder communities (public, private, scientific, and policy). It is the sense of the task force that these three pillars should serve as guiding foundations for near term regional confidence building and cooperation on addressing BW threats, as shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework for regional confidence building**

Confidence building<sup>1</sup> 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 regional confidence building activities under each pillar, with over 20 proposed activities in total. Examples include:

**Prevention**

- Data and information exchange and cooperation, including joint workshops, with regard to biosafety and biosecurity legislation, regulation, and export control systems
- Drafting of regional, non-binding guidance and codes of conduct for science and industry on best practices in biosecurity, biosafety, and genetic research
- Organization of a regional federation of national biosafety associations
- Joint regional workshops/conferences on education and ethics in the life sciences, including exchanges of information and discussion of current status and cooperation in education programs for scientists and students

**Detection**

- Joint workshops/conferences on methods for detection, diagnosis, pathogenesis and treatment of relevant pathogens
- Joint workshops/conferences on epidemiological research programs and policies for treatment and response to epidemics
- Joint training courses for law enforcers including police, customs, border security, and regulatory compliance officials with regard to identifying anomalous activities, maintaining and sharing information on criminal and terrorist activities, and investigating pathogen release

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this paper, “confidence building” is not meant to necessarily imply participation in Confidence-building Measures (CBMs) as implemented under the framework of the BTWC.

## **Response**

- Development of a list of national and regional contacts for biological emergencies
- Development of planning guidance for response and recovery following biological incidents
- Joint tabletop exercises for first responders focusing on optimal modalities for meeting BW attacks in the region, including victim treatment and hospital care, decontamination of affected sites, and imposition of quarantine and other restrictions on travel
- Joint workshops on mechanisms for ensuring rapid and effective access to medical countermeasures in the wake of BW attacks, including R&D, manufacturing, and stockpile of vaccines; delivery logistics; and dispensation strategies

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 confidence building 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 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.

Limited cross-national collaboration has taken place on monitoring of infectious disease outbreaks. Regional conferences 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—at both the governmental and non-governmental levels—in future meetings.

The task force looks forward to the outcomes of the 7<sup>th</sup> BTWC Review Conference. Although the work of the group is not tied to any specific treaty or regime, its 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.