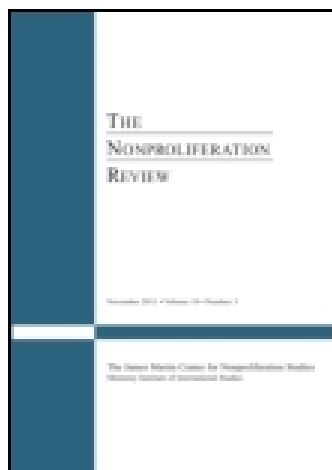


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# IMPLEMENTING A WMD-FREE ZONE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

## Track-two Insights on the Technical Dimensions

**Benjamin Bonin, Amir Mohagheghi, and Michael Yaffe**

*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 three years, the authors have participated in track-two 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 policy-making communities might move forward on advancing the broader WMDFZ question. This report provides an overview of the discussions, including the authors' insights and recommendations.*

**KEYWORDS:** Middle East; weapons of mass destruction-free zone; track-two diplomacy

The governments of Iran and Egypt first formally proposed the formation of a Middle East nuclear weapon-free zone in 1974 at the United Nations. That call—and Egypt's later call for a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—has been endorsed by every government in the region, as well as the UN General Assembly. 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 the zone and a broader regional peace process. A formal, multilateral diplomatic dialogue on Middle East arms control—let alone establishment of a WMD-free zone (WMDFZ)—has not existed since the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks of the 1990s. The 2010 Review Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) concluded with a call for a 2012 regional conference on the issue. Although a facilitator was selected and target date for the conference was established, the event has been postponed and continues to confront serious challenges, including whether key regional players will elect to participate. The issue of all-inclusive participation in such dialogues has been a consistent challenge for a region where diplomatic relationships between some countries are non-existent, or, in other cases, extremely strained.<sup>1</sup>

Where official track-one diplomatic dialogues prove challenging—as is presently the case with a Middle East WMDFZ—unofficial track-two interactions offer an alternative and less formal venue for exploring policy options. Track-two forums bring together

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experts from all sides in a confidential setting, under strict rules of non-attribution, to discuss contentious issues and develop non-binding policy recommendations. Ideally, track-two participants are in a position to transmit the insights from these interactions to official channels, potentially influencing the track-one discourse. In some cases, track-two dialogues may even feed into a more formal track-one process.<sup>2</sup>

For the past three years, the authors have participated in track-two discussions on the technical dimensions of implementing a WMDFZ in the Middle East. Many of these discussions emerged out of a larger regional security dialogue facilitated by the University of California-Los Angeles's Center for Middle East Development. A task force of policy and technical experts from the region, acting in their personal capacities, has been meeting regularly to discuss specific, narrowly-defined technical challenges that are likely to be associated with implementing a WMDFZ. The term "technical" is interpreted broadly to include the various technological, scientific, and organizational elements that might go into facilitating, and assessing compliance with, a zone. The task force is unique in its focus on the prospective zone's technical dimensions, the diversity of expertise it brings to the table, and its ongoing meeting schedule that is not bound to formal conferences, resolutions, or initiatives. Importantly, representatives from all countries in the region are invited and encouraged to participate, and indeed the group has facilitated interactions between key regional players that would not otherwise interact in regular diplomatic forums.

### **Proceedings on the Biological Weapons Dimension**

The task force met four times in 2010, twice in 2011, and three times in 2012. The group opted for an initial topical focus on biological arms control challenges. In addition to offering the fewest political obstacles to discussion, the biological dimension was notable for being largely unexplored in previous research on a prospective zone. In order to establish a base level of common understanding, 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 (BWC), the role of declaratory confidence-building measures in assessing BWC compliance, and the responsibilities of the scientific community in controlling BW. Participants also toured an actual biological research laboratory where key concepts related to controlling biological pathogens were demonstrated in context.

Initial discussions revolved around three primary subjects: the challenges inherent in verifying biological arms control compliance; threat perceptions on both state and non-state actor acquisition of BW; 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 that collectively detailed the diversity—and in some cases convergence—of regional perspectives on various elements of biological arms control and the larger WMDFZ question. By the second meeting, participants decided that dialogue would benefit from the formation of a technical experts subgroup. The 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 onto new topics, the subgroup will continue to meet and explore opportunities for regional cooperation and confidence building on biosafety and security technical issues of common concern.

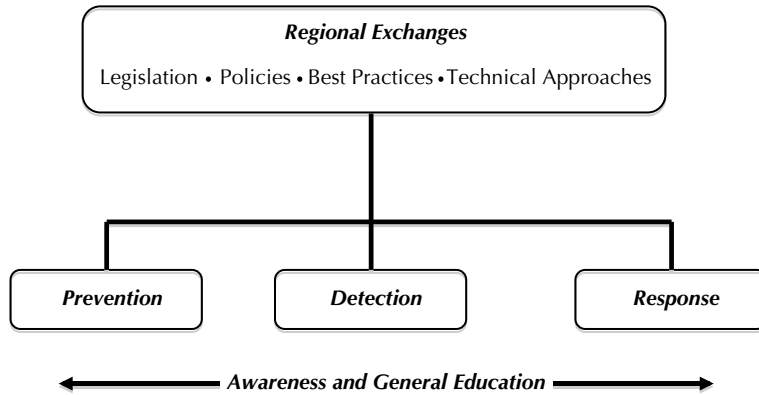
**A Framework for Regional Confidence Building on the Biological Dimension**

Task force discussions suggested agreement on certain common principles or pillars that should serve as a foundation for 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; and
- *Response* and mitigation in the event of an attack using biological weapons.

Each of these pillars must 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 the three pillars should serve as guiding foundations for near term regional confidence building and cooperation on addressing BW threats, whether within or apart from a prospective zone, as shown in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**  
 Framework for regional exchange and confidence building in the biological dimension.



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).<sup>3</sup> Such exchanges could 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 more than twenty 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; and
- Joint regional workshops/conferences on education and ethics in the life sciences, including exchanges of information and discussion of the current status of 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; and
- 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.

*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; and
- Joint workshops on mechanisms for ensuring rapid and effective access to medical countermeasures in the wake of BW attacks, including research and development, manufacturing, and stockpile of vaccines; delivery logistics; and dispensation strategies.

None of these activities would necessarily require binding political commitments, nor would they impose unnecessary burdens on legitimate bioscience activities. Many of these activities, if implemented, could also help countries realize additional benefits in terms of building capacities to manage biological risks and respond to infectious disease outbreaks. Moreover, progress in these areas would provide a foundation for more

comprehensive—and potentially integrated—regional preparedness measures to deal with a broad range of bio-security and public health challenges.

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. 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 biosafety and security best practices has even been implemented through university bioscience curricula.

There has already been limited, cross-national collaboration to monitor infectious disease outbreaks. Regional conferences have brought scientists together 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.

These existing efforts represent important steps in the direction of confidence building. Yet few, if any, activities currently undertaken are truly inclusive, incorporating all countries in the region. 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.

### **Insights and Recommendations**

The biological dimensions of a WMD-free zone dominated the task force's agenda in 2010 and 2011. However, the group touched on a number of additional issues which may receive additional attention at future meetings. These included a conceptual political and technical "roadmap" for implementing a free zone; more rarely considered issues relevant to a zone including radiological weapons, delivery systems, and nuclear test ban verification; and the role that voluntary codes of conduct and statements of principle might serve in advancing the goals of a zone. The group also considered its options for reaching out to track-one policy makers, as well as other track-two forums addressing similar issues. In particular, the December 2011 BWC Review Conference loomed large as an important venue for sharing the group's insights on the bio dimension. Representatives from the group participated in a side panel at the conference, presenting on the confidence-building framework outlined above, as well as existing biosafety and security initiatives in the region.

The task force has operated on the basis of consensus, seeking mutual agreement on topical focus and products meant for wider consumption. It should be emphasized that the following insights and recommendations represent the sense of the authors alone,

based on their reading of 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:

- In 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 biotechnology. This makes the biological weapons dimension 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.
- Discussions repeatedly reinforced a sense that awareness, capacity, and preparedness in fundamental biological safety and security areas remains low throughout the region and across stakeholder communities (including government, the private sector, and academia). 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 institutionalization of an actual zone. This is very likely also true in other WMD 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 BWC verification protocol remains a significant challenge for the global biological arms control regime, particularly if the regime is eventually to serve as the basis for controlling BW within 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-two level, circulated to governments for comment, and ultimately utilized as a track-one confidence-building measure, allowing regional governments to indicate their agreement (at least in principle) on certain fundamental pillars of a regional biological weapon-free zone.

On the larger issue of a regional WMDFZ:

- As noted above, the free zone conference called for in the 2010 NPT Review Conference Final Document and originally scheduled for December 2012 faces challenges, including securing the participation of key regional stakeholders. Group discussions emphasized the importance of not overloading the conference agenda

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

- 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 civil society and other nongovernmental sectors 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 beyond just governments. Recent events in the region only reinforce this sense, particularly developments following the “Arab Spring” in which civil society actors have sought—and in some cases achieved—greater policy voice.
- 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-two 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-two 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 dialogues is beneficial, there is a sense of disconnect between the various initiatives, occasionally resulting in repetitious agendas, duplicated effort, and scheduling conflicts. Organizers and facilitators would do well to better promote awareness, networking, coordination, and exchange across the various initiatives.

## Conclusion

Policy is not made at the track-two level. However, track-two interactions can provide space for contentious policy challenges to be explored in innovative ways not possible through



official discourse. The task force was formed to address one of the most difficult challenges facing the contemporary Middle East. It serves as a unique forum in which experts from the region can hold frank and honest discussions on the technical and political parameters of a zone, attempting to find common ground where official exchanges have previously been unsuccessful. The group was formed with an indefinite mandate; it can be readily dissolved if willed by the participants and organizers. It is the sense of the group and the authors that it should continue into 2013 and beyond, expanding an already ambitious agenda and continuing its contribution to the regional dialogue.

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## NOTES

1. For more background on the Middle East zone concept, including history and recent developments, see "Effective and Verifiable Measures Which Would Facilitate the Establishment of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in the Middle East: Report of the Secretary-General," United Nations Department of Disarmament Affairs, *Study Series*, 1991, No. 22; Patricia Lewis and William C. Potter, "The Long Journey Toward a WMD-Free Middle East," *Arms Control Today*, September 2011, <[www.armscontrol.org/2011\\_09/The\\_Long\\_Journey\\_Toward\\_A\\_WMD-Free\\_Middle\\_East](http://www.armscontrol.org/2011_09/The_Long_Journey_Toward_A_WMD-Free_Middle_East)>; and Mohamed Shaker, "The Middle East Issue: Possibilities of a Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone," *Organismo para la Proscripcion de las Armas Nucleares en la América Latina y el Caribe* (OPANAL), 1997, <[www.opanal.org/Articles/Aniv-30/shaker.htm](http://www.opanal.org/Articles/Aniv-30/shaker.htm)>.
2. For more information on the features of track-two diplomacy, including its application in the Middle East, see Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia," National Security Research Division, RAND Corporation, 2007, <[www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND\\_MG592.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG592.pdf)>; and Peter Jones, "Filling a critical gap, or just wasting time? Track two diplomacy and regional security in the Middle East," *Disarmament Forum* 2 (2008), pp. 3–12, <[www.unidir.org/pdf/articles/pdf-art2726.pdf](http://www.unidir.org/pdf/articles/pdf-art2726.pdf)>. The Council for Security Cooperation in Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) is an example of a track-two process that parallels and informs track-one processes in the region, namely through its interactions with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. For more information, see the CSCAP website <[www.cscap.org](http://www.cscap.org)>.
3. In the context of this paper, "confidence building" is not meant to necessarily imply participation in declaratory confidence-building measures (CBMs) as implemented under the framework of the BWC.