

Dear colleague,

I hope this email finds you and your family well in these difficult global circumstances. UNIDIR staff, including our project team, have been working from home for the last couple of weeks, but we are all healthy and work continues. I wanted to share with you an update on our activities over the first nine months of the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (ME WMDFZ) project, and our contingency and continuity plans for the next 3-4 months in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Project Launch

The project was officially launched in October 2019 at an event in the margins of the UN General Assembly's First Committee.



UNIDIR's Director's Dr. Renata Dwan moderated a panel discussion with project Senior Fellow, Amb. Wael al-Assad and Project Lead, Dr. Chen Zak along with two members of the Reference Group, Amb. Ulyanov (via video) and Tom Countryman.



The event was attended by over 120 senior officials, diplomats, and experts and included welcome remarks by Izumi Nakamitsu, UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, and Ambassador Jacek Bylica, EU Special Envoy for Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. The event was also attended by Ambassador Sima Bahous, president-elect of the UNSG November 2019 Conference.

The project's Reference Group held its inaugural meeting in Vienna in November

2019. We are grateful for the time, advice and insights they shared with us.

Interviews, documents collection and first regional visit

Through interviews, the collection of documents, as well as visiting REGIONAL STATES, the project staff is collecting valuable regional perspectives on the ME WMDfZ and lessons learned from past relevant regional experiences.

Between October 2019 and March 2020 the Project Team conducted 48 interviews with senior and retired officials and experts from 17 countries, including from Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Israel, Qatar and UAE.

We plan to continue to conduct interviews throughout the project. The team also collected over 150 documents from open sources, interviews and private collections. Those include official resolutions, reports, proposals and working papers. Many of the documents are not publicly accessible.

The Project Team also conducted a first regional workshop in Cairo, Egypt in January 2020.



The visit included meetings with Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, League of Arab States representatives, and a workshop on “Egyptian perspectives on the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone” at the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs.

Presentations and interviews

The project team also participated in multiple panels to present the project’s objectives and planned activities with a view to increasing knowledge and awareness about the project, ensure transparency and generate buy-in, as well as to conduct interviews, where relevant.



Presentations and interviews took place, among other places, at Track 1.5 Middle East regional security dialogue conferences in August 2019 and February 2020, the Sixth EU-Iran Forum in November 2019, the Amman Security Colloquium, organized by the Arab Institute for Security Studies (ACISIS) in Amman, Jordan, at a BWC Meeting of States Parties side event in Geneva also in November, and at the 2019 EU Non-

Proliferation and Disarmament Conference and Wilton Park NPT Workshop in December 2019.



In February 2020 we participated and presented at a workshop organized by UNODA in New York in preparation of the NPT 2020 RevCon Cluster 2 meeting.

The Nov. 2019 ME WMDFZ Conference

Members of the team also attended and conducted interviews at the November 2019 ME WMDFZ Conference in the UN Headquarters. There are preparations underway to hold an intersessional meeting in June 2020 in New York to learn from other NWFZs experiences and should it go ahead, the team plans to attend.

A workshop on the ME WMDFZ and the 2020 NPT RevCon

The Project Team convened a day-long event in Geneva in February 2020 supported by the Permanent Mission of Japan in Geneva.

Reference Group member Amb. Alison Kelly served as a speaker at the event.

The event examined WMD arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation developments in the Middle East and their broader implications including for the 2020 NPT RevCon.

Panels included the state of the ME WMDFZ and the JCPOA, and how these two issues will play out at the upcoming 2020 NPT Review Conference; how the ME WMDFZ was addressed in past Review Conferences and pathways forward, including the relevance of other regional experiences to the Middle East. Many speakers at the event felt that the 2019 Conference could have a positive impact on the upcoming 2020 NPT Review conference by relieving some of the pressure that was seen in previous NPT review cycles around the ME WMDFZ issue.



Event speakers also made concrete proposals for a prospective ME WMDFZ around three different themes: nuclear verification, Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), and how to address chemical and biological weapons in the context of the Middle East. A summary report on the discussion as well as

the key findings from the event will be published in April 2020.



Coronavirus contingency planning

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic a number of activities planned for March-June 2020 have had to be postponed. These include a planned side event at the 2020 NPT RevCon, and project team visits to Iran and Israel.

We are using this period of global confinement to complete a detailed chronology of the evolution of the ME WMDFZ issue for publication on the UNIDIR website in May, as well as to begin preparing and drafting of the narrative text on the Zone. Where possible via virtual means, meetings, interviews and briefings with stakeholders are continuing.

The Project Team has been also busy with presenting and writing about the implications of the pandemic on the region's security environment. Dr. Farzan Sabet, ME WMDFZ Project Researcher, published an article titled "[The Humanitarian Gap in the Global Sanctions Regime: Assessing Causes, Effects,](#)

[and Solutions](#)". The article examines why states under sanctions continue to experience problems importing vital goods like food and medicine despite the existence of humanitarian exemptions. The need to address these problems is even more pressing in light of the pandemic. Dr. Chen Zak published an article "[Coronavirus in the Middle East: A rare opportunity for diplomacy?](#)" in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, examining the boost to nationalism in the region as a result of the pandemic, but also noted few promising signs of cooperation to address this cross-boundary threat. You can also watch a virtual [panel](#) Dr. Zak participated in earlier this month on Biological Warfare, Bio Threats and Pandemics in the Middle East hosted by The Middle East Institute. Last, Chen published an article in Feb. 2020 on [Regional security from the ground up](#) on the need to complement high-level negotiations with developing regional technical and bureaucratic capacities.

Please don't hesitate to let me know if you have any questions.

With best wishes of health and safety.

Chen Zak

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