



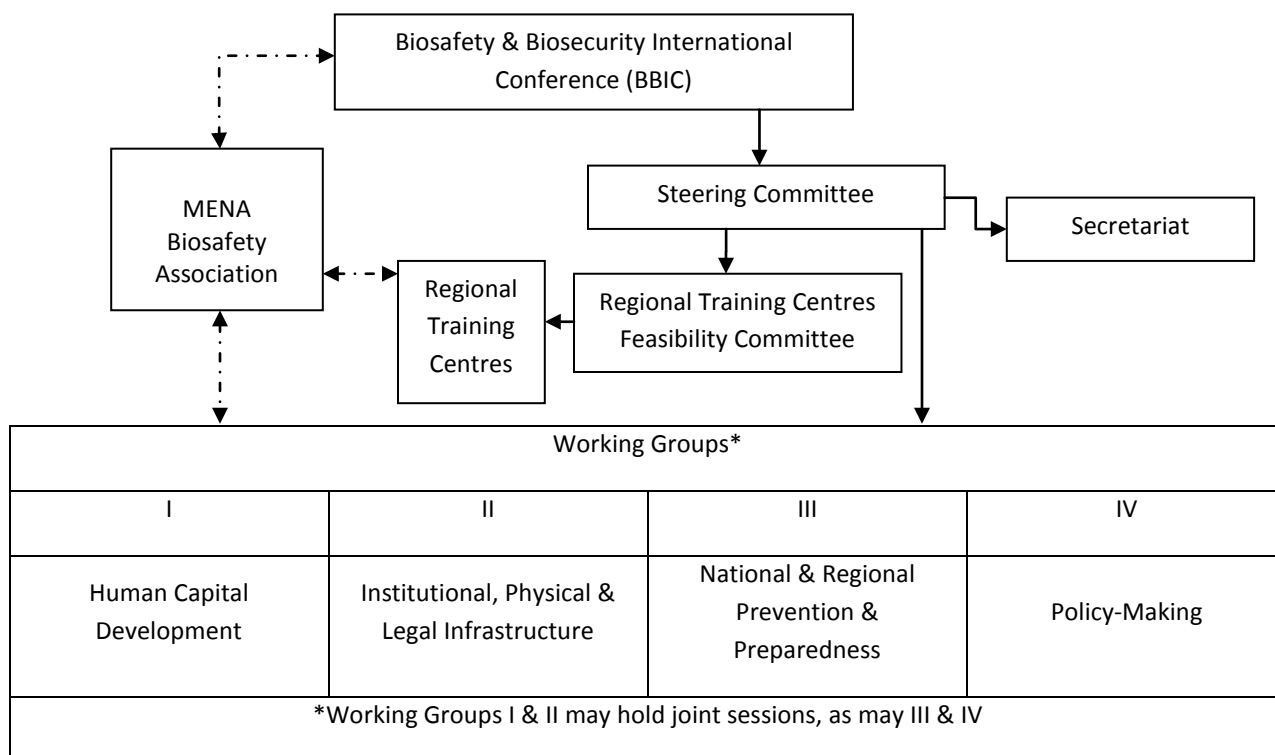
Building National Biosafety and Biosecurity Strategies in the Middle East and North Africa

Tim Trevan

Summary

The BBIC Process aims to promote the development of biosafety & biosecurity strategies in the Middle East & North Africa (MENA). The BBIC Process started with the first Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conference in Abu Dhabi in 2007, which examined biological threats in the MENA region & how to mitigate them. A Core Group met in Abu Dhabi in 2008 & produced a Framework Document entitled 'Developing Biosafety & Biosecurity Strategies for the MENA Region'. The second Conference, in Casablanca in 2009, adopted the Framework Document & issued the Casablanca Declaration plotting the way forward. The Declaration called for setting up a Steering Committee, Working Groups, ad hoc Committees as required, a Secretariat, and a regional biosafety and biosecurity association, and agreed to hold a further International Conference in Amman in 2011. The first meetings of the Steering Committee and the Regional Training Centres Feasibility Committee were held in Jordan in July 2009.

The proposed structure of the BBIC Process is thus:



Most developed countries have by now instituted whole-of-government biosafety and biosecurity strategies. For example, the UK and the Netherlands have created national risk registers, incorporating biological risks. The UK has a risk assessment methodology, which all policy-makers are required to apply to policy issues across the board. Other countries, such as Australia, ensure that biosafety and biosecurity strategies are incorporated at all levels of government (federal, state, city) and that they are internally consistent and compatible.

The Need

The countries of the Middle East and North Africa are not yet at this point. Some, such as the UAE, are fairly advanced in their federal and emirate planning. Others have not yet begun the process of creating a national strategy.

The need for comprehensive biosafety and biosecurity strategies has been explicitly recognized by the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. At the 1st Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conference held in Abu Dhabi in 2007 the countries of the region acknowledged their need for and desire to establish such strategies nationally and regionally. The Conference ended with a final statement which listed many areas in which the region needed to develop capacities and legislate with regard to biosafety and biosecurity. In May 2008, this list was developed further by a Core Group of interested experts from the region into a Framework Document. This document maps a process by which countries of the region can develop their national and regional biosafety and biosecurity strategies.

The Framework Document was discussed as the foundation document of the 2nd Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conference held in Casablanca in April 2009 and, with a limited number of amendments, adopted it and its recommendations as the roadmap for creating national and regional biosafety and biosecurity strategies in the Middle East and North Africa.

Among the Framework's suggestions was the establishment of a Steering Committee to monitor and ensure implementation of the Conference's recommendations, and four Working Groups to assist the countries of the region in developing consistent national strategies (e.g. through the adoption of common technical standards, common risk assessment methodologies, common performance metrics, etc...) which can be operated together as a regional strategy. The Steering Committee held its first meeting in Jordan in July 2009, adopting its rules of procedure and its work programme. Chairman for the Working Groups were appointed and work has started to recruit members to the Working Groups and establish each Group's work programme.

Through the efforts of the first and second Biosafety and Biosecurity International Conferences and the Core Group meeting, much has been achieved in raising awareness within the region of the need for national and regional biosafety and biosecurity strategies. However, much work remains to be done and the momentum needs to be maintained. To reach the goal of consistent and harmonized national strategies across the Middle East and North Africa which work together as a common and seamless regional strategy, there needs to be a consistent and sustained support effort.

Given that there are 21 countries¹ within the region, a multi-year effort is envisaged.

¹ Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman.

Future Work

Participants from the region have agreed to:

- convene semi-annual meetings of each of the four working groups. At each meeting, the working groups will run concurrently and in one location to minimize costs. However, successive meetings would be held at different locations throughout the region in order to help raise awareness of the issues throughout the region and to obtain wider governmental 'buy-in' to the process;
- convene semi-annual meetings of the Steering Committee to monitor progress and to direct more effort where it is needed. It was agreed that this committee should include the chairpersons of each of the Working Groups and should meet immediately after the meetings of the working groups in order to receive the Working Groups' reports, assess progress in the entire 6 months since the previous working group meetings, and energize/set the agendas for the ensuing working group intersessionals;
- convene BBIC11 in Amman, Jordan, in order to maintain the biennial schedule of conferences;
- convene a Special Conference in 2012 with the aim of finalizing and adopting national and regional biosafety and biosecurity strategies. Muscat, Oman has tentatively been identified as the site for this conference, as a major EU/WHO project on national biosafety and biosecurity policy development in Oman should be completed in that time frame and should bear fruitful lessons for the entire region; and
- establish a small secretariat to provide ongoing, intersessional support for the Steering Committee and the Working Groups.

Expected Outcomes/Benefits

The expected outcome is the adoption of comprehensive and compatible national and regional biosafety and biosecurity strategies by the majority (hopefully all) of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

This project is planned to be undertaken in conjunction with two other projects to:

- develop regional training centres to teach a common biosafety and biosecurity curriculum tailored to the needs of the region, available in Arabic, English & French to practitioners from all MENA countries;
- create a Middle East and North Africa Biosafety Association to disseminate best practices, improve standards and education, involve practitioners in the development of better regulations and facilities, and spread concepts of bioethics.

Taken together, these projects should have considerable regional and international benefits in the form of:

1. reduced risks from pan- and epidemics of any nature and from any source, be it natural, accidental or deliberate, by enabling earlier detection of and reaction to outbreaks resulting in earlier control and elimination and so fewer casualties and a considerably lower risk of the outbreak spreading to other regions of the world;
2. better responses to biological crises through better risk protocols, better education, and better preparedness;
3. reduced unintended consequences of research, activities and policies through a greater awareness of the issues and through better communication and wider adoption of best practices and codes of ethics;
4. better governmental policy-making and policy choices;
5. reduced biological accidents through better biosafety and biosecurity standards and practices;
6. reduced risk of intentional biological crises through better design of and better security systems and procedures at biological facilities.