

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE CBRN RISK MITIGATION POLICY IN LEBANON: A SUCCESS STORY IN BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

An interview with Dr Bilal Nsouli, CBRN National Coordinator

Ten years ago, before Dr. Bilal Nsouli assumed his post as the first official Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) National Coordinator for Lebanon and National Focal Point for the European Union (EU) CBRN Centres of Excellence (CoE) Initiative, little existed in terms of CBRN risk mitigation policy in the country. In his own words, “this was the first time we started CBRN response, before this no one knew what CBRN meant.”

In 2012, the Lebanese Prime Minister made the decision to formalize the process of becoming part of the EU CoE Initiative through Dr. Bilal’s appointment as the National Focal Point. At that time, Dr Bilal was Director of the Lebanese Atomic Energy Commission, an institute working under the aegis of the National Council of Research. With the Prime Minister’s support, Dr. Bilal assembled a National Team, composed of the army, interior security forces, general security, state security, civil defence forces, and of course the Lebanese Atomic Energy Commission (LAEC). The Prime Minister’s decision included a provision to allow this structure to be assisted by any ministries if needed. As such Dr. Bilal was able to call upon technical ministers from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Health, Environment, Agriculture, Industry, Economy and Industry as well as members of academia from different universities.

In this extensive interview with F3 Magazine, Dr. Bilal recounts t this feat, which was not an easy task. Not only did he have to deal with government agencies that were working in silos, but he also had to contend with issues of information security, whilst simultaneously attempting to attract external donors. Even with the support of government’s formal mandate, it was impressive to see what Dr. Bilal and the CBRN National Team achieved in such a short period of time. Despite the challenges of the last couple of years – including the tragic Port of Beirut explosions in August 2020, which killed more than 200 people and left many more wounded – Lebanon is investing resources and adopting a systematic approach to tackle CBRN risks.

Lebanon has also managed to attract the interest of several external partners, including the European Union, the United Nations, Canada, the United States, France and many other national and international organizations, to build capabilities in the field of CBRN risk mitigation, resulting in an impressive number of projects coordinated by Dr. Bilal and his CBRN National Team.

Let’s start from the beginning. What did CBRN preparedness look like before the EU CoE Initiative? “We started the effort to join the European Union Centres of Excellence Initiative for CBRN risk mitigation in late 2010 – before 2010 the only time CBRN was used was within another project with a significantly different context.

In 2008, we had a project with the European Union (EU) – funded by the EU Delegation in Beirut through a

financial arrangement with Lebanese Customs – in order to set up a system for combatting trafficking of radiological and nuclear materials. The implementor of this project was the International Atomic Energy Agency – as the nuclear security office at that time – and coordination came from the Programme Management Office of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

From this project, we formed a follow-up steering committee. It was composed of the Programme Management Office of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the European Union, IAEA and beneficiaries. This project focused on capacity building for combatting the illicit trafficking of radiological and nuclear materials. One of the Work Packages of this project was planning the emergency response to potential incidences of seized smuggled radiological or nuclear materials at the Lebanese borders. We started to discuss this issue only focusing on emergency response. Later on, IAEA and the EU proposed widening the response plan to encompass CBRN response. This was the first time we heard about CBRN in Lebanon. It was in mid-2008.”



What were the main challenges that you encountered during this early phase of the project?

“From the beginning the security issue was put on the table: it was difficult to divulgate information that was needed for the gap analysis. At that time, we were very transparent, and we discussed the issue with the different directorates that showed some restriction about divulgating different information. We told them clearly, if we wish to knock the socks off potential donors, we need to show them where we are, what we are doing, what our vision is and what we need from them. We need to show them our seriousness and professionalism. If not, you cannot attract donors.”

It is certainly impressive that you and your team were able to establish CBRN governance and interagency coordination so rapidly in Lebanon. What do you think is the secret to the country’s success?

“For CBRN risk mitigation, if you appoint a National Focal Point (NFP) from a list of given stakeholders, this NFP cannot put the all the stakeholders around the same table; we need a higher political cover. Th Prime Minister’s Office is at the head, and it means, as NFP, I can work under the umbrella of the Prime Minister’s Office, I can make the necessary meetings, by inviting whoever is needed. And, you can head a meeting by representing the Prime Minister’s Office. If you do not have this capacity, if you are not really the guide and if you’re not strongly supported by the political system. you cannot work properly

For example, I was able to send letters of invitation directly to the different ministries and directorates, without going through another structure. If you are able to do this, it means what you're saying is coming directly from the Prime Minister.

The second key of success? We need to offer the directorates and ministries serious projects where they can see the difference before and after. Directorates and ministries need to follow up and to be involved in activities and dialogue."

Aided by the EU CoE Initiative, Lebanon established a comprehensive CBRN National Action Plan (NAP) for the years 2017-2020 that included prevention, preparedness and response to CBRN risks. Now you are planning a workshop to update the NAP next June. Can you give us an insight on how the priorities of Lebanon in terms of CBRN risk mitigation have changed?

"Priorities are something dynamic, it depends on the threat and risk. For example, from the beginning, in 2012-13, our top priority was chemical weapons used by non-state actors (NSAs), because in Syria and our neighbouring countries, there was evidence of this issue. The top priority was how to protect Lebanon and the Lebanese population from any NSAs coming from Syria to Lebanon.

Now, the priority has changed. After the Port of Beirut explosions, the priority is totally different. Now, the priority is: to know where we have dangerous chemicals of security concern; where we have dual-use chemicals; to revisit the regulations governing the licensing process of different practices related to these materials; and to see how to destroy and neutralise disused and dangerous chemicals. These are the top priorities, it's something huge, and part of the update will be centred on that. From this priority, we can extract a lot of activities."



Can you tell us more about the lessons learned and the activities relevant to the CBRN risk mitigation policy that were triggered by the Port of Beirut explosions?

"First of all, we were surprised by the vulnerability of the system in the Port of Beirut, and we were also

surprised by the governance system at the Port. At the Port, we have different directorates who needed to coordinate with each other, and from what we heard after the explosion, it was really surprising. From our point of view there are two different things: firstly, how do we improve coordination in the CBRN response and, secondly, what do we need to learn? This explosion taught us a strong lesson that we need more coordination between all directorates in Beirut, and this needs to be done through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

We also need a new governance vision in the Port of Beirut: this wasn't a case of someone forgetting to send a notification to another. We need to re-evaluate the whole system of port governance to avoid another explosion somewhere in Lebanon. We need to know how different directorates coordinated with each other. Their manner of coordinating didn't work because this explosion happened, those materials had been stored for years in Beirut. This means you have a governance problem."

Looking to the future, I would like to ask your opinion regarding hybrid threats in relation to CBRN. We have seen in the news that cyber-threats are also impacting the CBRN world in some countries. What do you think about this threat from the CBRN risk mitigation perspective?

"Lebanon has made an effort during the past four years in close cooperation with France to establish a National Committee dealing with cyber security. We have prepared a National Policy and National Action Plan for cyber security for Lebanon, which was endorsed by the Council of Ministers in 2018. This cyber security plan covers chemical industries in Lebanon (as there are no nuclear or sensitive biological facilities in Lebanon).

In the future, cyber security and CBRN will be directly linked through relevant chemical industries and some critical infrastructure dealing with CBRN materials, for example in the storage of radioactive waste, in order to avoid any sabotage or theft of this material by non-state actors.

There is an intersection between CBRN and cyber security, so cyber security needs to take into account the whole spectrum – the financial sector, telecommunications and CBRN."

Dr. BBilal, if you could leave us with one message for the international community in terms of CBRN security, what would it be?

"In most countries, CBRN is implemented with the support of donors, not national budgets. I believe that our countries need to be aware of the importance of that issue and we need a part of national budget to be used for strengthening national capabilities, together with cooperation with international donors. My second message? We need to coordinate all national activities. We need to carry out activities within the endorsed National Action Plan, because, if not, we won't be efficient at all – we will duplicate activities and not make use of the existing resources correctly. We need coordination between donors and stakeholders, and to form a multilateral approach to assistance."

