

INTERVIEW WITH:

Dr Bilal Nsouli



Emphasizing the Unique Importance of Resolution 1540: A Call for Clear Vision

Concerning the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1540 (2004) (UNSCR 1540), Dr Bilal Nsouli is a uniquely influential figure in Lebanon's past and present. Twelve years ago, he was appointed by the Prime Minister's Office as the National Focal Point for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) safety and security. Since then, he has ascended to become the Director General of the Lebanese Atomic Energy Commission, as well as the Head of the recently established National Commission for Implementing Lebanon's International Obligations related to Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and CBRN.

Under Dr Nsouli's guidance, Lebanon remains committed to advancing the comprehensive implementation of UNSCR 1540. In this interview, he emphasizes the pivotal role of effective border controls and accountancy systems, stressing their significance at both the national and regional levels. Additionally, he highlights the imperative of developing a tailored national action plan for resolution 1540, emphasizing the importance of conducting a thorough gap analysis to inform its content.

Dr Nsouli also shares some key learnings from Lebanon's experience with implementing resolution 1540, which may prove valuable to other Member States. Namely, he underscores the crucial role of high-level political support in the successful implementation of any international instrument. In Lebanon, the National Commission has greatly benefitted from the Prime Minister's backing, ensuring that it has a clear mandate to implement the resolution. Linked to this, comprehensive awareness of the resolution and its purpose among different political and governmental stakeholders is also mentioned as a crucial factor for effective implementation.

Looking ahead, in addition to fulfilling its UNSCR 1540 obligations, the Lebanese Government is actively preparing to finalize an Additional Protocol with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This proactive step further underscores Lebanon's commitment to global efforts aimed at preventing WMD terrorism. Dr Nsouli's insights and experiences, shared in this interview, offer valuable guidance for Lebanon's continued adherence to UNSCR 1540 and serve as a source of inspiration for other nations pursuing similar objectives.

HEAD OF LEBANON'S CBRN-WMD NATIONAL COMMISSION

Dr Nsouli, thank you so much for agreeing to speak to the 1540 Compass. Before we begin, could you give our readers a brief overview of your work in Lebanon, particularly with regard to how it links to UNSCR 1540?

Certainly. At the national level, I have a dual role. Firstly, I serve as the Director of Lebanon's Atomic Energy Commission, where my responsibilities encompass direct engagement with the IAEA on matters of safety, security, and safeguards. Safeguarding, in particular, is directly intertwined with WMD affairs.

My second role began 12 years ago when I was positioned in the Prime Minister's Office during our participation in the European Union's (EU) CBRN Centres of Excellence. In 2012, the Prime Minister appointed me as the National Focal Point, marking the inception of our national CBRN team.

In 2015, Lebanon had two separate structures related to WMDs: the National Authority for implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention and the CBRN National Team. The latter was tasked with establishing the technical and legal infrastructure necessary for Lebanon's compliance with international obligations regarding CBRN.

However, by the end of 2018, recognizing the potential for duplication and seeking to improve effectiveness, the Prime Minister dissolved these two structures and established the National Commission for Implementing Lebanon's International Obligations related to WMDs and CBRN. Comprising representatives from 24 directorates, institutions, and ministries, this

Commission is responsible for implementing Lebanon's international obligations regarding CBRN and WMDs from both legal and technical perspectives. It is specifically mandated to implement resolution 1540 and to provide necessary reporting on its implementation.

We initiated a process of convening all relevant stakeholders to engage in discussions centred on a unified understanding of our objectives, priorities, and the path forward. This collective effort aimed to establish a common vision, ensuring alignment on key priorities and objectives for the years ahead. Recognizing the diverse roles and responsibilities across different directorates, the formation of this Commission was prompted by the need to improve inter-agency coordination and cooperation. WMD-related obligations span multiple ministries with distinct mandates, ranging from defence to safety and technical matters.

In my capacity as the Head of the CBRN and WMD Commission in Lebanon, our direct reporting line to the Prime Minister's Office greatly facilitates our operations, providing the crucial political support necessary for our endeavours. Notably, in 2022, the Prime Minister's endorsement of guidelines and operating procedures for the Commission represented a significant step towards institutionalizing our role and functions within the national framework.

Considering Lebanon's context, which elements of resolution 1540 do you believe hold the most significance for your country?

For now, our foremost priorities, as outlined in the CBRN National Action Plan, revolve around

bolstering border controls and enhancing the accountability of materials associated with WMDs. Let me elaborate: when we discuss border control, it's imperative to strengthen the capabilities of Customs to establish a robust control framework, not only for dual-use chemicals but also for dual-use items and materials. Industrial oversight, inspection, and awareness within the industrial sector also rank among the top three priorities.

Efficiency demands that the primary pillar be the establishment of a sound legal and regulatory framework, enabling any concerned entity in Lebanon to implement resolution 1540 effectively and without hindrance, ensuring enforcement. Our Commission, tasked with implementing resolution 1540, has initiated an exercise to compile an inventory of our existing regulatory and legal framework to conduct a gap analysis. While we may have commendable legal frameworks in certain aspects of CBRN and WMD risk mitigation, shortcomings in implementation at the technical level pose challenges. Neglecting the need to train Customs personnel, integrate dual-use chemicals and materials into their control systems, and raise their awareness about import and export control and reporting to our Commission could exacerbate these challenges.

Complementary to border control is the implementation of an inventory scheme. This is crucial as it provides a starting point. Historically, numerous potentially dual-use items were inadequately accounted for and controlled. Establishing a comprehensive list of traders and industries dealing with these items is essential to develop our inventory. Once the inventory is complete, coupled with a robust border control framework for these items, I believe we will be on the right path.

It certainly seems that establishing an inventory scheme is paramount for Lebanon in its efforts to implement UNSCR 1540 effectively in the coming years. Would you agree with this assessment?

Absolutely. And here's why: While industries typically receive a lot of attention, my experience has taught me that traders are equally crucial. They import large quantities of materials, storing them in various locations and managing these stocks over extended periods, sometimes up to a couple of years. This means that even if there are no immediate operations involving a particular item within a year, it could still be in circulation due to the stock imported six months prior, covering the country's needs for the next two years. This underscores the critical importance of the inventory process and the necessity of focusing on traders in our efforts.

And what would you say are the other critical priorities for the implementation of resolution 1540 in Lebanon in the coming years?

From my perspective, it's crucial for us to develop a dedicated national action plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1540. Currently, we're collaborating with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to establish a national action plan for complying with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). I believe we should extend this approach to resolution 1540 as well.

Looking ahead, I'll emphasize later in the interview the necessity of having a dedicated project for this purpose. UNSCR 1540 stands apart from other instruments issued by organizations like the IAEA and OPCW, requiring a clear vision based

on our current capabilities, what we've already achieved, and what future actions are necessary for effective implementation. Conducting a comprehensive gap analysis will allow us to develop a national action plan, and then we'll require assistance to execute these activities through a dedicated project.

What do you consider to be the most significant milestones or successes in preventing the proliferation of WMDs to and by non-State actors in Lebanon in the past 20 years?

I believe that the establishment of the Commission is a significant step towards the implementation of resolution 1540, because, for the first time, it is written that resolution 1540 needs to be implemented by this structure. It is a starting point.

Another success is the increased awareness concerning WMD affairs and, especially, resolution 1540 over the past two or three years. You know, when we started, some ministries lacked a comprehensive understanding of their obligations under 1540. While they were familiar with general WMD issues and international obligations, resolution 1540 was less recognized. However, through concerted efforts, we have successfully raised awareness about resolution 1540.

Lastly, assigning the Commission the task to work on resolution 1540 is also a notable achievement. It provides a tangible platform to initiate concrete actions for its implementation. Previously, discussions about resolution 1540

could linger for months, often getting lost among various ministries' and directorates' responsibilities. Now, with the inclusion of resolution 1540 implementation in the Prime Minister's decision establishing the CBRN-WMD Commission, we have a clear starting point for action. This represents a significant step forward in the journey towards proper implementation.

Given the continually evolving security landscape in the Middle East, what do you consider to be the most pressing concerns or threats regarding the proliferation of WMDs by non-state actors?

Since Lebanon does not have nuclear materials – and there are no nuclear facilities – I consider the chemical threat to be significant. In my view, enhancing border control, inspection, and inventory, particularly in various chemical industries, should be a priority aligned with the current security situation in our region. The production of mustard gas by the Islamic State in Iraq, using unconventional methods¹, serves as a poignant example. The accessibility of such information on the Internet underscores the urgency of strengthening border control and accounting for dual-use materials.

Unlike radioactive materials, which are subject to comprehensive regulatory oversight, with a registry of all items entering the country, their usage, and licensing, chemicals pose a greater challenge. Responsibilities are fragmented among different ministries, such as the Minister of Industry and the Ministry of Trade, lacking a cohesive approach for effective control. Therefore, I believe it is imperative to intensify

¹ Note from the Editor: The UN and other news outlets have reported that between 2014–2017, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, produced and used chemical weapons. For more information: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137492>

efforts toward border control and the oversight of dual-use chemicals, given the current circumstances.

When it comes to the chemical risk you highlighted, do you believe that the resources provided to Member States by the 1540 Committee are adequate to effectively address this ongoing threat?

Yes, I believe we have two different dimensions for this question. Firstly, the existence of a permanent Committee dedicated to reporting on the implementation of resolution 1540 to the UN Security Council provides assurance to Lebanon and other countries that this resolution carries significant weight and demands proper execution. This underscores the international community's keen interest in ensuring its effective implementation.

Secondly, the 1540 Committee serves as a platform for fostering mentorship or partnerships between countries, particularly between those more advanced in implementation and those less so. This enables the exchange of experiences and expertise, allowing less advanced countries to benefit from the knowledge of their more experienced counterparts. Additionally, the 1540 Committee can provide assistance to Member States, tailored to their specific capabilities, to enhance their understanding and implementation of the resolution.

This dual dimension is crucial as it ensures continuous attention and importance is attributed to the implementation of resolution 1540 within the international community. Without such follow-up mechanisms, international obligations may risk being sidelined amidst competing priorities. Therefore, the presence

of the 1540 Committee serves to reassure States of the ongoing significance of this issue and encourages concerted efforts towards its implementation.

So, what actions can international and regional organizations take to contribute to the implementation of UNSCR 1540 in Lebanon?

We need to have a dedicated project for the implementation of resolution 1540, not just at the national level, but also regionally. Regional cooperation is essential, particularly for border and export control, which are integral aspects of resolution 1540.

And I believe it is an added value if we start to convince, for example, the EU CBRN Centres of Excellence to have a set of projects for different regions. For the Middle East, I am pretty sure that Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon can have the same language in requesting such kind of projects. This approach yields tangible outcomes: a national action plan for implementation and associated projects to kickstart activities outlined in the action plan. This, I believe, is pivotal for effectively implementing any international legally binding instrument.

Our final question focuses on an important aspect we aim to highlight in the 1540 Compass: How can regional perspectives and expertise be more effectively integrated into efforts to prevent the proliferation of WMDs by non-state actors?

Developed countries play a crucial role in raising awareness and aiding developing states in enhancing their security, intelligence, border control, accounting, and detection capabilities.

Visiting developed nations to observe how resolution 1540 is implemented firsthand can greatly benefit developing countries.

In our region, we have various structures such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the League of Arab States, encompassing all 22 Arab states. Additionally, organizations like the Arab Atomic Energy Agency and the Council of Ministers of the Interior and Foreign Affairs wield significant influence. To bolster awareness of resolution 1540 in our region, effective dissemination of information is imperative.

Moreover, countries with efficient structures in our region should share their experiences. Regional cooperation is vital, given our shared language and culture. Facilitating exchanges of experts among regional countries will enhance expertise and strengthen regional capacities in preventing the spread of WMDs by non-state actors. This collaborative approach is key to addressing the challenges effectively.

The establishment of the Commission is a significant step towards the implementation of resolution 1540, because, for the first time, it is written that resolution 1540 needs to be implemented by this structure. It is a starting point.



Under the leadership of Dr Nsouli, and funded by the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments of the European Commission, ARZ 2023 (pictured) was a field exercise co-organized by UNICRI and the On-Site Assistance Expert for the Middle East Regional Secretariat; Credit: EU/ Joe Saliba