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GHD | EMPHNET: *Policies for Progress Series*

Policy Brief#3

Develop and operationalize a mass gathering emergency plan to prepare for, detect, and respond to potential chemical, biological, or radiological threats/casualties posed by WMDs

This policy brief provides practical recommendations on developing and operationalizing an emergency plan to ensure better preparedness, detection, and response to effectively counter potential chemical, biological, or radiological threats/casualties posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) during Arba'eenia mass gatherings in Iraq.

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- The Arba'eenia mass gathering (MG) is one of the largest religious MGs globally and *the* largest in Iraq. It occurs annually in Karbala City with the participation of several million visitors from Iraq and more than 40 countries from the region and other parts of the world.
- This mass gathering poses biosecurity concerns as it may become a hotbed for the rapid transmission and spread of dangerous diseases in Iraq and its after-event spread globally. In addition, MGs can serve as a target for bioterrorism attacks organized by terrorist groups such as ISIS.
- This event is a soft target vulnerable to potential chemical, biological, or radiological threats as well as casualties posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) unless context-tailored and practical emergency plans are in place that ensure better preparedness, detection, and response to effectively counter such threats.
- Developing an Arba'eenia emergency CBRNE plan for rapid and timely operationalization is a critical policy option that will ensure better preparedness, detection, and response to threats posed WMDs during the event.¹

GHD and EMPHNET: Working together for better health

Global Health Development (GHD) is a regional initiative created to support countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) and to strengthen their health systems to respond to public health challenges and threats. GHD was initiated to advance the work of the Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET) by building coordinating mechanisms with Ministries of Health, International Organizations and other institutions to improve population health outcomes. As an implementing arm to EMPHNET, GHD aligns its strategies with national policies and directions. Serving as a collaborative platform, GHD | EMPHNET is dedicated to serve the region by supporting national efforts to promote public health policies, strategic planning, sustainable financing, resource mobilization, public health programs, and other related services.

BACKGROUND

A mass gathering (MG) event, be it organized or unplanned, by definition is an event that is capable of straining the planning and response resources of the community, state, or even a whole nation hosting that event². Mass gatherings, such as Arba'eenia, create a need for careful pre-planning and preparedness due to their impact on resources and potential delays in response to emergencies. Relevant stakeholders and authorities need to prepare for mass gatherings with additional resources. Such additional resources can only be utilized efficiently if there is a well-thought emergency preparedness plan in place. To further facilitate the implementation and operationalization of emergency plans, it is essential to have other special establishments well ahead of the Arba'eenia event, such as a special situation room or a control/command center, in which all the essential stakeholders are present³. As one of the largest MGs, Arba'eenia may cause delayed emergency responses through different mechanisms. Therefore, adequate preparedness, pre-planning, and sufficient resources for timely response are essential elements of a good emergency plan for the local community, governorate, and national levels. Rapid and timely response to any potential threats posed by such a huge gathering necessitates a carefully designed emergency plan and the involvement of various sectors to ensure that any measures taken are timely, adequate, and well-coordinated.



One of the crucial need areas confirmed through GHD|EMPHNET's long-term experience in the Arba'eenia mass gatherings in Iraq is an emergency plan to ensure better preparedness, detection, and response to any potential threats during the event⁴. It is worth noting that Iraq has a multisectoral response plan for potential Bioterrorism events. This was developed by CTR and UNCCT in 2021 and likely remains in its infancy. However, it could be a strong starting point. Additionally, CTR intends to kick off a similar project in which it will develop a plan for a chemical terrorism event.

The following factors stressed the need for a unified emergency plan to prevent and mitigate potential CBRN threats.

1. The influx of people from different countries, including many countries with serious epidemic-prone diseases like Polio, (where a good number of people attended the MG from Pakistan and Afghanistan), meningitis (also a good number attended from the African meningitis belt), and others.
2. The recurrent wars, sanctions and political instability of the country over the last decades had weakened the 3C and



made it vulnerable for terrorism and ISIS invasion is a good example.

3. The engagement of different sectors particularly the general public with inadequate monitoring and control by the official authorities makes such MG events easily penetrated by terroristic organizations.

4. The poor infrastructure of the country like monitoring of water safety, health auditing of food makers, transportation networks, the civil design of the major cities involved in the MG.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The possibility of chemical, biological, or radiological threats, as well as risks of casualties posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and other threats during Arba'eenia mass gatherings, leaves a huge gap area to be filled. The only way to address this and other grave concerns around the possibility of intentional and unintentional disasters is to have a carefully designed emergency plan in advance.



Having an emergency plan will ensure better preparedness, detection, and response to counter the above-mentioned potential threats during Arba'eenia effectively.

Such a plan will also allow for more efficient coordination and collaboration among different sectors and save time and resources in case any action and response is needed.

UNDERLYING CAUSE OF THE ISSUE:

The intentional terroristic attacks by missiles, car bombs, chlorine gas, and others on the crowds during the MG in the preceding years indicate the necessity to be well prepared as well as engaging all relevant sectors. Several incidents of intentional chlorine gas explosions were reported in Iraq in the

previous years⁷, some of them during the MGs. As another recent example, the total number of reported injuries during the 2022 Arba'een MG days was more than 2600 incidents, resulting in more than 400 deaths (CFR more than 15%)⁸. This indicates the dire need to be vigilant, well-prepared, and capable of timely responding to all types of threats.

The lack of a carefully-designed, multidisciplinary and multisectoral, and comprehensive emergency plan that covers and supports efforts related to risk mitigation/prevention, disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. Such a plan should gather all relevant authorities and stakeholders under a central reference location such as a special situation room, EOC or a control, command, and communication (c3) center.

Key Stakeholders/Partners:

The following partners play key roles in an institutionalized and integrated real-time surveillance disease surveillance system:

- Ministry of Health Iraq
- Directorate of Public Health, MOH,
- Directorate of Technical Affairs, MOH,
- Directorate of Kimadia, MOH,
- Directorate of Planning and HR Development, MOH,
- Directorate of Operation and Specialized Services, MOH,
- Directorate of Health in the concerned Governorates, MOH,
- Directorate of Inspection, MOH
- Directorate of Management and Financing
- Al-Atabat
- Ministry of Municipalities, Iraq
- Ministry of Environment, Iraq
- Ministry of Transport, Iraq
- Ministry of Interior, Iraq
- Council of Border Ports
- Ministry of Defense
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Ministry of Finance
- Iraqi National Monitoring Authority (INMA)
- National Biorisk Management Committee (NBMC)

- Kurdish National Biorisk Management Committee (KNBMC)
- Prime Minister National Operations Center
- National Security Agency and security services.
- Ministry of Higher Education
- Iraqi Red Crescent Society and other National NGOs
- Iraq Field Epidemiology Training Program, which is under the Directorate of Public Health of MOH
- Any form of community representation.
- GHD | EMPHNET (Technical Advisory Role)

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POLICY OPTION 1 – Mission: *Design, develop, and operationalize an emergency plan to ensure better preparedness, detection, and response to effectively counter potential chemical, biological, or radiological threats/casualties posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) during Arba’eenia mass gatherings in Iraq.*

Objective(s) to accomplish the mission: An emergency plan is the first and foremost element that ensures proper preparedness for any potential threats or disasters before they happen. Such a plan will further support multi-sectoral engagement under one command, control, and communication center and even facilitate good coordination, and efficient operationalization/implementation of other (non-emergency) planned activities. Such a plan will be crucial to an adequate and timely response to any potential threats or disasters during the mass gathering event. As mentioned earlier, it is to be noted that Iraq has a multisectoral response plan for potential Bioterrorism events. This was developed by CTR and UNCCT in 2021 and likely remains in its infancy. However, it could be a strong starting point. Additionally, CTR intends to kick off a similar project in which it will develop a plan for a chemical terrorism event.

POLICY OPTION 2 – Mission: *Activation of the existing (Emergency Operations Center) through official order to make it responsible for the ground*

implementation of the response during the MG and the development of the emergency operational plan.

Objective(s) to accomplish the mission: Activation of the existing EOC, through a high-level governmental order to make it responsible for the development of the emergency operational plan and the on-ground implementation of the response during MGs, The plan can particularly include all events relevant to CBRN threats. This high-level official order will also facilitate the expansion of representation in the EOC to include all relevant stakeholders as the first step towards achieving the goal of developing the emergency plans, to be followed later by developing relevant SOPs and guidelines and to be tested through simulation exercises.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

It is crucial to involve all relevant stakeholders in the planning process well in advance of the MG event. Hence, contacts with all sectors and stakeholders must be made early in the timeline, i.e., several months before the Arba’eenia event. Stakeholders and partners must feel ownership of the plan, which can be achieved through careful stakeholder mapping and analysis, stakeholders engagement strategies, and active involvement of all partners in the development of the emergency plan. This may require more time in the beginning, but it will pay off later on. Given the timeline of the coming Arba’eenia in 2023, it is recommended to start earlier for a successful outcome.

External funding for the implementation of the suggested options under this policy brief (e.g., funds from ISN/CTR and other sources) will be used to supplement any allocated government funds and/or to fill gaps till more sustainable country-based mechanisms are established for regular functioning of this policy initiative.

SOURCES:

1. Iraq MG Reports from 2016 to 2020.

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3. Koski, A.; Kouvonen, A.; Nordquist, H. Preparedness for Mass Gatherings: Planning Elements Identified through the Delphi Process. *Int. J. Disaster Risk Reduct.* **2021**, *61*, 102368. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2021.102368>.
4. GHD | EMPHNET. 2022. "Collaborative Public Health Interventions during Mass Gathering (MG) Events in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.": 24. <https://library.emphnet.net/libraryDocs>.
7. Chlorine bombings in Iraq. (2020, June 28). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chlorine_bombings_in_Iraq.
8. Ministry of Health of Iraq (MOH) Report on Arba'eenia Mass Gathering 2022.