

## COVID-19 and Biological Weapons: Interview with Gunnar Jeremias



Gunnar Jeremias is head of the Research Group for Biological Arms Control. He holds a post gradual MA in Peace and Security Studies and a PhD in political sciences from Hamburg University. Before he started working for the Research Group, Gunnar conducted a number of research projects in the area of bioethics at the Research Centre for Biotechnology, Society and the Environment and worked as a researcher at Greenpeace.

You are currently leading The Research Group for Biological Arms Control at the Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker Centre for Science and Peace Research (ZNF), which is studying the potentially disruptive effects of biological threats on society. More specifically, what is the focus of your research group?

We have been studying issues related to biological weapons since 2004. In 2017, we broadened our focus to include risks of infectious diseases deriving from natural or accidental outbreaks. Our highly interdisciplinary team is composed of mathematicians who help understand the spread of diseases, through modeling, life-scientists who study the challenges of emerging technologies both theoretically and in wet-labs, and social scientists who look at the regulatory aspect of dual-use items, at preparedness, response and the allocation of resources in the bio-field, as well as risk and crisis communication. We also examine the potential of biological events to cause societal disruptions. As shown by the corona crisis, large-scale biological events can have a profound impact of the security dimension.

Is it safe to confute any speculation of COVID-19 being a man-made virus and how does a natural incident such as the COVID-19 pandemic differ from a deliberate biological attack? How do the two threats differ in terms of emergency response?

Speculations of SARS-CoV2 being a laboratory construct were heard from the first days of the outbreak. First, rumors regarded the Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory, in China. Ironically, that lab was built – with the help of French engineers – as part of a capacity-building exercise after the SARS outbreak in 2002/03. Today, it collaborates with countless universities worldwide. Successively, allegations were directed against other countries, too. Sources were conspiracy theorists from civil society and governments. There is no indication, however, that any of the agents that we have witnessed in man, livestock, or crop farming are man-made. Kristian G. Andersen's team

[has proven](#) that the SARS-CoV2 genome cannot be constructed and is, instead, a natural mutation of corona-viruses. Since there is little experience with BW use, it is hard to predict how such use would differ from a natural outbreak and how it would occur. I would assume that an actor who wants to effectively release a bioweapons agent would release it in several locations to increase the chance that an infection-chain starts and augments challenges for emergency responses. Since the uncontrolled spread of contagious diseases would hardly be in the interest of most possible BW users, I would consider the use of non-contagious pathogens or toxins, or programmes directed against the agro-industry as more likely. It is worth recalling that, today, there is no indication of active BW programmes in any state. As for the emergency responses, they would not differ in the relevant respect. A functioning, prepared, internationally coordinated and well-equipped public health system is the backbone of any response to outbreaks of infectious diseases.

How do you assess EU countries' responses to this biological emergency? What further collective measures should be taken to contain the pandemic at the European and global level?

This is the first time that the EU is hit by such a highly contagious pandemic. Higher death tolls in some areas are not a result of slow or inadequate responses. Rather, they show that we were lucky in other places. Measures that were eventually effective in some areas have been applied in all countries. European countries should coordinate public health activities, including the production and distribution of protection equipment – as they are starting to do so now. At the same time, the EU should take the lessons learned to prepare for the next event. Contagious diseases will occur again. However, only countries that have adequate financial means can prepare. Hence, the issue of financial solidarity touches the containment of COVID-19, too.

## THE EU SANCTIONS REGIME AGAINST CHEMICAL WEAPONS

In October 2018, the EU adopted a sanctions regime against the proliferation and use of chemical weapons, which is in many ways unprecedented.

The EU had previously employed sanctions in the fight against the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), in accordance with the [EU Strategy against the spread of WMD](#) and its [Principles on the Use of Restrictive Measures](#). However, WMD sanctions had been restricted to nuclear proliferation, and had been applied within the framework of UN actions vis-à-vis Pyongyang and Teheran.

By contrast, the new sanctions regime goes beyond what has been decided in the UN framework and constitutes the EU's first coercive measure in the chemical weapons' domain. It takes the form of a "horizontal list", which is not subject to geographical or temporal limits, thus holding perpetrators responsible for chemical attacks carried out anywhere and at any time.

A glance at the blacklist shows the advantages of such a versatile approach. For example, designators were able to include in the same list five individuals responsible for chemical attacks on civilians in Syria and the suspects of the Salisbury incident and their accomplices. As a result, Brussels forbade these individuals entry into the EU's territory, froze their assets under EU jurisdiction, and banned the transfer of funds to them.

Horizontal blacklists can be politically useful, since they neither imply nor exclude States' responsibility in attacks. Instead, blacklists expose the identity of perpetrators in a 'naming and shaming' exercise, which might deter future attacks. As some perpetrators are listed both in the Syrian sanctions regime and the chemical weapons blacklist, consideration could be given to the establishment of allocation criteria for each of these lists in the interest of clarity and to avoid overlaps.

**Clara Portela**

European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)/ EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Network



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### Implications of COVID-19:

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## EU INSTITUTIONAL NEWS

### The European Union launches Operation IRINI to enforce the Arms Embargo in Libya

On 31 March 2020, the Council of the EU adopted a [decision](#) on the launch of Operation IRINI, a new military operation in the Mediterranean under the [Common Security and Defence Policy](#) (CSDP). The primary objective of the operation is to enforce the current United Nations (UN) arms embargo on Libya, replacing former [Operation Sophia](#). Headquartered in Rome, Operation IRINI will be re-assessed every four months until its expiration date, set for 31 March 2021.

The new military operation will use aerial, satellite and maritime assets. In accordance with the 2016 [UN Security Council Resolution 2292](#), IRINI will conduct inspections of vessels suspected to carry arms or related material from/to Libya and will provide training to the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy towards the dismantlement of human and arms' trafficking networks.

The Council Decision was adopted following the Berlin Conference: a German-led diplomatic effort, held on 19 January 2020, to strengthen the implementation of UN arms embargo in Libya. Representatives from the permanent members of the UN Security Council and other regional countries who attended the conference renewed their commitment to fully respect the embargo. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, delivered a [statement](#) on behalf of the EU recalling that UN mediation efforts represent the "only sustainable solution" to the Libyan crisis, and noting that the "EU was the only regional organisation to enforce [the arms embargo] after 2016".

With this newly unveiled mission, the EU once again reaffirms its commitment to enforcing the implementation of UN arms embargoes, complementing its diplomatic efforts with actions to bring about a peace agreement between warring factions in Libya.

For more information: [EU launches Operation IRINI to enforce Libya arms embargo](#)

## NETWORK NEWS

### The EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers Series

As part of its mandate, defined in Council Decision (CFSP) 2018/299 of 26 February 2018, the EU Non-Proliferation Consortium is publishing a new series of Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Policy Papers. The latest paper is authored by Tytti Erästö (Finland) is a Senior Researcher in the SIPRI Nuclear Disarmament, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Programme.

*The Arms Control-Regional Security Nexus in The Middle East*

Summary:

The erosion of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement poses a risk for both Middle East regional security and the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. At the same time, it highlights the need to build a more sustainable regional foundation for conflict resolution and arms control in the Middle East. This paper argues that the arms control- regional security nexus should be better reflected in European policy. While maintaining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and preventing further US-Iranian escalation should be the European Union's (EU) first priority, the paper urges the EU to develop a more comprehensive approach in support of regional security, arms control and disarmament in the Middle East. In addition to resolving inconsistencies in current EU policies on regional security, arms control and arms exports to the Middle East, the EU should consider throwing its political weight behind two emerging processes that could provide a much-needed opening for regional cooperation: security dialogue in the Gulf and the annual Middle East weapons of mass destruction (WMD)- free zone conferences at the United Nations. If it involved regional non-proliferation cooperation, the former process could also help manage the negative consequences of the potential collapse of the Iran nuclear agreement.

Read the full paper [here](#)

Previous papers can be found [here](#)

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