

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR KENNETH D. WARD  
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
TO THE OPCW IN RESPONSE TO THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL'S  
PRESENTATION OF THE REPORT OF THE  
OPCW INVESTIGATION AND IDENTIFICATION TEAM FOR SYRIA  
APRIL 8, 2020

Mr. Director-General, Distinguished Ambassadors and Delegates,

The United States of America commends the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) for overcoming technical challenges and identifying a workable solution to allow States Parties to hear firsthand the results of the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team's (IIT) initial work. The Technical Secretariat has shown resiliency in continuing its mandate under the difficult and uncertain conditions of a world pandemic that is gravely impacting all of us.

One thing that is certain, however, is the continued culpability of the Syrian Arab Republic for chemical weapons attacks in Syria. The IIT, established pursuant to the decision of the Fourth Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties in June 2018, issued its first report attributing responsibility for three chemical weapons attacks in Syria. The IIT determined that the Syrian Arab Republic carried out a concerted campaign of chemical weapons attacks in late March 2017. It specifically determined that individuals belonging to the Syrian Arab Air Force were responsible for the sarin aerial bomb attacks on March 24 in southern Ltamenah and March 30 and a chlorine cylinder bomb attack on the Ltamenah hospital on March 25. These attacks were followed by the infamous Khan Shaykhun sarin nerve attack on April 4, 2017 that already has been attributed to the Syrian government.

The release of this first report of the IIT represents a critical juncture for the OPCW and the international community's efforts to address the series of horrific chemical weapons attacks that have taken the lives of so many innocent Syrians since 2013. The IIT has attributed chemical weapons use in Syria to the Syrian regime and, as Director-General Arias said in his statement, "it is now up to the Executive Council and the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention [CWC], the United Nations Secretary-General, and the international community as a whole to take any further action they deem

appropriate and necessary.” In taking such action, we will reinforce the obligations of the CWC that we, as States Parties, are bound to uphold.

It is important to recall the circumstances that led to the creation of the IIT. The Syrian regime has used chemical weapons systematically and repeatedly since it acceded to the CWC and it has been enabled by members of the Executive Council. There is no question that chemical weapons have been used in Syria. It is well documented by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission. The OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) confirmed the Syrian Arab Republic was responsible for four cases of chemical weapons use before Russia shut down the JIM by vetoing its renewal. Vetoes do not exist at the OPCW. Instead responsible states can work together to achieve a common goal to bring us closer to a world free of chemical weapons. This is what happened in 2018 when the IIT was created pursuant to the decision of the Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties. This is also what happened in 2018 and 2019 when the OPCW budget was overwhelmingly adopted at the annual Conference of the States Parties, including provisions for IIT funding. And this is what members of the Council need to do now to ensure Syria is held to account for its blatant disregard for human decency and its international obligations under UN Security Council resolution 2118 and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The United States has full confidence in the professionalism and independence of the OPCW at large and that of the IIT in particular. The IIT’s independent findings in the report put to rest Russia-propagated conspiracy theories that somehow chemical weapons attack sites were elaborately staged. We were not surprised to hear that the IIT had concluded that Syria, Russia’s ally and a party to the CWC, was responsible for three chemical weapons attacks in March 2017. Specifically, “the IIT concludes that there are reasonable grounds to believe that:

- (a) At approximately 6:00 on 24 March 2017, an Su-22 military airplane belonging to the 50th Brigade of the 22nd Air Division of the Syrian Arab Air Force, departing from Shayrat airbase, dropped an M4000 aerial bomb containing sarin in southern Ltamenah, affecting at least 16 persons.
- (b) At approximately 15:00 on 25 March 2017, a helicopter of the Syrian Arab Air Force, departing from Hama airbase, dropped a cylinder on the Ltamenah hospital; the cylinder broke into the hospital through its roof, ruptured, and released chlorine, affecting at least 30 persons.

- (c) At approximately 6:00 on 30 March 2017, an Su-22 military airplane belonging to the 50th Brigade of the 22nd Air Division of the Syrian Arab Air Force, departing from Shayrat airbase, dropped an M4000 aerial bomb containing sarin in southern Ltamenah, affecting at least 60 persons.”

The United States assesses that the Syrian regime retains expertise from its previous chemical weapons activities to use sarin, despite its claim to the contrary. The Syrian military also has a variety of chemical-capable munitions, including grenades, aerial bombs, and improvised munitions that it can use with little to no warning. We also want to point out that most chemical attacks that have occurred in Syria have taken place where the Assad regime has faced battlefield losses, as was the case in the Ltamenah area between March 24 and 30, 2017, when the attacks investigated in the IIT report occurred. This suggests that, despite the country’s accession to the CWC in 2013, Syrian leadership sees chemical weapons as a viable means to weaken its opposition and instill fear in the Syrian people. We believe it will continue using chemical weapons as long as it perceives military advantages as outweighing the costs of breaking its international obligations. Unless stopped, the United States is convinced the Syrian regime, shielded by its Russian ally, will continue to use chemical weapons when faced with battlefield challenges and add to the long list of atrocities it has perpetrated against its own people, some of which rise to the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Chemical weapons use cannot and will not be tolerated. The United States will work with responsible States Parties to ensure that Syria is held accountable and that effective actions are taken by the Executive Council and the Conference of the States Parties to redress this situation. These horrific attacks against the Syrian people must stop. Their perpetrators must be brought to justice. By doing so we will strengthen the CWC and deter future chemical weapons use.

The United States requests that this statement be designated an official document submitted in response to the Director-General’s presentation of the Report of the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team, and immediately posted on both the external server and the public website.