

New Opportunities for Chemical Disarmament in the Middle East

Mrs Grace Asirwatham, Deputy Director-General of the OPCW
at the Amman Security Colloquium, 13 November 2013

Excellencies, distinguished colleagues,

It is a great honour, and personal pleasure, for me to address you here at the 2013 Amman Security Colloquium.

Over recent years, the Colloquium has become a highly respected forum for dialogue on questions of regional and global security. Perhaps at no time in the almost twenty-year history of the Arab Institute for Security Studies has this dialogue found as engaged an international audience as it has this year.

There are three reasons for this – or rather, three still unfolding events, which are capturing our imagination on prospects for building durable security and stability in the Middle East.

- The first was agreement at the May 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference that all States in the region hold a conference on the creation of a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction. This conference has so far failed to take place, but the urgency of its goals has been only reinforced by the recent use – with horrific effect – of chemical weapons in Syria. These attacks form part of a brutal and persistent legacy of chemical weapons use in the Middle East, which must be forever relegated to the past.
- The second event, or chain of events, was dramatically unleashed less than six months after the NPT Review Conference. I speak here of the wave of demonstrations and protests across North Africa and the Middle East that have come to be known as the Arab Spring. While unconnected with moves to advance a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, these events resonate with them in a directly relevant way. By challenging the *status quo ante*, socio-political change in the Middle East has opened up the possibility – for the first time in decades – of rethinking traditional dynamics between neighbouring countries and approaches to regional security.
- The third event is the tragic, ongoing conflict in Syria and the untold suffering it is wreaking on that country's people. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the very generous assistance provided by the Jordanian Government in hosting more than half a million refugees fleeing the violence in Syria, despite the enormous burden that is placing on Jordan's scarce resources.

While this humanitarian crisis shows little sign of abating, one immensely positive development has been the commencement of a process aimed at completely eliminating Syrian chemical weapons – a process which is not without significance for the future of disarmament in the region.

My purpose in raising these three events is this:

There are important points of intersection between them that can act as a catalyst for advancing the cause of disarmament in the Middle East, based on new possibilities for increasing confidence and transparency. These, in turn, can serve to marginalise and, eventually, preclude any role for weapons of mass destruction in a region that has, tragically, been no stranger to violent conflict.

I propose here to explore how these possibilities relate to chemical weapons. In doing so, I also hope to show how chemical disarmament can help inform a more broadly based effort to address weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

In recent weeks, the work of the OPCW in overseeing implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention has been thrust into the international limelight by two truly historic events – agreement on an accelerated programme for destroying Syrian chemical weapons following the accession of Syria to the Convention, and the award of this year’s Nobel Peace Prize to the OPCW.

As accustomed as the OPCW has been to working behind the scenes, we are deeply honoured, and humbled, by recognition of what amounts to a sixteen-year record of achievement towards achieving a world free of chemical weapons.

A record which has seen verification of the destruction of nearly 82% of the world’s declared chemical weapons, as well as the destruction or conversion of almost 93% of all chemical weapons production facilities.

A record which has seen more than 2,000 inspections of chemical industry facilities of interest hosted by 86 States Parties.

And a record which has seen extensive cooperative activities aimed at building capacity for national-level implementation of the Convention, as well as assistance and protection measures and collaboration on peaceful uses of chemistry.

In this record of achievement, we have allowed the OPCW to rise to the new challenge of eliminating Syrian chemical weapons in the wake of the accession of Syria to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Never in its history has the OPCW had to confront such an enormous undertaking – overseeing the destruction of a major chemical arsenal amidst civil war and within compressed timeframes. But our progress so far has only served to reinforce our confidence.

Within six weeks of the historic decision by the OPCW Executive Council on 27 September on an accelerated destruction programme for Syria, OPCW experts, working with our UN partners in the Joint Mission:

- had assisted Syria in the completion of an initial declaration covering its chemical weapons programme;
- had inspected 22 of 23 declared sites; and
- had completed the functional destruction of critical equipment for all of Syrian declared chemical weapons production facilities and mixing/filling plants.

All of these milestones were reached by the target dates set by the Executive Council.

This success draws on the highly effective collaboration between the OPCW and UN in the Joint Mission, established on 16 October, with the OPCW leading on technical issues and the UN providing enabling and operational support. Given the significant risks to our inspectors in an active war zone, UN facilitation of safety and security support has been critical. Joint Mission personnel have shown immense personal courage, dedication and professionalism in what are clearly challenging circumstances.

The next milestone will occur on 15 November, when the Executive Council will meet to approve detailed plans for destruction, with intermediate deadlines ahead of the mid-2014 completion date. Work in The Hague is well advanced towards this end, with the active participation of Syrian officials.

Nonetheless, this success, underpinned by close cooperation with Syrian authorities, is still only the beginning of a difficult road – a road along which we cannot afford to travel at too leisurely a pace. To reach our final destination in good time, international support will be crucial. This means strong political support, no less than financial and technical assistance.

At the same time, the OPCW is under no illusions about the extent of the impact that its work will have on the Syrian crisis – or about the highly politicised environment in which this mission is being carried out. Three things are worth bearing in mind in this respect:

- Firstly, the mandate of the OPCW is limited to overseeing the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons – nothing more, or as I prefer to say, nothing less. For it would be wrong to underestimate the security and humanitarian benefits for the Syrian people of destroying these weapons – all the more, given that they have experienced the deadly effects of chemical weapons in the course of this conflict.
- Secondly, delivering these benefits is in the interests of all parties to the conflict. There are simply no downsides to working together in order to ensure that chemical weapons do not feature in the future of Syria. All parties to the conflict must be stakeholders in this endeavour, alongside the international community.
- Thirdly, while consigning the Syrian chemical arsenal to history will not end the conflict, we must not lose sight of the fact that it has been only this objective which has so far attracted consensus in relation to the Syrian crisis. What is more, the diplomatic effort that got chemical disarmament under way in Syria has been far from expended. It offers the best hope for a political resolution and an end to the suffering of the Syrian people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we focus on succeeding in this mission, we should not lose sight of the broader strategic objectives and the opportunities that the Syrian chemical disarmament potentially creates for realising them.

Insofar as the OPCW and its States Parties are concerned, the best guarantee for the integrity and durability of the Chemical Weapons Convention is to secure universal adherence to it. We are redoubling our efforts to persuade those six states (Angola, Egypt, Israel, Myanmar, North Korea and South Sudan) remaining outside the Convention to join without delay to make this a truly universal norm. The Middle East, of course, is front and centre of these efforts – and for good reason.

The Middle East has too often witnessed the indiscriminate lethality of chemical weapons over the past thirty years, while its citizens have for all too long lived under the threat of more widespread attacks. This cycle must be broken once and for all.

The first step towards doing so is accession to the Convention by Egypt and Israel. Such a move would have a resoundingly positive impact for national, regional and global security – precisely because of what sets the Convention apart from other multilateral arms control treaties.

It is worth recalling just what that is.

The Convention is a non-discriminatory international norm that imposes the same rights and obligations on all of its States Parties. As a complete ban on the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of chemical weapons, it relies on declarations by States Parties to measure compliance – but not on declarations alone.

In a fundamental way, the Chemical Weapons Convention differs from other arms control treaties in that declarations must, under the terms of the Convention, be verified through on-site and other verification activities. In other words, each State Party is held to account by other States Parties, working with the OPCW Technical Secretariat, for the veracity of the information it provides. Indeed, the Convention was negotiated bearing in mind the limitations of its predecessors in this regard, notably, the Biological Weapons Convention.

Regional security dynamics in the Middle East are complex, informed, as they are, by a history of recurring conflict. The opportunity presented by Syrian chemical disarmament to advance a practical disarmament agenda is, therefore, extremely rare. But, at the same time, the fact that such an opportunity presents itself in relation to the Convention – an almost *sui generis*, tried and tested treaty – points to achievable, empirically based possibilities.

To this end, we should not lose sight of two benefits – one being a catastrophe avoided, and the other an advantage gained.

Renouncing chemical weapons comes at no obvious strategic cost. Chemical weapons are increasingly unable to win battles, and they are most likely to lose wars. No State can now afford to use weapons that attract universal condemnation, as we so clearly saw in the response to the attacks in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on 21 August.

Giving up such weapons does, however, yield significant benefits that go well beyond traditional notions of security. The Convention has shown that, from cooperation on disarmament and non-proliferation, more broad-ranging scientific and industrial collaboration can flow, with clear commercial and humanitarian benefits. It can be no secret to anyone that security underwritten by economic prosperity, born of growing economic interdependence, is the most enduring security for all.

The accession of Egypt and Israel to the Convention would, therefore, send a powerful signal on several fronts. It would multiply the security benefits accruing from the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons. And it would help build confidence and increase transparency across the region through a non-discriminatory international norm that extends the same rights and obligations to all of its States Parties under international verification.

The Convention can, in this regard, provide a well-anchored bridge for spanning confidence and transparency across historically deep divisions and mistrust in the Middle East. It can likewise provide a supporting arch for more extensive disarmament and security architecture for the region, such as that envisaged by the idea of a regional WMD-free zone.

Because, if the history of arms control has shown us one thing it is this: multilateral disarmament can have no prospect of evolution and success without credible verification. And to secure a durable future for verification, we need more than well-meaning platitudes. We must have the complete confidence and active cooperation of all States.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion, one thing is clear. A final decision to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention will come down to a question of political will – far more so in the case of the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. We cannot harbour any illusions about the toughness of the security decision-making environment in the region, whatever we might think about justifications for defaulting on the side of unconventional weapons.

But because many of us do see a way forward, we also cannot shy away from testing traditional assumptions about security in the Middle East. We need to ensure that all parties are as informed as possible, to avoid opportunities being lost.

Some have argued that current uncertainty in the Middle East demands caution, and rightly so. But caution need not lack imagination, especially when what is at stake is a Middle East living in peace, security and prosperity.

In the case of the Chemical Weapons Convention, imagination does not require a leap of faith. This is a treaty that has proven its worth as a practical disarmament tool, with near universal support. It has a long-standing pedigree of working together with a broad range of stakeholders, winning the confidence of those working in the security establishment, no less than in science and in industry.

At a time when we have been graphically reminded of the horrors of chemical weapons, and when we are savouring the opportunity to remove a major chemical arsenal, history will

judge us poorly if we fail to make the global ban on these brutal weapons a truly universal norm.

Thank you.