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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR KENNETH D. WARD
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
TO THE OPCW AT THE FIFTY-FIFTH MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL**

Mr Chairman, Mr Director-General, distinguished ambassadors and delegates,

Let me start by congratulating you, Ambassador Belal, on assuming the chairmanship of the Council, and by wishing you every success in fulfilling this responsibility. You can count on the full cooperation of my delegation in our proceedings.

Mr Chairman,

The Syrian chemical weapons crisis is the greatest challenge ever faced by this Council—indeed, the greatest threat ever to the Chemical Weapons Convention and its goal of eradicating these heinous weapons.

This Council is convening in the wake of one of the most important reports issued in the twenty-year history of this Organisation. I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Director-General and the members of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) for their dedication, courage, and professionalism in preparing this report. They represent the international system at its best.

After thoroughly investigating and analysing the 4 April incident at the opposition-controlled town of Khan Shaykhun, the FFM has incontrovertibly confirmed that the nerve agent sarin or a sarin-like substance was used in a chemical weapons attack—an attack resulting in the death of approximately 100 persons and with at least 200 more persons suffering acute exposure.

The OPCW's FFM and the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) continue to play essential roles in defending the Convention and the international norm against chemical weapons use, and in advancing the goal of holding those responsible for chemical weapons attacks accountable. Both of these bodies deserve the full support of all States Parties to the Convention. According to its mandate, the JIM has the solemn and urgent responsibility to identify those responsible for carrying out this barbaric attack on Khan Shaykhun. While fully respecting and strongly supporting the FFM and JIM processes, the U.S. believes that there should be no doubt in anyone's mind as to the culpability of the Syrian government, as we have emphasised in this forum and elsewhere.



In addition to chemical weapons use by the Syrian regime, it appears non-State actors also continue to use these despicable weapons. In a May report, the FFM confirmed that civilians were exposed to the blister agent mustard during a 16 September 2016 incident in the town of Um-Housh. This incident evinces certain similarities with the August 2015 mustard incident in Marea which the JIM attributed to the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

Pursuant to the requirements of United Nations Security Council resolutions 2118, 2235, and 2319, the Director-General has officially submitted both of these FFM reports to the JIM through the United Nations Secretary-General. In fulfilment of its mandate, the JIM will now work to identify those involved in the use of chemical weapons with respect to the Khan Shaykhun and Um-Housh attacks.

This Council is confronted with a sobering and deeply serious challenge. From early in the Syrian conflict, the Assad regime has embraced chemical weapons use—a method of warfare renounced by the international community as utterly repugnant to the conscience of mankind. On 21 August 2013, the world awoke to the horrors caused by the Assad regime’s use of sarin nerve agent in an attack on a town controlled by the Syrian opposition. The name of this town, Ghouta, is seared into our collective moral consciousness alongside Halabja and Ieper. Three weeks after launching the Ghouta sarin attack—an attack which killed nearly 1,500 people—the Syrian government proclaimed its intent to join the Chemical Weapons Convention. Far from being based upon any moral conversion, Syria’s accession to the Convention was a calculated decision borne out of fear of military action against the Assad regime.

By the spring of 2014, evidence began to mount that the Syrian government continued to possess and use chemical weapons. The JIM has since confirmed Syria’s use of the toxic industrial chemical, chlorine, in three attacks: Talmenes on 21 April 2014; Qmenas on 16 March 2015; and Sarmin on 16 March 2015. No doubt these findings of Syrian chemical weapons use were just the very tip of the iceberg, as the FFM has confirmed many more chemical weapons attacks involving helicopter-dropped barrel bombs—the incontestable signature of Syrian government chlorine attacks.

In parallel, the OPCW Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) uncovered compelling evidence—much of it from forensic sampling analysis—that Syria failed to declare its entire chemical weapons program. Most alarming were the clear indications that Syria had produced and continued to possess stocks of nerve agent and its immediate precursor chemicals. Syria’s use of the nerve agent sarin in its 4 April attack on Khan Shaykhun should remove any doubt that the Syrian regime continues to harbour an undeclared chemical weapons stockpile.

The evidence of Syria’s continued possession and use of chemical weapons is both compelling and overwhelming. Ignoring the body of evidence compiled by the DAT, the FFM, and the JIM is intellectually dishonest and morally indefensible. In joining the Chemical Weapons Convention, we have all pledged to renounce the possession and use of chemical weapons and, as important, not to tolerate those who possess or use such monstrous weapons—be they governments or non-State actors.

The Syrian government, along with its patron, the Russian Federation, fears the international consequences of Assad’s reign of chemical terror and desperately seeks to shift the blame onto the Syrian opposition—as they have tried to do since the Ghouta sarin attack in

August 2013. In April, Syria and Russia first denied that there was even a sarin attack at all and then, as evidence mounted, quickly revised their narrative, claiming that a cache of opposition sarin had been struck by Syrian warplanes. At other times, Syria and Russia have had yet another tale to tell us, seeking to have us all believe that the 4 April sarin attack in Khan Shaykhun was carried out by the Syrian opposition against civilians in a calculated effort to falsely blame the Assad regime. To this end, Syria purports to have conducted its own investigation utilising the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) and providing samples to the OPCW for analysis. Even though OPCW labs reached similar analytical conclusions as the SSRC reported, Council members should not be taken in by Syria's clumsy effort to remake itself as a defender of the Convention rather than the confirmed offender which all know it to be.

The members of the Council should recall that at the Council's Eighty-Third Session in October of last year, Russia tabled a draft decision in an attempt to project an upside-down version of the realities of the Syrian chemical weapons challenge and the already well established JIM process mandated by the United Nations Security Council. That decision would have called upon Syria itself to conduct a national investigation into confirmed cases of chemical weapons use in which the JIM had already reached conclusions of Syrian government culpability. This draft decision was never adopted and many on the Council rightly rebuffed it as a cynical attempt to have the confirmed perpetrator investigate itself. Now, once again, we are being asked to legitimise this same type of Syrian investigation of itself. Syrian and Russian claims should be seen for what they truly are—yet another fabrication by a chemical weapons perpetrator and its unflinching and cynical ally to market an exonerating counter-narrative.

Regrettably, this Council must face the grim truth that Russia continues to collaborate with Syria to bury the truth and shield the Assad regime from any consequences for its barbaric nerve agent use in Khan Shaykhun as well as numerous other chemical weapons attacks. In February, Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution that would have held the Syrian government accountable for its chemical weapons atrocities and deterred further chemical weapons use. Such a decisive resolution would have sent a clear and unified signal from both the allies and opponents of the Assad regime that, irrespective of political differences on broader Syrian issues, chemical weapons use would simply not be tolerated. Russia's actions have directly emboldened the Assad regime, investing them with confidence that they can continue their reign of chemical terror with impunity secure in the knowledge that their Russian ally would protect them. We should all ask ourselves whether the Khan Shaykhun sarin attack would ever have occurred if the United Nations Security Council had not been prevented from taking action against the Syrian government.

The United States will not cast a blind eye on the transgressions of the Assad regime and the so-called Islamic State and let the hard-won norm against chemical weapons use be eroded and undone. It is too important to our national security and, indeed, to international peace and security. A chemical weapons attack by anyone is a threat to everyone. Soon after the 4 April attack, the United States acquired compelling information that the Syrian military had carried out this barbaric attack on Khan Shaykhun. Seeking to deter and prevent further chemical weapons use by the Assad regime, the United States launched a military strike against Shayrat Airfield, targeting a Syrian military facility directly linked to the 4 April chemical weapons attack on Khan Shaykhun. In taking this step, we sent an unequivocal message that the United States will not allow the use of chemical weapons to become a grotesque new "normal" leading to further acts of carnage in Syria and beyond.

On 26 June, the United States announced that it had identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime that would likely result in the mass murder of civilians, including innocent children. The activities identified were similar to preparations the regime made before its 4 April 2017 chemical weapons attack.

In closing, let me be very clear. The norm against the use of chemical weapons is under direct attack and the OPCW itself is in crisis. A State Party to the Convention, the Syrian Arab Republic, is repeatedly and systematically using chemical weapons against its own people. Russia and its allies on this Council are engaged in a campaign of denial and obfuscation to cover up Syria's violations of the most fundamental prohibitions of the Convention, seeking to shield Syria from any international accountability or enforcement action.

All that is needed for the evil of chemical weapons to endure is for good people to do nothing. Let there be no doubt that the Convention is under siege. We must do much more than repeat customary appeals for full implementation of the Convention; we must fight for the Convention or risk it becoming an empty promise. None of us can abstain from this historic challenge and sit on the sidelines. Membership on this Council carries with it a solemn responsibility to uphold the Convention and defend the integrity of the OPCW. The people of Syria are counting on all of us to end the reign of chemical terror. And future generations, our children, are counting upon all of us to deliver on the promise of finally bringing to an end the shameful era of chemical weapons.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.

I ask that this statement be an official document of the meeting and posted on both the external server and the public website.

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