

Chemical Disarmament: The Nobel, Syria and Future Challenges

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Dean Tufano,
Dear Faculty and Students,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be at Oxford, and to have the honour to address you here at the Saïd Business School.

It is impossible not to get a special buzz from being an Oxford don, even if only for an hour – I am certainly no exception.

As I walked around your university today, I was reminded of the grandeur of this institution, and of its proud legacy in nurturing so many brilliant minds over the ages.

I was also reminded, by the sea of remembrance poppies, of the fate that befell many of them during World War I, whose centenary is now upon us.

A war that witnessed casualties on a previously unimaginable scale.

A war that raised killing to new heights of efficiency through spectacular technological advances and innovations.

A century later, most of these – machine guns, high explosive shells, tanks and submarines – are still with us in far deadlier forms.

Others, thankfully, are not.

Chemical weapons, which were first used on a large scale near Ieper in April 1915, have been comprehensively banned since 1997.

And now, only seventeen years later, we are fast approaching the reality of a world free of these monstrous weapons.

I would like here to describe to you how we got to this point at a time of renewed interest in chemical weapons against the backdrop of efforts to eliminate them in Syria.

But I also want to explain why chemical disarmament is important, and what sort of investments it can make in global peace and security.

Finally, I want to show the complexity of this challenge in the face of a changing strategic landscape, and why addressing it is not just the business of governments.

For the work of ridding the world of inhumane weapons is far too important for any of us to forgo our responsibilities – responsibilities, as I will argue, that we all share.

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Of all weapons of mass destruction, chemical weapons are unique in having been used with brutal regularity over much of the twentieth century.

From the battlefields of Flanders to the suburbs of Damascus, chlorine, sulphur mustard and nerve gases have blinded, burned and suffocated countless victims.

Many of these have been civilians, with the towns of Halabja and Sardasht – and, more recently, Ghouta – becoming emblematic of the misery caused by these barbarous weapons.

This persistent history of chemical warfare has gone together with no less persistent a history of efforts to rid the world of this scourge, once and for all.

It is not well known that an international legal instrument banning the use of poisonous gases in warfare was, in fact, in place well before the outbreak of World War I.

This was the Hague Convention of 1899.

Its failure to avert the chemical horrors of the First World War prompted a push to devise a more binding norm, resulting in the 1925 Geneva Protocol.

But, while it prohibited the use of chemical and biological weapons, the Protocol did not ban their production and possession.

By the end of the Cold War some six and a half decades later, enormous stockpiles of chemical weapons had been amassed.

Most tragically, however, the Geneva Protocol did not prevent chemical weapons from being used.

The next breakthrough came much later from the early 1970s, and in earnest over the 1980s, when negotiators assembled in Geneva at the Conference on Disarmament.

If there was any consolation to be had from the brutal excesses of chemical attacks during the Iran-Iraq War, it was that it focused negotiators' minds on obtaining a truly effective, enforceable and global ban.

These negotiations, assisted by a new spirit of cooperation between the superpowers in the twilight of the Cold War, rendered a treaty with a uniquely comprehensive scope – the Chemical Weapons Convention.

And more than two decades since it was concluded in 1992, the Convention remains the most comprehensive treaty in the history of multilateral arms control.

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The reason I have sketched out this brief history is to show how incremental, sometimes faltering but always determined steps can bring about best multilateral practice.

Not the lowest common denominator, not a second-best compromise, but best possible.

Let me explain what this means in the case of the Chemical Weapons Convention.

First of all, the Convention prohibits not only the use of chemical weapons, but also their development, production, stockpiling, transfer and retention.

This is something that was sorely missing in the chemical disarmament treaties preceding it.

Secondly, the Convention is non-discriminatory.

This means that each and every Member State enjoys exactly the same rights and is subject to exactly the same obligations.

Unlike the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, there are no haves and have-nots – no-one is entitled to produce or stock chemical weapons.

Those members that have such weapons are obliged to destroy them, while those that do not are obliged never to acquire them.

Thirdly, the Convention is backed by an international verification regime.

In other words, its members can draw confidence from the fact that the OPCW – the Convention's implementing body – polices the Convention through monitoring and inspection activities.

The other treaty that bans an entire class of weapons of mass destruction, the Biological Weapons Convention, has no such verification regime.

Only the Chemical Weapons Convention can hold its members to account.

These unique provisions amount to more than fine words – they provide vehicles for turning them into deeds.

And as a result, there can be no question of chemical weapons having any strategic warfare future for as long as the Convention remains in place as the well-established norm that it is today.

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It is these foundations that have helped make the Chemical Weapons Convention the most successful treaty in the history of multilateral disarmament and arms control.

The facts speak for themselves.

In only seventeen years, we have seen our membership swell to 190 States.

We have so far verified the destruction of some 86% of all declared chemical weapons.

And we have conducted more than 2,500 inspections of relevant industrial facilities in more than 80 countries.

It is this record of achievement that last year earned the OPCW the award of the Nobel Peace Prize.

And, more recently, our credentials have been burnished by the mission to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons programme.

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The confirmed use of chemical weapons in Syria in August 2013 made it clear that our success can only be as broad as our reach.

International reaction to the brutal attacks in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta also reminded us that chemical weapons are unacceptable in any quarter.

It sent a clear signal to Syria about the unwelcome threat posed by its chemical weapons.

And it showed that the world's nations are prepared to invest heavily in ensuring they are eliminated.

Syria's subsequent accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention, as unanticipated as it was, opened the way for a rapid succession of events.

Just over one year later, all of Syria's declared chemical weapons have been removed and 98% of them have been eliminated.

I will not describe the details of these achievements here – they are a matter for the public record, which the OPCW has been assiduous in keeping up to date.

What I will point to, however, is how the Syria mission proved the resilience of the Convention, and what lessons we have drawn from this.

Lessons, I would add, that go to the very heart of dealing with any unpredictable event, including scenarios that some of you may be studying in the MBA programme here.

For the OPCW, these lessons relate to having had recourse to:

- prior contingency planning based on realistic scenarios;
- an authoritative but flexible plan,
- a well-subscribed funding and technical assistance base
- well-coordinated partnerships,
- technical innovations, and
- effective public-private initiatives.

All these elements have underwritten the Syria mission.

First of all, the reason the international community was able to act so swiftly is because it had no need for a specially mandated, ad hoc international arrangement.

The Convention presented a ready-made, tried-and-tested vehicle.

Second, our Member States were able to show sufficient flexibility to bend the letter of the law of the Convention – that requires destruction by the possessor state – to better embody its spirit.

This meant agreeing, at the Syrian Government's request, to remove declared chemical weapons for destruction outside the country.

Third, we could count on a collective international effort.

More than thirty of our Member States provided generous in-kind and financial assistance for the mammoth task of removing and destroying some 1,300 metric tones of chemical agent.

This required unprecedented levels of cooperation – in part, amid an active conflict in very compressed timeframes.

Fourth, we were able to overcome political and security obstacles through innovative technical solutions.

When no country was willing to host land-based destruction in its jurisdiction, the US devised a sea-based platform aboard its vessel, the Cape Ray, to neutralize Syrian chemicals.

And, to monitor activity at Syrian chemical weapon facilities to which we could not gain physical access, we employed GPS-mounted remote cameras.

Finally, to expedite destruction operations, we pioneered public-private partnerships by engaging commercial contractors through a tendering process.

From all of this, one thing is abundantly clear.

While overseeing the destruction of a chemical arsenal is routine business for our organisation, there was clearly nothing routine about how we went about doing this in the extraordinary case of Syria.

The fact that we were able to do so with such a high degree of success reinforces the importance of having a textbook, but also the ability to write and add new chapters as we go.

For no opportunity to rid the world of a major arsenal of weapons of mass destruction should be overlooked.

In the business of disarmament and security, we have no choice but to always turn black swans, as rare as they may be, into white ones.

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The OPCW is, of course, very proud of its achievements, in Syria and more broadly.

But we do not consider success to be a commodity fixed in time and space.

Let me recall the reason that the Norwegian Nobel Committee provided for awarding the Peace Prize to the OPCW.

I quote: “for its extensive efforts to eliminate chemical weapons”.

Efforts, I should underline, that are ongoing and evolving.

This applies as much to our need to respond differently to emerging challenges, as it does to having a clear and realistic understanding of what it is that our achievements can contribute to.

Let me tackle these two issues separately before trying to bring them together.

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Syria has preoccupied us over the past year, and it is right that this should have been the case.

It has also thrust the work of the OPCW into the international limelight.

But it is important to remember that, as the destruction of declared chemical weapons rapidly nears completion, the OPCW is just as rapidly adjusting its priorities.

Broadly, this means shifting our focus away from getting rid of existing weapons to preventing new ones from appearing.

This is a qualitatively different, far more difficult task, and one that is far less visible in the public eye.

The changing strategic landscape in which we are undergoing this transition is equally challenging.

It is enough to cite:

- the impact that globalization is having on the structure of chemical industry and society's use of chemicals, and what this means for how we conduct inspections of the future;
- new advances in science and technology that may call into question how we verify compliance with the Convention; and
- the revolution in digital communications that serves to enhance and multiply transfer of know-how that could be misused.

Even more alarmingly, well-organized and resourced terrorist groups have made no secret of their ambitions to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction.

We should all be very concerned that not only are chemical weapon-related materials and technology relatively accessible, terrorists are not deterred by the same disincentives that states are.

But, despite this somewhat grim horizon, I am confident that we can turn challenges into opportunities.

The reason for my optimism is that the Chemical Weapons Convention is a holistic regime that draws its strength from multiple stakeholders.

Worth recalling is that it was forged not by diplomats alone, nor even by diplomats informed by so-called subject-matter experts.

Scientists and industry representatives were active participants in the negotiations from the very outset.

Without them then, there would be no scientifically rigorous, commercially sensitive verification regime.

Without them now and into the future, there can be prospect of modernizing this regime, or of responding to some of the challenges I have just outlined.

With more than 15,000 new chemical substances being added to the Chemical Abstracts Database every day, we simply cannot hope to control all transfers, nor should we try to.

Rather, what we need to do is to co-opt new proactive partnerships that extend our reach by making that reach a commonly held one.

This means developing new synergies between governments and industry, scientists and civil society that assume their own momentum for advancing the goals of the Convention.

To this end, we at the OPCW are expanding our education and outreach efforts across the board.

We are working closely with professional associations and universities to promote a culture of responsible science, so that current and future generations of scientists and engineers better understand the wider implications of their research.

We are exploring the possibility of codes of conduct to prevent the misuse of science, and we are working with industry to streamline and enhance compliance with the Convention.

And we are going beyond our traditional stakeholders to cultivate new ones.

As I mentioned, we all share responsibility for ridding the world of inhumane weapons.

The OPCW has long worked hand in glove with civil society in disseminating information on all aspects of our work, from disarmament to cooperation on peaceful uses of chemistry.

But recent events have provided a unique opportunity to extend our reach even further.

The award to the OPCW of the Nobel Peace Prize last year and the achievements of the Syria mission have dramatically heightened the profile of chemical disarmament.

In this light, our reinvigorated public diplomacy efforts, which have included the development of new materials and e-learning tools, have helped more people better understand what contribution disarmament can make to global peace.

Our intention is simple: to empower more people to participate in making this contribution as productive and comprehensive as possible.

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But it is not only our agenda that is evolving.

The OPCW, as an institution, must also evolve.

In many respects, international organizations are not unlike private corporations.

A particular challenge we face, however, is to harmonize sometimes broad-ranging national interests.

The OPCW's board of directors is, after all, rather large, comprising 190 Member States.

But our order of business has historically attracted a high degree of consensus.

The Syria experience has been especially instructive in this regard.

Not only were we able to narrow differences and combine political will, we successfully projected sufficient adaptive capacity to expedite a highly complex mission comprising many interlocking parts.

In turn, this experience has helped us streamline our operations, improve work practices, create new synergies between different work units, and engage our Member States more productively.

It will be vital that we continue in this vein at the OPCW as we restructure our workforce and resources to better meet the challenges ahead.

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It was not by chance, or for historical convenience, that I chose World War I as a point of reference at the beginning of my remarks.

Let me return to it now in framing what I would like to say about how disarmament serves global peace and security.

Because, with chemical weapons having been removed from Syria, the broader benefits may not be immediately obvious.

The conflict continues, after all, to rage, and casualties continue to mount.

You will recall I noted that, from the carnage of World War I, chemical weapons were singled out for control and, eventually, elimination from countries' arsenals.

In the course of wars, and in their wake, outcry against indiscriminate and inhumane weapons effectively marks a bottom line for how warfare is conducted.

It is our responsibility to continually redraw this line ever higher.

And – through more effective partnerships with science, industry and government – we must work prevent new weapons that have mutate from banned old ones from even making it to the battlefield.

This was the basis for my observing at the Nobel Prize ceremony in Oslo the need to keep before ourselves challenges that are realistic but ambitious.

It is the role of disarmament efforts to drive a wedge – slowly but persistently – through the rock on which war and conflict is founded, and to eventually break this rock.

This is the investment that disarmament and non-proliferation makes to global peace and security – to not only remove weapons, but also to make them unwanted to ensure they do not return.

It is in this sense that the OPCW's motto – “working together for a world free of chemical weapons” – should be understood: as an ongoing endeavour to make disarmament gains permanent.

Now, as the centenary anniversary of the first gas attacks approaches, we need to remind ourselves of the long road travelled from Ieper to Geneva.

And we need to imagine having travelled much further along this road by the time of our children's children.

Thank you.