

Chemical Disarmament: The Syria Mission and Beyond

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Thank you, Dr Grand.

Let me start by thanking the EU Non-Proliferation Consortium and the European External Action Service for convening this important conference.

Scholarly discourse is vital to policy making. The OPCW and similar international organisations stand to benefit from informed and sustained discussion among experts. In our contemporary world with its ever changing security environment, exchanges that take place at conferences like this, in my view, are an essential input to policy formulation and implementation.

Since its creation little over four years ago, the Consortium has more than proven its value by raising the quality of debate on disarmament and non-proliferation issues and engaging a broader range of stakeholders.

All here, I'm sure, would join me in commending the remarkable success of the Consortium. It is also a great pleasure for me to see many good friends in the audience today.

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Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

A lot can happen in a single year.

When you last met at the 2013 conference, it was only days after the Executive Council of the OPCW had taken an historic decision on eliminating Syria's chemical weapons.

We were presented with a unique opportunity to rid the world of a major remaining chemical arsenal.

There were many people who doubted that this could be done.

It was still terra incognita – unknown terrain fraught with risk.

Never before had the OPCW faced a task of such magnitude and importance in such difficult circumstances.

One year on, we can proudly say that we seized that unique opportunity with both hands.

We proved that it can be done. This has been a perfect example of effective multilateralism.

As things stand, all 1,300 tonnes of declared chemicals have been removed from Syrian territory – and 95% of these chemicals have now been destroyed.

Two weeks ago, the Cape Ray, a specially equipped US ship, finished neutralising the overwhelming majority of the most dangerous chemicals in Syria's stockpile.

And facilities in Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States are rapidly completing the destruction process.

In my remarks here today, I would like to briefly recap how we got to where we are in eliminating Syria's chemical weapons programme.

This mission has attested not only to the robustness and responsiveness of the Chemical Weapons Convention, but also to the flexibility and innovation that its members have shown in tackling various issues in unprecedented circumstances.

Apart from Syria I will also outline some of the emerging challenges for chemical disarmament, as well as efforts to prevent their re-emergence, and what we are doing to address them – now and into the future.

The gruesome sarin attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on 21 August last year, together with the international outcry that followed, precipitated an extraordinary series of events.

Russia and the United States played a pivotal role in devising a way forward on Syria's chemical demilitarization. Syria had decided to join the Chemical Weapons Convention on 14 September.

The Framework Document agreed by Russia and the US in Geneva paved the way for an historic decision by the OPCW's Executive Council on 27 September on an accelerated programme for eliminating Syrian chemical weapons.

As a measure of the international community's resolve, this decision was endorsed that same day by unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2118.

It was a day of rapid and efficient diplomacy in response to a completely unforeseen situation.

For its part, the OPCW hit the ground running.

Our first team of inspectors arrived in Damascus within four days after the Executive Council decision was adopted, and the OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria was formally established on 16 October.

Within a matter of weeks, the mission recorded several early successes ahead of set target dates, including submission by Syria of a full declaration of its chemical weapon sites, destruction of all unfilled chemical munitions, and the functional destruction of chemical weapon production facilities.

Despite several delays and challenging hurdles, the mission – and the agreement underpinning it – has set a standard for the international community in responding to disarmament opportunities.

The success of our organisation in working together with the United Nations to oversee the destruction of Syria's chemical stockpile in the midst of a civil war depended on an extraordinary collective effort.

It consisted of in-kind and financial assistance from more than 30 countries, and the European Union. The support ranged from providing transport vehicles, packing equipment and cargo vessels, to dispatching naval escorts and opening up government and commercial facilities for the destruction of chemicals. I wish to take this opportunity to express once again our deep gratitude for the generous financial contribution by the European Union to the OPCW trust fund.

Not only has the Syria mission established a vital precedent for responding quickly and effectively to opportunities for disarmament, it has reminded us that there can be pathways for cooperation, where there is a will.

The mission to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons – during a raging conflict and in highly compressed timeframes – was an unprecedented challenge for us.

It stretched us to new limits, demanding a great deal of professional commitment and personal courage on the part of personnel deployed to Syria, as well as flexibility and innovation on the part of our Member States in expediting removal and destruction operations.

Take, for example, the OPCW inspectors on the ground in Syria, who for the first time in their careers had to wear bulletproof vests on top of their hazmat suits while accessing sites in blistering 40-degree heat.

We were made only too aware of the dangers on 27 May, when a convoy transporting members of the OPCW fact-finding mission looking into allegations of use of chlorine came under attack. An armoured vehicle was destroyed by an IED and the convoy was then ambushed.

In these operational circumstances, the United Nations has been a vital partner for the OPCW in navigating logistical and security obstacles that our inspectors had previously not had to deal with.

There was also no textbook solution for removal and out-of-country destruction of chemical weapons. Simply put, it had never been done before.

It is a credit to our Member States that, in agreeing to such an arrangement, they were able to show flexibility in their adherence to the Chemical Weapons Convention in a way that was true to its spirit.

But more than this was required.

The complexity of the challenge meant that lateral thinking and technological innovation were at a premium.

Two innovative solutions stand out in this respect: the destruction of chemical stockpiles at sea, and engagement with the private sector regarding disposal of industrial chemicals used in Syria's chemical weapons programme.

Faced with the absence of a land-based destruction option, the United States mounted two of its Field Deployable Hydrolysis Systems aboard the Cape Ray.

This creative solution saw the destruction of Syrian stocks of sulphur mustard and main precursor chemicals – some 600 tonnes – in a remarkably short period of time in an effective, safe and environmentally sound way.

The OPCW also pioneered a public-private partnership in expediting the destruction of other chemicals, as well as the effluents resulting from operations aboard the Cape Ray.

Given that many of the chemicals used in Syria's chemical weapons programme were industrial, commercially traded chemicals, the OPCW devised a solution for dealing with them by putting their disposal to commercial tender.

At the end of the solicitation process, two companies – Ekokem of Finland and Veolia of the United States – were awarded contracts to undertake this task, whose completion is now well in sight.

Throughout this process, both the OPCW and the Joint Mission have been assiduous in ensuring as much transparency as possible.

As shareholders in an enormous investment in an extraordinary mission, the international community has been at all times kept apprised of our progress, and of how we are addressing manifold challenges.

Ongoing challenges include finalising arrangements for the destruction of 12 chemical weapon production facilities and obtaining further clarification of Syria's initial declaration. Work in both these areas is well advanced.

At the same time, the work of the fact-finding mission looking into allegations of chlorine gas attacks continues apace.

The success of the Syria mission owes much to the international effort that has underwritten its implementation.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that it was enabled not by a specially mandated ad hoc arrangement, but rather, by an existing, highly effective multilateral treaty – the Chemical Weapons Convention.

It was the Convention's ready-made, tried-and-tested provisions that provided the basis for action.

More than twenty years after it was concluded, the Convention remains the only legally binding international treaty banning an entire class of weapons of mass destruction under international verification.

Let me remind you of what makes this treaty uniquely successful.

The Chemical Weapons Convention is non-discriminatory.

It commits all of its Member States, without exception, to its prohibitions and obligations.

There are no haves and have-nots.

All those possessing chemical weapons must destroy their stockpiles, and all States Parties must ensure, on an ongoing basis, that chemistry is used only for peaceful purposes within their jurisdictions.

The Convention is also comprehensive, prohibiting not only the use of chemical weapons, but also their development, production, stockpiling, transfer and retention.

And, most importantly, its provisions are backed by strict international verification.

As the guardian of the Convention, the OPCW works to ensure that all of its members are in full compliance with their obligations, including through regular on-site inspections at industrial facilities of interest.

To date, we have conducted more than 2,500 inspections in more than 80 countries, with a current rate of some 241 inspections a year.

More than this, the Convention has a provision for challenge inspections to guard against the possibility of any of its members covertly undertaking banned activities.

These provisions are the bedrock of the practical disarmament and non-proliferation record that the OPCW and its Member States have chalked up over the past seventeen years.

A record that has so far seen more than 84% of declared chemical weapons destroyed, a membership that has swelled to 190 States, and ever-growing international cooperation on assistance and protective measures as well as peaceful uses of chemistry.

A record that last year achieved international recognition by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee in a singular honour for the OPCW, acknowledging its extensive efforts to eliminate chemical weapons.

And, as the Syria mission has amply demonstrated, the Chemical Weapons Convention has proven its resilience as an enduring example of what can be achieved in multilateral disarmament.

The challenge of eliminating Syria's chemical weapons programme has only served to reinforce our sense of purpose and sharpen our view of the strategic challenges looming ahead.

These are many.

First and foremost is achieving universal adherence to the Convention.

Let us not forget that the extraordinary collective effort in Syria drew its strength from a near-universal consensus – a consensus based on the established norm that no country should be allowed to possess, far less use, chemical weapons.

There can be no justification for remaining outside a treaty that guarantees the indivisibility of chemical security.

This is the message that we are reinforcing with the six countries still outside the Convention – Angola, Egypt, Israel, Myanmar, North Korea and South Sudan.

Whatever reasons these countries might cite for not being members, they should not lose sight of one essential fact: the Chemical Weapons Convention is an accepted global norm, and the international community has clearly shown that it is willing to act on this basis in relation to Syria.

It is high time, therefore, that all six non-member countries either speed up their internal processes for acceding to the treaty, or reconsider the overwhelmingly persuasive arguments for getting them underway.

We are working closely with States Parties to make this a reality – for we are determined to ensure that the Convention's reach be broad enough to prevent any repeat of tragedies such as the one witnessed in Ghouta.

To this end, more also needs to be done to bolster implementation of the Convention at the national level.

Seventeen years since the Convention's entry into force, many State Parties have still not established mechanisms for meeting their obligations, or, in some cases, even adopted implementing legislation.

This is a serious shortcoming, since we ultimately can only be as strong as our weakest link.

The EU has been a vital partner in seeking to universalise and enhance adherence to the Convention, making generous voluntary contributions to

OPCW activities in this area and promoting EU regulations as a model for best practice in relation to implementation.

EU Member States have especially valuable links in regions where implementation is not yet satisfactory, notably in Africa.

We are looking to better coordinate our efforts to improve this situation, as well as to draw non-States Parties into the Convention.

Other major challenges ahead relate to how we at the OPCW will need to recalibrate our priorities and reallocate resources when, not long from now, we have achieved complete destruction of existing stockpiles of chemical weapons.

In this post-destruction phase, our ongoing success will be measured not just by weapons destroyed, but by weapons not re-built.

For this, we will need to ensure that our verification regime keeps pace with the globalisation of the chemical industry, as well as rapid advances in science and technology.

New improvements in chemical production technology will lead to new possibilities for small-scale production of chemicals.

This will potentially present new verification challenges as the range of facilities capable of making and handling dual-use chemicals increases significantly.

Likewise, the growing convergence of biology and chemistry could call into question the integrity of our current monitoring mechanisms.

A further challenge – one that current global non-proliferation norms are ill-equipped for dealing with – is that posed by non-state actors.

Several extremist groups have made no secret of their aim to acquire and to use weapons of mass destruction.

In the case of chemical weapons, the dangers are very real, especially if we consider the threat posed by options for using conventional means to bring about a toxic chemical incident.

To meet these challenges, we need to stay alert and be able to adapt.

The Syria mission showed the world that the OPCW and States Parties can innovate in the face of unforeseen challenges – it is clear that we will need every inch of flexibility and inventiveness that we have shown to date in order to prepare for these new and emerging challenges.

We will need to find durable and effective ways to address rapid advances in science and technology – not only as potential risks, but also as opportunities for enhancing our security.

New technological developments can be a force for good, enhancing methods of gathering, transmitting and retrieving data which might help with monitoring and verification.

For example, through its Secure Information Exchange Project, the OPCW has established a tool for States Parties to share their declarations and information on transfers of scheduled chemicals by electronic means. This will ensure more

accurate and timely submission of declarations and enhance the effectiveness of the verification regime.

This equally applies to new communication tools, as evidenced by the role that social media has recently played in bringing new sources of data to our attention.

All this can help us turn challenges into opportunities.

To do so effectively as we transition to post-destruction priorities, we will need to expand and bolster our partnerships with science and industry.

We will also need to carve out new constituencies – in universities, schools and civil society – for conveying the message that science must at all times work in the service of peace, and never again for the detriment of humanity.

And we will need to deepen our cooperation with other international organisations.

This goes well beyond our vital partnership with the United Nations, whether on the ground in Syria or in promoting disarmament.

Our interaction with specialised international agencies is identifying new ways of enhancing chemical security, whether in addressing transnational crime and terrorism, or building capacity for chemical emergency response. We are also working with other arms control treaty organisations to exchange best practices, especially in verification.

Finally, we will need to draw on the support of our States Parties in enhancing our historic cooperative venture, as well as that of influential regional organisations such as the EU.

Because it is vital that we work collectively to ensure that our efforts to prevent the re-emergence of chemical weapons is given priority at national decision-making levels – despite the difficulties of quantifying progress in this area.

Syria has shown that no value can be placed on having the mechanisms in place to respond to disarmament opportunities.

The onus is now on us to ensure that these and other disarmament gains are made permanent.

I am confident that the Convention, and its holistic regime, is sufficiently robust to allow us to meet this weighty responsibility.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you all the best for fruitful and stimulating discussions over the next two days.