

60th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs: Dialogue, Disarmament and Regional and Global Security
Istanbul, Turkey, 1–5 November 2013

From CW disarmament in Syria to a Middle East free from CW

Working Group 7

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CW elimination from Syria

- The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) plays a central role in the termination of Syria's chemical warfare programme. As a consequence of the involvement of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations, it is now an obligation of the global community, irrespective of individual positions in the Syrian conflict, to support the CW destruction project. The OPCW-UN Joint Mission in Syria points to the possibilities and opportunities for international organisations to work together.
- Although the destruction of CW will proceed according to an accelerated schedule approved by the Executive Council of the OPCW, it is of utmost importance that destruction operations are undertaken with the maximal protection of public health and the environment in accordance with CWC requirements. OPCW inspectors should therefore not only verify the destruction of the weapons, equipment and facilities, but also certify that the operations undertaken conform to the standards laid out in the CWC.
- While the current focus is on weapon destruction, the international community should also consider ways in which it can create employment opportunities for the scientists and technicians previously involved in the CW programmes to prevent them from becoming involved in weapons programmes of insurgent forces or other countries.
- Despite the success of bringing Syria into the CWC, the efforts currently under way to destroy CW and related equipment and infrastructure do not address the underlying causes of the Syrian civil war, nor do they address the mass atrocities and massive destruction of property and infrastructure. However, both the negotiations that have led to the agreements on the termination of Syria's CW programme and the implementation of those agreements on the ground require cooperation between different parties and have therefore opened fresh opportunities to negotiate an end to the war. Syria's accession to the CWC proves that disarmament may unlock fresh opportunities towards conflict resolution.

Universalisation of the CWC

- Six states remain outside the CWC. Egypt and Israel are the two states in the Middle East not yet party to the treaty. Israel has signed, but not ratified the CWC, and is therefore already committed to the convention.
- The ways in which the international community has ultimately responded to the use of CW in the Syrian civil war underscores the fact that CW have no role to play anymore in armed conflicts and security postures of nations. This appreciation should be a key motivator for Egypt and Israel to join the CWC.
- Within the CWC universalisation programme, the OPCW Director-General could appoint a special envoy for the Middle East who interacts on a continuous basis with both countries in order to prepare their accession to/ratification of the CWC.
- Civil society—both international and national—can play a significant role in the promotion of universal adherence to the CWC in the Middle East.
- A regional process involving Middle Eastern states that are party to the CWC could be set up to explore the needs of Egypt and Israel for joining the CWC. Both the OPCW and civil society can play complementary, but useful roles in promoting and facilitating this dialogue.

Potential impacts on the debate to establish a WMD-free zone free in the Middle East

- The fact that Russia and the United States were able to work together intensely in order to reach agreement on the elimination of Syria's chemical warfare programme may create opportunities for further cooperation regarding peace in the Middle East. In addition, the CW disarmament in Syria can stimulate the process towards a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, as stipulated in the final document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.
- The destruction operations currently under way for Syria could offer insights and opportunities for international collaboration to tackle the technically challenging question of safely destroying dangerous CW remaining in Iraq and, more broadly, ordnance disposal in other states having suffered from armed conflict over the past decades. Addressing legacies of war through international cooperation could be a pathway to building trust in the Middle East.
- Within the broader disarmament community (civil society, etc.) in the Middle East there remains an important need for critical and innovative thinking on the meaning and roles of a regional WMD-free zone. Exploration of options and opportunities should be multifaceted. The process in itself could open up channels of communication between all countries concerned and begin to discern where the common interest lies.

- As the global community can observe how the availability of a formal verification regime and an international organisation enables the current CW destruction effort in Syria under challenging circumstances, the need to equip the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) with similar tools is clearer and more urgent than ever before.
- The tragedy of CW use in the Syrian civil war may have paradoxically created an unexpected opening for new diplomatic interaction, and as a result, for restoring peace to the country. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated in his message to the 60th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs, ‘disarmament issues lie at the heart of the global security agenda’. He concluded by noting that the realisation of a WMD-free zone would substantially strengthen peace and security, benefiting all peoples of the Middle East.