

## Editorial

# The Middle East free of WMD?

Encouraging progress towards Syria's full compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention has been registered in recent times, with destruction of some weapons already taking place under international supervision within a few weeks of the breakthrough agreement in Geneva in September 2013. In the Dossier section, we print the landmark decision on 'Destruction of Syrian Chemical Weapons', agreed in double-quick time by the executive council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

As the Organisation's programme of work is carried out, the success of which will depend on sustained political support from a range of governments and interested parties, this process may help to unlock some other doors. In this issue of *The Spokesman*, the people at Conflicts Forum in Beirut examine a 'point of inflection', or point of change, where new and more peaceful possibilities suddenly become 'fecund', not only in Syria but also in relation to Iran and the wider region.

The world had been just hours away from a blizzard of cruise missiles and aerial bombardment of Syria, with all its destructive and unknown consequences. Two days earlier, in a political earthquake, the British Parliament had voted against joining in such military action. Then President Obama pressed the pause button and decided to seek authorisation for military action from Congress. Some space for peaceful diplomacy had opened up, which was quickly occupied. It was far from plain sailing, as Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, made clear after preliminary agreement had been reached with the United States in Geneva. We reprint Mr Lavrov's extended remarks to the press then, in which he charts some of the progress registered at Geneva in September, and some of the pitfalls which had to be negotiated, as well as unfinished business.

In the latter category, Mr Lavrov urges the early convening of the delayed UN Conference on a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction. State Parties agreed at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Review Conference of 2010 to hold such a gathering, and the conference was scheduled for Finland in late 2012. In November that year, the US State Department announced that the conference was postponed as strenuous international efforts were made to avert yet another Israeli onslaught on Gaza (see *Spokesman 119*).

Israel's substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons, developed in part through collaboration with apartheid South Africa, creates enormous tensions in the Middle East. These tensions are made greater by Israel's

non-adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In addition, Israel is said by the US Congress Office of Technology Assessment to possess undeclared chemical and biological warfare capabilities. In the context of Syria's chemical weapons disarmament, and Iran's readiness to discuss its nuclear programme, the pressing need for a conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East becomes all the greater.

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People from many countries have contacted the Russell Foundation to express their appreciation of the vote against war on Syria in the British Parliament. This clearly helped to pause the rush to attack Syria by the United States, United Kingdom and France, following the harrowing videos of people near Damascus suffering from the effects of nerve gas or already dead from it. The Syrian Government consistently denied responsibility for any such attack with chemical weapons, and they have been supported in this by the Russian Government, who have people on the ground in Syria, while some other local observers have remained decidedly sceptical. The jury is still out on what exactly happened on 21 August and who was responsible.

Back in Westminster, the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, had asked to see the evidence before voting on the matter. He urged the British Government to await the report of the UN Secretary General's inspectors who were, on 29 August 2013, the day Parliament was recalled from its summer break to debate possible military action against Syria, still gathering evidence in Damascus. This rational position eventually found widespread support, although the Opposition's motion was defeated heavily on the day. But the real loser on that fateful Thursday was Prime Minister David Cameron, who lost control of the Conservative Party, with 30 of his MPs voting against him, and many others absenting themselves. One of those absentees was the Tory veteran, Ken Clarke, who had, with cause, previously described Tony Blair's decision to go to war on Iraq in 2003 as Britain's biggest foreign policy mistake since Suez in the 1950s. Mr Clarke, it seems, was not going to compound Blair's gross error by voting for a war on Syria, notwithstanding his own place at Mr Cameron's Cabinet table.

Two days later, President Obama surprised many people and announced his own pause, whilst he sought authority from Congress for a military attack on Syria. It soon became apparent that such authority would not be readily forthcoming as there was in the United States, as in Britain, deep public opposition to bombing Syria. People were far from convinced of the case for such violence.

At the time of writing, with Russian encouragement, the Syrian Government is joining the Convention on the Prohibition of the

Development, Production, Stockpiling, and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction, to give it its full title. A programme of work is being developed to destroy Syria's considerable chemical arsenal under international control. If accomplished, this will be a signal achievement of the Convention, on a par with founding Director-General Bustani's ambition to bring Iraq within the Convention in 2002. Ultimately, he was to lose his job because of this laudable aim (see below).

The situation remains fraught, as it was in Iraq, but the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has much accumulated experience in this vital area of work, which might now be put to good use.

### **Without Exception**

'I am blamed for seeking Iraq's membership of the Chemical Weapons Convention, even though this effort is in full accordance with the decisions of the United Nations Security Council, and with the mandate issued to me by all of you, to ensure the Convention's universality *without exception*. Does dissatisfaction with my actions mean that the universality of the Convention should include some countries, but not others, not Iraq, for example?'

***José Bustani**, first Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, prior to his dismissal in April 2002.*

### **Dagger**

The sixteenth century Iranian dagger featured on the cover of *The Spokesman* is displayed in an informative and free exhibition about Edward Harley, 'The Great Collector', in the Treasury Museum at the Harley Gallery, Welbeck Abbey, in rural Nottinghamshire. Traditionally known as Henry VIII's dagger, it was bought by Edward Harley in 1720 from a sale of part of the great Arundel collection. From the Ottoman empire and probably a diplomatic gift from the court of Suleiman the Magnificent, the blade is decorated with the verse,

*If you stab me a hundred times  
it is not as painful as losing your love  
I cannot end my love for you*

*[www.harleygallery.co.uk](http://www.harleygallery.co.uk)*