

Syria's Chemical Weapons: A Decade of Atrocities and the Path to a Global Zero Use Policy

Introductory Remarks by Toby Dershowitz

Featuring Anthony Ruggiero, Andrea Stricker, and Joby Warrick

Moderated by David Adesnik

DERSHOWITZ: Welcome everyone. Thank you for joining us for an event hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Toby Dershowitz, Senior Vice President for Government Relations at FDD. As many of you tuning may know, FDD is a research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. We are non-partisan and accept no funds from foreign governments.

We come to you today marking a tragic and somber milestone. It's now been 10 years since Syrian civilians rose up in peaceful protest against the Assad regime. Since then, Syrians have been subject to the most horrific and deadliest forms of torture and brutality. More than 500,000 people have been killed. Half the population has been internally displaced and millions more have fled the country to seek shelter. Chemical weapons against the Syrian population have reportedly been used more than 300 times since 2011.

In the coming days, we'll mark four years since the chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun, a town in Southern Idlib Province, killed nearly 100 people and injured more than 200 innocent kids, women, and others. Now most analysts agree that Assad would not have been able to carry out his 10-years of war without the backing of Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran propping up his regime with funding, with military equipment, and with militias on the ground. Significantly, when the international community has sought to hold Syria accountable, the Russian Federation has shielded it from punitive measures.

Our experts will discuss the use of chemical weapons in Syria over the last decade and more importantly what can be done today to prevent these types of attacks from taking place again. So, I encourage you to read our experts full bios online but allow me briefly introduce them:

Anthony Ruggiero is a senior fellow at FDD, who has served for more than 19 years on Capitol Hill and in both Democratic and Republican administrations. Most recently, he served as Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and NSC Senior Director for Counterproliferation and Biodefense. Thanks for being with us today, Anthony.

Andrea Stricker is a research fellow at FDD and an expert on nuclear weapons proliferation and illicit procurement networks. She has done groundbreaking research on the OPCW – the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. We look forward to discussing your research, Andrea.

Joby Warrick is a distinguished Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and a longtime *Washington Post* national security reporter. He'll discuss his latest book, which I read just last weekend, and which I highly recommend to you, titled *Red Line: The Unraveling of Syria and America's Race to Destroy the Most Dangerous Arsenal in the World*. So many lessons really to be learned from it. Joby, thank you for this important work and for joining us.

And finally, our moderator today will be my friend and colleague David Adesnik, FDD's Director of Research, whose own superb research as Senior Fellow at FDD focuses on Syria as well. Thank you for leading this important and timely discussion not only about what has happened in Syria, but the role of the world community in addressing these mass atrocities.

For more information on FDD's work, I encourage you to visit our website: FDD.org. We also encourage you to follow us on Twitter @FDD. And with that, David, over to you.

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ADESNIK: Welcome everyone. Thank you for joining us at FDD. I'm here with Joby Warrick of *The Washington Post* and my colleagues, Anthony Ruggiero, and Andrea Stricker. I'm David Adesnik, Director of Research and Senior Fellow. And we're going to be talking today about chemical weapons in Syria, especially because Joby has published a new book on the subject. I'm going to hold up my copy right here. As you can see, although the text will be reversed online, it is *Red Line: The Unraveling of Syria and America's Race to Destroy the Most Dangerous Arsenal in the World*. With the subtle notice above the Joby has won a Pulitzer Prize, which shouldn't be forgotten.

So, the place where I'd like to start is really with the very first pages of the book. When I cracked this book open, within around three pages I said to myself, "I'm reading all the way," because the initial account there of the CIA asset known as Ayman, a Syrian chemical weapons scientist is so compelling, it's the first time it's been reported. It really, in a lot of ways, changes our perception of everything and how the U.S. was thinking about Syria and the threat of chemical weapons. So, if you could, could you just open and sort of summarize the story of Ayman, why he was so important and what eventually happened to him?

WARRICK: Well, thank you, David and thanks to FDD for doing this event. I'm really pleased to be with everyone today. And you're right, the story of the Ayman was a great hook for me. As soon as I learned the story, I just couldn't wait to dig out more. But basically this brings us back to the murky origins of Syria's chemical weapons program more than 40 years ago. So, way back in ancient history in a way. But it sheds light on features of the program that become much more important later on. And for my purposes, he happens to be a very intriguing character. He's a mole, and that's why my book opens with him. But to tell readers briefly, Ayman is a scientist. He's a key figure in Syria's development of nerve agents, specifically sarin. We just call him Ayman because I agreed not to reveal his last name, his family is out of Syria and there's some security problems or concerns for them.

But the important thing about Ayman is that besides being a gifted scientist, he has a history with the United States. He had gone to the U.S. to study as a young man. He has an affinity for the U.S., he likes Americans and because of this, he becomes a tempting target for the CIA when they're looking for a recruit, for somebody to give them information. And sure enough, some overtures are made, Ayman becomes a spy, essentially a mole inside the chemical weapons program of Syria. And for more than a decade, he turns out incredibly valuable information from inside the secret lab that helps us understand what the Syrians are doing with their program.

It's important because he's not just getting facts and figures, but he actually gives us in one case a sample wrapped up as a Christmas present, some actual sarin that was from their production line. And the value of that, in terms of understanding what the Syrians were doing, and also getting a sense of the quality, that was really important.

Now there's a whole fascinating story with Ayman of what happens to him and let's not give it away, but just to say, it becomes very bad for him, there's a bit of a shocker ending for him. But we do learn a couple of things from Ayman. One is that Syria has a large, very sophisticated chemical weapons program. It contains all the nerve agents that we worry about. It's almost entirely indigenous, meaning that if it goes away or if the production system goes away, they still know how to make this stuff.

It's designated or designed to be a deterrent, it's a strategic weapon to be used against Israel in a future war. But the other thing that's important is that, years later, this information becomes priceless for us as we begin to grapple with the fact that here is a country that's in a civil war and within the boundaries of this country is a dangerous weapon of mass destruction. And we understand really well how dangerous it is and the potential risks, not only to Syrians, but to the region and to people outside the region if some of that stuff ends up with a terrorist group and taken someplace else.

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ADESNIK: Sure. If I could do a quick follow-up, it would be, could you elaborate a little on what it was like in the first, say, two years before the major Red Line incident where the U.S. had a fair amount of intelligence from Ayman. And it seems like we were tracking things so closely that we could know if Syrian rebels, including extremists, were approaching those facilities. Can you describe the atmosphere in the White House as they are watching this risk, that the arsenal could fall into the hands of people who would potentially use it on civilians in Europe or the U.S.?

WARRICK: We did watch it very closely, and we were goaded along actually on this by the neighbors in the region, by the Jordanians, the Israelis, the Turks who were extremely concerned about the possibility of this stuff getting out, because they're next door. So, all of us are watching this very carefully. In the beginning there's a belief that Assad would fall, he would fall to a moderate rebel force, presumably, and then negotiation would take place and we'd get these weapons out fairly quickly. But as 2012 turns into 2013 and more dangerous groups become more prominent on the rebel side, you've got Al-Nusra, which is an Al-Qaeda organization, we get ISIS beginning to pop up in the East. So, there's a concern that regardless of which way the war goes, some of these individuals could end up taking out some of this stuff.

That becomes an animating thing for the administration. They're worried about that scenario and they're also worried about the possibility that Assad could give some of this stuff away to his good friends next door in Lebanon, to Hezbollah. And some intelligence starts to come out in 2012 that Assad is trying to do just that. That's part of the reason that Obama became so concerned over that summer about the movement of chemical weapons, which he keeps talking about in press conferences, in his talks warning Assad, "Don't move the stuff, don't transfer the stuff. If you do, it's going to be a problem for us. It's going to be crossing a red line," to use a famous phrase.

ADESNIK: Yeah, I think that's very interesting because it really helps make clear that Obama's red line was not sort of an off the cuff thing. The initial phrase may have been, but it really establishes the U.S. had very clear intelligence about the extent of that chemical arsenal, even its precise locations. And there really was a considerable threat focused on whether they could be lost or, of course, used by Assad, which is what happened. There is lesser sarin and attacks and then the major attack in August, 2013.

And I should tell people who are considering reading, one of the best things about the book is you keep having these compelling characters and you have this on-the-ground reporting from their perspective, really giving a feel of what it's like to be an arms inspector on the ground. Now on this, I want to shift over to Andrea for some background because the organization that becomes really integral along with the United Nations is the OPCW or the Organisation for the [Prohibition] of Chemical Weapons. It actually goes on to win a Nobel Peace Prize for its role. And it happens to be on the ground, or with a UN team, when the attack on East Ghouta happens, killing around 1400 people in a single day in August, 2013. Andrea, can you tell us, what is this organization that so few people were aware of in August, 2013? What exactly are its authorities and what are its goals?

STRICKER: The OPCW is a body located in The Hague, Netherlands. It oversees the implementation of the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, or CWC. The CWC seeks the worldwide elimination of chemical weapons under international verification. It establishes monitoring and control over toxic chemicals, precursors and production facilities. Under the convention, States commit never to develop, produce, acquire, or retain chemical weapons, to destroy those that they possess upon entry in the convention, to declare their stocks annually, and to submit to regular OPCW monitoring of their declarations.

The group has three main bodies. It has a technical secretariat that handles activities like inspections and is led by a director general. And it has a body made up of all 193 Member States called the Conference of States Parties or CSP, that's the principal and plenary body. The Executive Council, or EC, is a 41 member elected body of Member States, which is like a policy-making body, it advises the CSP. Both bodies seek to pass decisions by consensus mostly, but if necessary they hold open ballot, formal votes if necessary. And they need a two-thirds majority to pass a decision.

ADESNIK: Sure. If you could expand on one thing there, one thing you and I have talked about some in our work is, what are the limits on their powers? If I understand correctly and you could expand on this, the OPCW is generally, with all the Member States or state parties to the CWC, limited to inspecting what has been declared. Unlike say the IAEA, the nuclear inspectors, they don't really have any authority to go outside and hunt for anything suspicious. Is that right?

STRICKER: Yeah, that's right. So, enforcement of the CWC is a major problem, sort of a tale of politics and the nature of international institutions. So, the CWC doesn't empower the OPCW to investigate, like what you said, on declared capabilities on its own authority. So it has to be directed by member state bodies to carry out non-routine inspections. So, there are a few things that member states can do. They can request or vote for OPCW investigations and fact-finding missions if they have compliance concerns. Of course, a state can always refuse to cooperate, they can refuse access. States can also request the OPCW's technical assistance to help establish facts of chemical weapons use on their territories.

Another mechanism they have is called a challenge inspection. That permits a state party to request an inspection actually of another state party's facility if undeclared chemical weapons efforts are suspected. And while it seems like that would be a no-brainer, to have a state call for challenge inspection, for example, in Russia regarding its apparently ongoing Novichok nerve agent program. Well, to use this authority in Syria, it's actually never been done. States fear that invoking the challenged inspection could lead to retaliatory requests from the other state and then diminish the OPCW strength overall.

Another worry is that the inspection may not succeed in detecting violations. For example, if a state hid something prior. And for states like Syria and Russia, which we know use extensive disinformation campaigns about their chemical weapons use, we would expect that they would falsely claim they're exonerated, nothing was found. And then they would use that as further ammunition to disrupt and de-legitimize the OPCW. Which they have been doing over the past few years.

ADESNIK: Yeah.

STRICKER: Um – yeah.

ADESNIK: No, go ahead. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

STRICKER: And just finally, if non-compliance matters did escalate, the CWC does empower the CSP to bring issues to the attention of UN where the UNSC could act, but then they would be subject to the veto of Russia and possibly China.

ADESNIK: Yeah. And of course for our audience, the UNSC is the UN Security Council where Russia and China have vetoes. And we find that a lot of these international organizations, if the final stop on the train is the UNSC, enforcement becomes very difficult. So, now I'd actually to turn to Anthony who, in addition to his wealth of substantive knowledge,

has of course occupied a key position at the National Security Council staff. And 2019, you became the Senior Director for WMD.

Of course, at that time we've already had two rounds of airstrikes where the Trump administration enforced the red line, basically launched missiles and the second case with multilateral participation from the French and British. So, can you give us a scene-setter, what was the situation when you come in in 2019? We know Assad still has a portion of his arsenal. I guess you may know more than was publicly known at the time, but how are you thinking about it at that point? Is there a plan to try to deal with those chemical weapons? Is it a matter of reinforcing deterrence and making him know that there is a red line that's being enforced?

RUGGIERO: Right. For me, when I started in July 2019 as NSC Senior Director, I looked at these issues through the prism of how can we better get back to what was really an international norm of zero chemical weapons use. And so, when it comes to Syria, you have the Syrians, unfortunately, in the past using chemical weapons, and then also Russia I think as Andrea mentioned, Russia using Novichok now a second time against Navalny. So, from our perspective, from my perspective, when I was on the NSC is making sure there were consequences for those actions. You noted military strikes. There's other tools that we have available, high-level diplomatic tools, and we have the Secretary of State, Secretary Pompeo, talking about Syria's use of chemical weapons in September 2019. Also using the OPCW in July of 2020 to adopt a decision to, again to your point, say that Syria needs to declare where all these weapons are because they continue past their previous declaration to use them, and then also to destroy them. And I think the OPCW has said that they have not done that.

So, the question for me, fast-forwarding to today is, how can we ensure that there's enough consequences against those who use chemical weapons to send a message to others that might be contemplating using them in the future? I think it's still an open question. It's a legitimate question for the Biden Administration. They obviously instituted the sanctions against Navalny, but the question is, if there was another chemical weapons use in Syria, would they be willing to use military strikes?

ADESNIK: Is that, I mean, what you would advise as compared to other tools, if Assad really wants to see if he can get away once again with using sarin now that there's been a change of administration? And in that event, what was the lesson, in a way, of the first two rounds of strikes? Clearly the first one didn't deter Assad, but now we've had around three years where after the joint strikes with France and the U.K., we see there's a pause. Is that an indication that deterrence succeeded, or are we conflating it with other factors?

RUGGIERO: Well, I mean deterrence with regard to Syria may have succeeded, but the Russians used chemical weapons six months ago, so when we're talking about – I know this is a Syria event but when we think about global chemical weapons use, the broader question in my mind also is, if we have military strikes that may have deterred Assad, but then there needs to be another layer on top of that to deter even chemical weapons use against dissidents. And to my mind it's the fault of both the Trump Administration and the Biden Administration, frankly, that combined they waited six months before really enacting sanctions against Russia. And then the just concluded OPCW meeting did not have any real decision on Russia. So, what kind of message does that send on the consequences of chemical weapons use?

To your point on military strikes, if you have a very similar situation, now that situation may have been unique where you have a use of chemical weapons, and you have information that you have a high confidence, or at least enough confidence to do a military strike, I think the Russians and the Syrians have been successful in ensuring that there's any large gap between when a strike occurs and when you might have impartial information or enough information where

you'd be able to do something like a military strike. That's going to be the challenge for Biden, is there going to be enough information there for him to act and justify a military strike? Then if he doesn't do a strike, that sends a message that maybe that there is lower consequences during the Biden Administration.

ADESNIK: Yeah, that reminds me of something interesting from the book. It's in the chapter discussing the deliberations within the Obama Administration. Initially, there seems to have been a very strong reaction especially among cabinet members saying, we have to enforce the norm of zero use of chemical weapons. I thought that's interesting because it's saying, we're going to try to enforce something that's relatively intangible. I mean it exists in the form of a treaty, but you can't exactly point to a norm, and are you going to risk war for that?

Yet what we see is, as the norm eroded and Assad escapes punishment, Russia itself later begins to use it, and I think that's one of the interesting consequences that we're still seeing from something that happened in this controversial incident. So, Joby, I was wondering if you could sort of take us back now to 2013 and really the sequence of events following the strike in Ghouta where it becomes fairly quickly that the regime has used these weapons and Obama has to figure out what he's going to do.

Is he going to retaliate? Is he going to ultimately pursue the agreement that he's surprised later when the Russians come around to it? Because I think in a way there's been a lot of mythologizing on this or speculation. Is this the moment when Obama should have held his ground regardless of what the public thought, or is the mistake that he even drew a red line in the first place? So, can you just tell us how that debate played out within the administration?

WARRICK: Well, you're right about the mythologizing and it's complicated. I think that anyone in the administration who was a participant at the time wish they could do a do-over. So many things played out in ways they didn't expect, and they ended up in a very, very awkward position to say the least in the sense that they had sort of made this threat. We have this red line that can't be crossed, and yet they emerge as almost powerless in early September of 2013. Kind of out of options, and just are almost saved by this Russian offer to do something different, which was to try this disarmament thing.

But to bring people back, what I was able to discover in recreating moments and talking to people inside the White House at the time, was that there was this almost unanimous view that we have to strike after this terrible chemical attack of 2013. There was the red line threat itself, which was essentially America's credibility on the line. But there was also this taboo. It was important to enforce this century-old taboo against the use of chemical weapons and it was also a human atrocity, a mass slaughter of human beings. And you have people like Samantha Power in the White House. Her whole thesis coming into prominence as a public figure was on the need to stand up to acts of genocide.

So, all those things are weighing toward or pushing toward a strike, and so the machine goes into motion. The missiles go into launch tubes. The ships are in place. Yet Obama ends up being slowed down by a number of factors. One thing we have to remember that's a bit different about the later strikes is, there was a large chemical weapons arsenal on the ground, and so that becomes a factor. There's a concern about, "Well, if we have a strike, what if Assad uses chemical weapons a second time? Or what if he then uses that as an excuse to give things away? We can't strike the weapons themselves. It's too dangerous because if you hit a stockpile of sarin you might end up spreading it, so that's off the table."

The one thing that slowed them down initially was a bit of an oddity. There happened to be a UN inspection team on the ground in Damascus at the time of the attack, which was just bizarre timing for all kinds of reasons. But it meant

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you had independent fact-finders there at the scene to gather evidence. And as far as Obama was concerned, he knew what had happened. He knew there'd been a sarin attack. He wanted the UN inspectors to come out, and the UN essentially said, "No. We've got a mission to do. It's more important now than ever that we try to gather the facts," and so there's this waiting period while the inspectors finished their work and are slowly brought out of Syria. There's an intelligence issue, which you alluded to earlier.

If you're going to have a military action in the Middle East based on a WMD threat, you have to make sure your intelligence is absolutely ironclad, and you have to be able to present it to the public. So that's taking some time, and as all these things are happening the coalition falls apart. We have what was planned to be a U.S.-British-French strike. The Brits go to Parliament to get permission to do this, and Parliament votes it down, so suddenly you have two countries instead of three. You've got Germany and other countries urging Obama to slow down and wait. Let's do this collectively.

So, Obama does what many people consider just to be an out, kind of a cop-out, which is to go to Congress to try to get congressional consent for this action. As it was viewed at the time, there was a sense that Obama as a candidate was always saying, "It's not appropriate for presidents to carry out acts of war without congressional consent, so let's ask Congress. Let's get Congress to come behind us and do this with us." And the belief in the cabinet was that Congress would say yeah. The Democrats would line up behind Obama. Republicans would want to rally behind the president in this case because of what had happened in Syria.

So, they go to Congress and say, "Let's get this bill approved," and the opposition in Congress was so strong they decided to drop the whole thing. Nobody supported it. Public opinion polls were overwhelmingly against any kind of military involvement in Syria. So, you end up in this situation early September, 2013 where there are no options left. As Samantha Power says, and I quote her in the book, "We were naked. We were out of options until suddenly this Russia thing came along and we had this face-saving way of getting out of what was really a difficult political and diplomatic jam."

ADESNIK: Yeah. The degree of improvisation was something that really struck me that, I mean in a way part of the – People who want to cast it as a particular turning point in history, whether for or against intervention, and sort of want to make it out to be very deliberate and well thought through rather than something that just sort of step-by-step came together in the way you show.

I was wondering if you want to elaborate a little. Something that came up a little earlier in the discussion was misinformation or disinformation. And despite sort of pushing Syria into this deal, as I understand it from the book, basically neither Russia nor Syria ever admits that they used chemical weapons. To this day they continue to basically send deniers to the UN. Can you talk a little bit about, what's your sense of was it a sophisticated misinformation campaign or just flat-out denial? Did people buy it? Did it ever wind up puncturing the consensus?

WARRICK: It is. It's an interesting case study on how disinformation campaigns work these days, because some of it is absolute absurd denial. And you see to this day Syrian spokesmen, the Foreign Minister, UN ambassador, will say straight up that, "We never used chemical weapons ever." That, "Not a single person was killed by this government in a chemical weapons attack, and all these things that you see, they're all false flags. They're all done by rebels or other forces." It's absurd on the face because by now there've been so many investigations and our own intelligence-gathering process. It's very clear what happened in those incidents. Yet the denials continue, and they're amplified, and that's the new part, by what is really to me a very sophisticated echo chamber.

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And it's the bots, it's those unusual allies including academics here and there, or former officials who for some reason believe that Assad is innocent of all this. So, they're trotted up, they write their papers, they question little bits of evidence here and there, try to take apart, particularly the 2018 attack that prompted the second U.S. military strike in a town called Duma outside Damascus. And picking at a couple of conclusions that weapons inspectors made, and essentially suggesting that the whole investigation was tainted somehow, and that none of it can be trusted, and just really chipping away at the credibility of international institutions like the OPCW, and there's an audience for that.

It's not just Syrians, it's not just Russians, but it's people who just want to be skeptical in general about government processes. I see it all the time now myself. A very loud, very boisterous chorus of people who just want to say none of this is real, you can't believe anything that the UN says about what's happening in Syria. People buy it, and it's extraordinary, but it really is part of the world we live in now.

ADESNIK: Just quickly, do you think there's something the UN or the OPCW could do better to resist that? I mean sometimes the advice is, just tell the truth, tell it simply, and the truth will out. Other times though you know, the saying goes back quite a ways, right, "While the truth's still putting on its boots, the lie is halfway around the world." Do you think there's been any missteps in the case of this with OPCW, or is it really a case where it's just hard to get ahead of a very determined propaganda campaign?

WARRICK: Yeah. That's an excellent question, and there are a couple things going on. One is, I think that some of these big international organizations are hamstrung by their own regulations and restrictions. For the longest time, OPCW was in a position in Syria where it could gather information. It could say, for example, that sarin was used in this particular attack, dropped by a helicopter or whatever, but they couldn't identify a culprit. They couldn't say that helicopter with Syrian markings was responsible for this, for killing people with sarin, that was not in their rules to be able to say.

Also, there's sort of an institutional tendency toward hoarding information, frankly, at some of these institutions where they have great stuff, they have sometimes damning information, but they're so careful about how they present it because of international diplomatic debates that arise. And also the final thing is just the ability of single members, or in some cases single members plus their allies of essentially shutting down debate within these organizations, like the OPCW. Where you can't get a consensus, where sometimes you get such a large group of dissenters, and Andrea has written about this quite a lot, where you can't present facts. The system does not allow the kind of, "Here's what really happened, and here's why we think it happened." It gets much more complicated and belabored than that.

ADESNIK: Sure. Good to mention Andrea's research. I mean, it's a good point to bring her in. So I guess, Andrea, what I would ask is, so there's been these efforts to push for accountability, I guess, going on eight years now in the OPCW. Can you bring us up to speed on the most current efforts, including the French-led initiative that has been recently introduced, and also talk a little bit just about the coalitions and what Russia is trying to do to sort of gum up the works so that these kinds of accountability measures can't pass?

STRICKER: Right. Yeah. So, Joby mentioned, a lot of investigations have happened since 2013, obviously Syria has continued to use chemical weapons. So, most recently in 2018, the Conference of States Parties, CSP voted to establish its own unit devoted to determining the perpetrators of chemical weapons use, called the Investigation and Identification Team, or IIT. Of course, Russia, Syria, they don't like these, sort of, assigning blame type bodies. They think it's outside the OPCW's mandate.

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In April 2020, the IIT released its first report assigning blame to several Syrian air force officers. That didn't go over well. As recently as July 2020, the EC voted to give Syria three months to demonstrate compliance with the CWC, and it still hasn't done so. So, really I think states are feeling like they're at the end of their rope on what to do about Syria, as far as using the OPCW.

One thing they can do is, if they choose to, is that under the CWC member States can vote to suspend Syria, suspend its rights and responsibilities at the organization. And there's some indication that that's what the U.S. and its partners may be considering as they move into the CSP next winter.

Between then, they have two more meetings of the Executive Council, and the Council is supposed to advise the CSP to take that kind of action. So, we know that the U.S. and 45 other countries seem to be alluding to coming tough action on Syria, but obviously in order to suspend them, they would have to get a two-thirds vote, so that's about 128 member States in the CSP. That probably will take quite a bit of effort, high-level U.S. diplomacy to corral all those votes. But, yeah, go ahead.

ADESNIK: I was just going to ask you to elaborate a little on the voting dynamics. I know you've been compiling data that other people really haven't combed through systematically. And if you could just describe sort of the coalitions that, I mean, you talk about the two-thirds threshold, and it seems there are a good number of U.S. and allied votes, but because it's still a majority or super majority driven, it's not that easy to block the way that anyone can have the veto at the Security Council. I mean, so who is it that is sort of siding with Russia and who is it that may be on the fence?

STRICKER: Yeah, so around 2017 Russia really started to work to undermine the OPCW by gathering a coalition of States to vote adversely to the U.S. and its partners decisions or simply to just abstain in key votes. That's something the U.S. government, Anthony was definitely active in, in trying to get people to not abstain, to just take a stand and vote the way they should against chemical weapons use.

So, but last fall at FDD, we decided to analyze some of the voting data just to establish any trends. We found that about 27 member states that are typically seen as U.S. adversaries or friends of those adversaries actively side with Russia in OPCW voting. We found about 35 member states frequently abstain, so that makes it harder to pass decisions just because they're sitting on the fence.

And as you said, Russia clearly hasn't been successful in obstructing the OPCW's work. So, what ends up happening is they delay decisions. They try to block agendas from being passed. They try to block budgets, and just cause all kinds of procedural trouble as well. But there's concern that over time Moscow could grow its voting block and peel away the needed votes to take any action where it needs to be taken.

ADESNIK: Yeah. So, it seemed that some of those States are simply not going to come onto our side. That's sort of the core rogue state alliance, you might call it, whether it's Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, the number of sort of Venezuela-oriented Latin American states, the central Asians. They're not going to move, but I guess just, can you say a bit more about who is it that might potentially come off the fence if the U.S. pushed?

STRICKER: Yeah, let's see. So, a lot of countries that maintain positive relationships with the U.S., those that maybe we have significant trade relationships, we give them economic assistance or military help or security, some of those are like Algeria, Argentina, Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, just going in alphabetical order, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Thailand.

There's sort of medium powers, but also some larger powers that definitely should be susceptible to or pleased to vote the right way.

ADESNIK: Sure. If I could turn back to Anthony, I was wondering if you could sort of describe what it looks like from your position when you're actually trying to build these coalitions. I mean, how eager are the closest allies, I guess probably mostly in NATO, to actually press hard? It does seem like the French took something of a leadership role. And when you go to representatives of other countries that may be on the sidelines, I mean, what exactly are they saying, in saying, "We don't want to get involved. This is not our problem," or, "We don't want to put ourselves in a position where Russia may punish us in some way." What was your experience like there?

RUGGIERO: Right. So it takes a full court effort, right? It requires working the phones at every single level. So the question for me is really going to be, is Secretary Blinken prepared to make phone calls? Because that's what it may take with some of these countries. Will National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan do the same?

And now, of course people below them will try and get the votes before that, but it's going to require, I mean, some of the themes are some countries don't want to get into what they might see as a great power competition, depending on your definition of that. But at least get in the middle of the U.S. and Russia. The others, I think it's useful to remind some of these countries, some of what we're talking about here, the scale of the atrocities, the fact that we all agree on trying to get back to global zero, global zero use of chemical weapons.

And when you ask a country that, it's hard to sort of go back against that, but the point that you and Andrea have made as well, they always have this out, which is to abstain, which to them seems like, well, they're not voting no, and they're not voting yes to upset the Russians, but they're in a lot of ways, making it harder for the U.S. and its allies to get the two-thirds vote.

The other thing I would raise too, and I mentioned this earlier, is, now we're talking about Syria, but when we get to the zero chemical weapons use, we obviously treat some of these situations differently, but I think people also notice when the OPCW doesn't act with regard to Russia. It sort of bakes in a double standard when it comes to Russia in this instance being able to use chemical weapons and deny that, and basically say, "Hey, this isn't the purview of the OPCW."

In fact, what I think the U.S. and its allies should have done is treated it like Syria in 2020, and enacted a decision and said, "You clearly used chemical weapons via impartial labs that discovered that, and Russia should be forced to get rid of that." I think at some point we have to have a level playing field when it comes to reacting to these uses.

But as Andrea said, it starts now. And certainly my hope is that, inside the administration, the Biden administration, they're starting to come up with these lists. And in some cases, even when someone says yes, you may have to call them again and make sure they remain a yes.

ADESNIK: I mean, do you think even U.S. principal allies in Europe are willing to go as far as to, I guess, demand a challenge inspection, demand a full investigation, or because it's Russia and they're generally conflict adverse, are they going to ultimately back down?

RUGGIERO: I guess for me, that's an end point decision, right? It doesn't have to start with a challenge inspection. It can be like what happened with Syria and the decision by the OPCW in July 2020, where it just simply says, "You clearly

used a chemical weapon. So you have not declared all of your chemical weapons stocks. So, you need to declare those. You need to destroy those, and come clean on what happened.”

And then if they don't do that, as Andrea said, you give them a deadline. If they don't do that, then you put them in the situation with Syria and you force a vote to remove their voting rights. And frankly, an OPCW without Russia having voting rights might not be a bad OPCW in my mind, but whether we get there. I think on challenge inspections, the challenge is, no pun intended, as Andrea said, is what happens if you do call for a challenge inspection and you don't find anything?

I think the point that was made earlier is the weakness really is in the OPCW enforcement gaps where they're not able to, on their own go to a country and have a technical visit. They have to get Russia to invite them and to cooperate. And that makes it harder to investigate any of these. And the point I made earlier as well, and I think Joby was talking about it, which is really increasing the length between a suspected chemical weapons use and when what most of us see as an impartial investigator or investigation, the conclusion comes out.

I mean, what we're talking about with Syria is something that happened three years prior, right? That investigation concluded in 2020 talking about, I believe incidents in 2017. That makes it really hard, when you're looking at your list of options, it really cuts off some of the options when there's a three-year delay in the finality of an investigation.

ADESNIK: Sure. At this point, I'd like to pivot a little. Again, back in time and back to Joby. I think one of the most interesting stories that kept me reading a while I had a *Red Line* in front of me was this question, which most people didn't think much to ask, which is, okay, so if you find out Syria has all these chemical weapons and we're talking, I guess, more than 100 tons, and they even started to get rid of them, what do you do with it? How do you get rid of that number? And maybe it would become relevant with Russia and Novichok again, if they ever became cooperative, but what you obviously found was that, and it's quite fortunate, that there was some contingency planning a little bit ahead of time in the U.S. government by a fairly remarkable group that came up with something called the “Margarita Machine,” which was reminiscent of the thing where you pull the lever and get your fix of alcohol and sugar. But if you could talk a little more about what was the Margarita Machine, and why was it essential to actually getting rid of serious chemical weapons?

WARRICK: Yeah, and you wouldn't want to drink what came out of this particular machine, but it was a very descriptive term. So, yeah, this is one of the cool stories, I must say, in kind of weaving this yarn together. And it does go back all the way to this scientist spy we had back in the '80s. We really understood what the threat was, not just what Syria possessed, but in what form. The sarin was in a binary form. So it was mostly in this product known as DF. It was liquid, and it combines with another product at the end to create sarin.

And so, the Americans understood, if we get this stuff, if we can get it out of the country, what's the process for getting rid of it? We have experience getting rid of chemical weapons. We had our own program, the Americans, and Russians did, as well. And we spent more than two decades, billions and billions of dollars, building incinerators, going through all kinds of environmental regulations. We're still not finished with it completely in this country. So, clearly, it wasn't something that could happen in Syria. It could not involve an incinerator, because those are very difficult to build and operate.

So, the Pentagon came up with this solution that involved these machines, where you essentially inject the liquids into this mechanical process. They get combined with water under pressure, and it's complicated. But you come up with

Syria's Chemical Weapons: A Decade of Atrocities and the Path to a Global Zero Use Policy

Introductory Remarks by Toby Dershowitz

Featuring Anthony Ruggiero, Andrea Stricker, and Joby Warrick

Moderated by David Adesnik

a product that's still toxic, but it's irreversibly neutralized. It's not going to be sarin anymore. You can't make it into sarin anymore. And so this was this amazing thing that a kind of a small shop at the Pentagon did in 2013. They built it in a couple of months. They made it prototype. They tested it, it worked. They made seven of them and just put them in a warehouse thinking that maybe we'll use them someday, but probably not. And when the situation turned out in Syria, where they actually needed this technology, they were available.

And then becomes this hunt around the world for a place to put the machines, because no country was willing to take 1300 tons of liquid chemical weapons. We kind of went around hat in hand to countries like Albania and to beg them, "Please let us set these machines up here. We'll give you this and that. We'll let you come into NATO." All kinds of bribery went on. No country would take them. And so the last resort was to put these machines on an old Ready Reserve boat from the Navy, send it out to the Mediterranean, pick up the chemicals, and essentially spin circles around the Mediterranean for 40 days and burn off one barrel after another until they were all gone.

The lesson, I guess, of all this is that there does need to be tools available to deal with chemical weapons when they're discovered. We have ability in this country to do it on a small scale. Thanks to this invention, we have a more ambitious system. But there could well be other opportunities. If North Korea has a change in leadership or decides to give up its weapons programs, there could be a very large chemical weapons program to deal with there. So, it's good technology to have, and there isn't really a body in the world, not the OPCW certainly, that's really set up to go to a country and do these kinds of destruction on the ground that you would need to have. And that's why countries like the United States, with the resources we have, are absolutely vital to that kind of process.

ADESNIK: And actually, if you could just follow-up a little one, another interesting part is when we actually get the Margarita Machine on this Ready Reserve boat, things are a little rocky. There are some surprises near the end. I don't think you need to give away all the spoilers. Maybe you could just talk about a few of the challenges and why it actually becomes a very close-run thing that they can complete the mission while they're doing these circles in the Mediterranean.

WARRICK: You know, before they started, there were a bunch of inspectors of various kinds that went on the ship, just to see if this process would work. And a Navy team came in and looked at this equipment, and looked at the ship, and said, "This is way too dangerous to do at sea. These machines were built to be used on land. If you put them on a boat in the middle of the ocean, there's all these additional stresses. You're going to have a real catastrophe on your hands." So, that advice was absorbed, but at this point, this is late 2013, there was no other option. So, they went ahead with this thing, anyway.

And sure enough, there were problems. When they get out to sea, some of the whole process that was originally designed didn't quite work, so they had to redo it. There was environmental protestors who boarded ships and came looking for them. And there was this whole other problem with stability, that, what's quite extraordinary, on a cargo ship normally, you don't have cargo moving around. You have fuel at the bottom that's balanced, and you have kind of carefully balanced loads of cargo on the decks. This was a ship where things were moving around constantly. Fuels being burned off, so the ship is becoming more top heavy, and millions of gallons, literally millions of gallons, of waste chemicals are being moved up to various levels of the ship, including up on the very top.

And so, you have computer programs on this ship that shows the boat becoming more and more, closer and closer, to being unstable. And by the time the mission was over, they were literally within a few days of losing stability, which raised the possibility that a wave or just an accident could cause the ship to capsize. And you could only imagine what

that would have looked like on CNN. And it was a close call, but they managed to get it done. They didn't spill anything. And they managed to destroy all the chemical weapons that Syria had given up, which turned out to be most of its stock, but not everything. And it was a pretty extraordinary story.

ADESNIK: Yeah. On the question of disposal, I was wondering, Anthony, did that come up much in your portfolio? Is it something that is under active consideration? Has there been any follow on to the margarita machine? Or is the fact that right now, no one looks especially likely to give up their chemical weapons mean that we can sort of defer planning, or it can stay back within the Pentagon, within DTRA, or one of the other organizations?

RUGGIERO: You know, I think that's a question beyond just the chemical weapons issue. And certainly when you believe you might get close to that kind of disarmament or threat reduction, you think through what those plans look like. But certainly during my time, we didn't get close to that. I think as you get closer and closer, if you start down the road of negotiation with a country, whether it's Syria, Joby mentioned North Korea, Iran could be another example. There could be others. Then you start to think about these solutions. And what struck me in the book was that it was kind of an innovative solution, both using it on a vessel, but then also the machine itself, or at least the way it was described. And so, certainly we hope, down the road, that we'd be able to come up with the same situation.

But yeah, you always want to make sure you're planning. We used to say, "You want to plan for success," right? Sometimes you pursue a policy and it might not go the direction you're looking for, but you also want to make sure that if you are successful, you're able to achieve what you're looking for.

ADESNIK: Sure. I'm going to direct the next question to Andrea. It may be pieces of the answer from each of you, which is, I mean, would it make any sense for the OPCW to develop the capability to dispose of chemical weapons, or is that sort of outlandish, and we really should have the nation who has them take charge? And if you change what the OPCW is doing, either in that regard or in giving it additional inspection authority, does that mean you have to change the underlying chemical weapons convention? Do you have to get all 193 parties to agree? Which seems like a pretty high bar. So, I guess two questions, one is about the disposal, but more broadly, what does it take to change the chemical weapons and the nature or mission of the OPCW?

STRICKER: Yeah, I think you would probably need the two thirds vote if I'm correct on that. Yeah, but they don't dispose of the chemical weapons now. So that would have to be added, I think, in short.

ADESNIK: Okay, so, but it's two thirds and not necessarily all 193, so potentially new authorities or missions potentially don't need to just overcome, effectively, a Russian veto?

STRICKER: I believe so, yeah.

ADESNIK: Interesting. Anthony, was there ever any consideration of that? I'm just sort of speculating here, but what would your recommendations be for the person sort of more broadly now sitting in your chair at the NSC doing WMD, what should their top priorities be when it comes to chemical weapons?

RUGGIERO: Well, I think the OPCW is at a crossroads, right? I mean, this session really describes it. When you go to the OPCW website, right, what pops up is essentially making sure we have a world free of chemical weapons, right? Not just chemical weapons use, but of chemical weapons. And we have, right now, these two uses, these two types of uses, right, by Syria, in their own country, against civilians, and then really the Russian using it for assassination purposes. If

we get a year, two, three years down the road from now, which is really well into the Biden administration, which is why this, hopefully, is a very important issue on their agenda. And there's no consequences for either of those. So, we have a report that comes out on Syria in 2020, and we don't, in this scenario, don't get a removal of voting rights, and there's no real consequences for Russia using Navalny. What that shows to countries is, maybe there's a benefit to having chemical weapons, or to planning, in that sort of way. And to me, that would be a disastrous result. Which is why, from a policy perspective, they really need to be doubling down to have consequences for Syria's use of chemical weapons, and figure out a way to use the OPCW to challenge Russia's use.

To your question on using it for getting rid of chemical weapons, you can certainly think about doing that, but we're not really a situation where a country has been willing to do that. And then I think the other point is that, what we learned is that, how do we look at the Syria situation and not come back with the same result, which is a 80, 75% solution? You got to get to a 100% solution, and that, to me, is less about making sure you have a Margarita Machine and more about, are you willing to press the Syrians or whatever country it might be to getting to the 100% disarmament scenario?

ADESNIK: Well, time flies when we're talking about weapons of mass destruction. I regret that our time is just about up. So, really, what I just want to do is thank our audience for joining us, thank our panelists for joining us, and tell everyone that, of course, there's a lot more to learn on this subject. To read more from Anthony and from Andrea, you should go to FDD.org, where all of their publications will be.

Of course, for the story about the red line and the weapons, pick up a copy of *Red Line* by Joby. You won't regret it. As I said, it is really full, and we didn't even touch on probably a half dozen figures in this book, who each one of them is a formidable, challenging person who you'll get a view on the ground, whether it's a Syrian general, or an inspector, or a diplomat. And it reads almost like, it reads like crime fiction or thrillers, but it's actually based in fact, and you can see it all in the footnotes. So thank you all for joining me, and to our audience, as well, thank you for tuning in. Have a great day.

WARRICK: Thank you.

STRICKER: Thank you.

RUGGIERO: Thank you.