

SYMPOSIUM ON NEW CHALLENGES IN WEAPONS INSPECTION

DEFENDING WEAPONS INSPECTIONS FROM THE EFFECTS OF DISINFORMATION

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The intentional spread of disinformation is not a new challenge for the scientific world. We have seen it perpetuate the idea of a flat earth, convince communities that vaccines are more dangerous than helpful, and even suggest a connection between the “5G” communication infrastructure and COVID-19.¹ Nor is disinformation a new phenomenon in the weapons inspection arena. Weapons inspectors themselves are often forced to sift through alternative narratives of events and inconsistent reporting, and they regularly see their credibility and conclusions questioned in the face of government politics or public biases. But certain recent disinformation campaigns have become so overwhelmingly comprehensive and effective that they constitute a new kind of threat. By preventing accountability for clear violations of international law, these campaigns have created a challenge to the survival of arms control treaties themselves. If weapons inspectors cannot regain the trust of the international community in the face of this challenge, it will be increasingly difficult to ensure compliance with arms control and disarmament treaties going forward. In this essay, I will briefly discuss one of the most comprehensive disinformation efforts of the past decade: the disinformation campaign used to prevent accountability for Syria’s repeated use of chemical weapons. After this discussion, I will propose one possible approach to help protect the credibility of disarmament experts and weapons inspectors in the face of pervasive disinformation. This approach will require a concerted effort to connect and support compliance experts and to understand and explain their expertise across cultural, political, national, economic, and religious divides.

The Syria Chemical Weapon Case Study

On August 21, 2013, during an escalating civil war, the Syrian government used sarin, a deadly nerve agent, as a chemical weapon during its attack on an opposition-controlled suburb of Damascus. Over 1400 civilians were killed in that attack, including large numbers of women and children.² After this attack, and in response to the threat of military action, Syria agreed to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).³ In doing so, Syria

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¹ See, e.g., James Temperton, [The Rise and Spread of a 5G Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory](#), WIRED (Apr. 9, 2020).

² The White House Office of the Press Secretary, [Government Assessment of the Syrian Government’s Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013](#) (Aug. 30, 2013).

³ Julian Borger et al., [Syria Pledges to Sign Chemical Weapons Treaty and Reveal Scale of Stockpile](#), GUARDIAN (Sept. 10, 2013).

admitted that it had an expansive chemical weapons program, a fact that it had previously denied. Under the CWC, Syria declared approximately 1,300 metric tons of chemical weapons and precursors, and these were safely removed and destroyed with international oversight, resources, and assistance.⁴ But many suspected that the Syrian government maintained an undeclared stockpile of chemical weapons.⁵ And despite a legal framework that required accountability under international law for any employment of chemical weapons in Syria,⁶ the Syrian government continued to use chemical weapons against its own people.

In April 2014, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the international implementing organization for the CWC, created a “Fact-Finding Mission” to investigate the numerous allegations of chemical weapons use in the Syrian civil war since Syria’s accession to the CWC.⁷ In September of that year, the Fact-Finding Mission officially confirmed the repeated use of chemical weapons.⁸ It also reported that “witnesses invariably connected the [chemical weapons delivery] devices to helicopters flying overhead,” and its own investigations confirmed that bombs containing chlorine were dropped from above.⁹ For many in the United States and around the world, the reporting from the OPCW scientists and experts was irrefutable evidence that the Syrian government was again using chemical weapons on its own people, as the government was the only player in the civil war that had helicopters or planes.¹⁰ Since 2014, there has been repeated and even more pointed confirmation by OPCW inspectors, UN chemical weapons experts, and numerous governmental scientists that the Syrian government has continued to use chemical weapons throughout the war.¹¹

In response to the repeated expert confirmation of attribution to the Syrian government, Syria and its allies have conducted one of the most comprehensive disinformation campaigns to date. Conflicting media stories and narratives of the chemical weapons events have flooded the internet and been promoted in international forums by Syrian, Russian, and Iranian news outlets and diplomats.¹² Inconsistent and fraudulent video footage, allegations of child actors pretending to suffer the consequence of chemical weapons, the smaller-scale terrorist use of chemical weapons, and manufactured testimonies that poke holes in the weapons inspectors’ narrative have all been held up by anti-Western news outlets and politicians.¹³ As author Amil Khan has explained, Russia has been “able to game Western news media through a very sophisticated understanding of how stringers work, how to pitch to

⁴ Global Biodefense Staff, [Destruction Completed for Syria’s Declared Chemical Weapons](#), GLOBAL BIODEFENSE (Jan. 4, 2016); [Destruction of Declared Syrian Chemical Weapons Completed](#), OPCW NEWS (Jan. 4, 2016).

⁵ See, e.g., Anthony Deutsch, [Syria Hands Over Remaining Chemical Weapons for Destruction](#), REUTERS (June 23, 2014).

⁶ See [S.C. Res. 2118](#) (Sept. 27, 2013); [S.C. Res. 2209](#) (Mar. 6, 2015); [S.C. Res. 2235](#) (Aug. 7, 2015).

⁷ See [Fact-Finding Mission](#), OPCW.

⁸ [OPCW Fact Finding Mission: Compelling Confirmation that Chlorine Gas Used as Weapon in Syria](#), OPCW NEWS (Sept. 10, 2014).

⁹ Anthony Deutsch, [UK Blames Assad Regime After Watchdog Documents Chlorine Attacks](#), WORLD NEWS (Sept. 10, 2014).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Ambassador Robert A. Wood, Alternate Representative, Delegation of the United States of America, [Remarks for the Sixty-Ninth UNGA First Committee Thematic Discussion on Other Weapons of Mass Destruction](#) (Oct. 24, 2014).

¹¹ See, e.g., [Seventh Report of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism](#), UN Doc. S/2017/904 (Oct. 26, 2017); Press Statement by the State Department Deputy Spokesperson Robert Palladino, [Release of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission Report on Investigation into Chemical Weapons Use in Douma, Syria, on 7 April 2018](#) (Mar. 7, 2019).

¹² See, e.g., [Syria’s President: OPCW ‘Faked’ Report on Chlorine Gas Attack](#), AL JAZEERA (Dec. 10, 2019); Paul Roderick Gregory, [The Kremlin Claims Trump Has Joined the Terrorists With an Invented WMD Excuse to Strike Syria](#), FORBES (Apr. 10, 2017); see also Ben Hubbard, [Syria Used Chemical Weapons 3 Times in One Week, Watchdog Says](#), N.Y. TIMES (Apr. 8, 2020).

¹³ See, e.g., Rick Gladstone, [Assad Says Videos of Dead Children in Syria Chemical Attack Were Faked](#), N.Y. TIMES (Apr. 13, 2017); NewsClickin, [Evidence Debunks OPCW Claim on Syrian ‘Chemical Attack’](#), YOUTUBE (Nov. 28, 2019); [Syria Chemical Attack ‘Fabricated’ – Assad](#), BBC NEWS (Apr. 13, 2017); Niles Niemuth, [New WikiLeaks Documents Expose Doctoring of Chemical Weapons Report to Justify 2018 US Attack on Syria](#), WORLD SOCIALIST WEB SITE (Dec. 28, 2019).

editors and the way information moves between outlets—morphing slightly as it does so according to the editorial policy of individual websites, newspapers and channels.”¹⁴

From the Syrian perspective, this campaign to undermine the credibility of weapons inspectors and chemical weapons expertise has been an almost unmitigated success. Despite expert findings and direct attributions to the Assad government for actions in violation of the CWC and numerous UN Security Council resolutions, the international community as a whole has yet to impose any consequences. The confusion sowed by disinformation has hindered such accountability by providing an excuse for governments and the public to continue to look away from the Syrian government’s and its accomplices’ repeated violations of international law. It is possible, in light of Russia’s power to veto accountability measures as a member of the UN Security Council, that the international community would not have been able to hold Syria accountable even in the absence of the disinformation. But we have seen the international community overcome such obstacles to hold countries accountable in the past.¹⁵ A significant difference in the Syria case, in which there have been numerous and repeated confirmations of Syria’s violations of international law, is the disinformation itself, which has minimized public outcry and excused political inaction. Indeed, this campaign has been so effective that others have replicated it to prevent accountability for other bad actions, most recently in counter-narratives to avoid attribution for the poisoning of perceived enemies of Russia.¹⁶

The disinformation encountered by OPCW inspectors, who have continued to report on Syria’s violations of the CWC and Security Council resolutions, is merely one manifestation of a growing challenge that is being felt across the entire scientific arena—namely, lack of public trust in expertise. This challenge is a feature of the so-called “post-truth era,”¹⁷ and it has undermined the power of science, media, international alliances and organizations, governments, and laws and treaties, along with any other sort of expertise.

When there is a trust deficit in the expertise of international organizations meant to enforce international law, these organizations are fundamentally weakened—as are the laws they are meant to uphold. On a micro-level, the trust deficit results in people not trusting the expertise or veracity of anyone they do not know. On a macro-level, if countries cannot trust in the rule of law or the compliance of their treaty partners, they begin to abandon multilateralism and focus only on national interests and objectives. In the arms control context, where attribution and accountability are so critical to upholding the rule of law and the strength of norms, the global lack of trust in expertise and the diminishment of multilateralism could be devastating.

A Possible Path Forward

How can we help weapons inspectors produce credible reports in an atmosphere of declining trust? How can we strengthen science-based expertise against the rising tide of disinformation? We could begin by asking expert organizations to take steps that have worked at a micro-level.

To put it simply: trust is gained by building relationships, connections, and understandings between a speaker and an audience. We build trust by fully acknowledging possible biases or influences and being as transparent as possible about the basis for our expertise, information, and analysis. The more we learn about someone or something, the more we are able to understand the justification for positions and conclusions, whether grounded in

¹⁴ Amil Khan, *International Affairs in the Disinformation Age*, FOREIGN POL’Y CTR. (May 31, 2019).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Richard Nephew, *UN Security Council’s New Sanctions on the DPRK*, 38 NORTH (March 2, 2016) (explaining the imposition of heightened sanctions on the North Korean Regime).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Joel Gunter & Olga Robinson, *Sergei Skripal and the Russian Disinformation Game*, BBC NEWS (Sept. 8, 2018); Editorial Board, *Putin is Running a Disinformation Campaign on Navalny’s Poisoning*, WASH. POST (Oct. 2, 2020).

¹⁷ See, e.g., RALPH KEYES, *THE POST-TRUTH ERA: DISHONESTY AND DECEPTION IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE* (2004).

training or experience. The more we know about someone or something, the less likely we are to believe fake information that suggests something out of character or attacks the legitimacy of empirical data. Trust is also built when we fully acknowledge any errors and explain how we will avoid them going forward. If we show how we can prevent mistakes, and if we correct mistakes when they are made, we can build trust in our processes and methods. Such trust can foster resilience against allegations that our process is broken or our methods are flawed. Relationships and collaborations can support this process by generating networks of trust, as we are more likely to trust those who are trusted by people we ourselves trust.

How do we adopt this approach in the arms control arena? The detailed action plan will depend on the challenges faced by the specific organizations involved, but the path to promoting all science-based expertise requires engaging with and listening to the relevant audiences in order to develop resilience against the forces that diminish trust. International arms control organizations must build relationships, connections, and understandings with each other and within their communities. Perhaps more importantly, weapons inspectors and treaty verifiers must build relationships with the broader international community that knows very little about what they do. International organizations must carefully explain their role and the basis for their expertise and be as transparent as possible with the underlying information their inspectors and scientists rely upon to make determinations. Finally, all experts should openly acknowledge any biases or interests that may affect their decision-making and actively show how they are countering those influences. Any mistakes must be immediately addressed, explained, and remedied going forward. These steps will require local, regional, and global cooperation so that scientists and experts can understand the basis for each other's reports and support and explain their work globally in the face of false attacks.

Some efforts to reduce distrust have already begun.¹⁸ Expert weapons inspection organizations at the international level, such as the OPCW, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN Inspector General's Office, and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization, as well as those at the national level, are working together to collectively understand the trust deficit. They are trying to educate broader communities about the sources of their own expertise and enhance communications with both their counterparts in other organizations and international policy-makers that may not fully appreciate their work. But more can always be done, and there are only so many resources for this type of trust-building activity. There needs to be a collective effort by all expert organizations to collaborate with each other and engage relevant audiences to increase the level of understanding for all science-based expertise.

As a model for this effort, consider the Cooperative Monitoring Center (CMC) at Sandia National Laboratories. Its mission is to promote collaboration and cooperative scientific engagement in order to enhance national and international security. Accordingly, it works to establish connections, especially between non-traditional allies, to build relationships that can withstand disinformation challenges, and to build trust by bringing experts together on collective challenges. The CMC works with expert counterparts worldwide to promote joint scholarship and research projects, roundtable dialogues, collaborative development of verification technology, and multilateral

¹⁸ See, e.g., Joint statement by WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC [Managing the COVID-19 Infodemic: Promoting Healthy Behaviours and Mitigating the Harm from Misinformation and Disinformation](#) (Sept. 23, 2020) ("We urge Member States to engage and listen to their communities as they develop their national action plans, and to empower communities to develop solutions and resilience against mis- and disinformation. We further call on all other stakeholders—including the media and social media platforms through which mis- and disinformation are disseminated, researchers and technologists who can design and build effective strategies and tools to respond to the infodemic, civil society leaders and influencers—to collaborate with the UN system, with Member States and with each other, and to further strengthen their actions to disseminate accurate information and prevent the spread of mis- and disinformation.").

capacity-building and training. It is just one of many organizations around the world using collaborative science to understand why arms control is necessary for the collective good.

Taking these steps to build trust in expertise and science will certainly not solve the problem of disinformation. There will always be those who seek to control or confuse factual narratives through fraudulent information. And regardless of any disinformation efforts, countries will try to prevent accountability for their own or their allies' illegal activities. But if the disinformation efforts can be exposed and their effects minimized through expanded trust in international experts, and if scientists and weapons inspectors can credibly report on illegal actions such as Syria's repeated use of chemical weapons against civilians, then the international community may have a better chance of collectively and effectively working towards upholding international law.

Conclusion

For arms control and disarmament treaties to be effective in the future, we must work to reestablish a basic level of trust. Credible, multilateral, and repeated determinations of treaty violations must result in consequences for the responsible parties. If we allow disinformation to destroy our trust in the treaty verifiers, then the effectiveness of the treaties themselves will also be destroyed.