

Marking the anniversary of the Khan Sheikhoun attack: article by Alistair Burt

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The Rt Hon Alistair Burt, Minister of State for the Middle East, outlines how chemical weapons have no place in today's world.

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A year ago today, in the early hours of the morning, Syrian aircraft dropped bombs on the town of Khan Sheikhoun. The sarin released by this bombing killed approximately one hundred people, including several children. We saw media footage of men, women and

children convulsing in agony, some foaming at the mouth, as their bodies were poisoned by nerve gas.

As we know, the Khan Sheikhoun attack was not the first time that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against its own people. In 2013, after hundreds were killed with sarin in an attack on Eastern Ghouta, Russia promised the world that Syria would abandon all of its chemical weapons. But this promise has not been kept. We can say with certainty, based on the findings of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism, that the regime used chlorine in Idlib: at Talmenes in April 2014 as well as in Sarmin and Qmenas in March 2015. And then the massacre a year ago today in Khan Sheikhoun.

In the five years since chemical weapons were first used in the region, international attempts to halt and bring crimes such as these to account have been consistently undermined and increasingly blocked by Russia. Again and again, they have used their power of veto to defend Assad's brutal regime in the United Nations Security Council. Last November, Russia blocked the renewal of the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, which the Security Council had set up to ensure those responsible for chemical weapons attacks in Syria were held accountable. Russia's response to Syria's continuing violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention has allowed these abhorrent attacks on the Syrian people to continue.

More broadly, Russia's disdain for the international system has grown ever clearer. Their brazen use of a chemical weapon on UK soil one month ago is a further case of their blatant disregard for the international rules-based system. The poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal with a military grade nerve agent endangered anyone who chanced to be in the vicinity, with more than 130 people potentially exposed to the nerve agent, including a police officer who fell into a critical condition.

Russia has offered no explanation whatsoever as to how their nerve agent came to be used in this manner. Instead, as in Syria, we have seen the outpouring of disinformation designed to confuse and paralyse the international system and prevent the perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks from being held accountable. After Khan Sheikhoun, Russia repeatedly sought to undermine the OPCW – the very organisation set up to put an end to the barbarity of chemical weapons attacks. Russia unilaterally rejected the findings of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism last year confirming Syrian regime use of sarin at Khan Sheikhoun. And on 22 March a senior Russian Foreign Ministry official rejected the idea that Russia would accept OPCW independent conclusions in examining the material from the Salisbury attack; only its own investigation would be acceptable.

Consensus already exists as to the abhorrent nature of chemical weapons. Only 4 states across the globe are not Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention. 192 states have come together to outlaw their usage; these are weapons that have no place in the world today. We must stand together against any attempt to dismantle an integral pillar of the rules based system. This kind of destructive and dangerous behaviour threatens us all.

Events in Khan Sheikhoun and across Syria have seen the world respond in horror. We call on states worldwide to make it clear that Russia should no longer endanger its fellow states recklessly in pursuit of its aims. There should be no more victims of chemical weapons attacks, whether in the warzone of Syria or in a sleepy English town. The rules-based international order and its institutions are too valuable to be put at risk in this way: we must act collectively to protect them and ensure no-one else dies in this most horrific and inhumane way.

Further information

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