

Syria

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons)

In her powerful opening speech, Alison McGovern rightly pointed out that chemical weapons were not the only method of vile killing in Syria. However, there is a reason why their use is such a heinous crime under international law. I would like to address that, and also to make some remarks about those who fail to accept the role of Russia in attacks— not only in Syria, but here on the streets of the UK.

My right hon. Friend Mr Francois spoke immensely powerfully about the effect of chlorine gas, and I would like to add some comments about nerve agents— or cholinesterase inhibitors, as those chemicals are known. They are also indiscriminate. They can affect anyone who comes into contact with them— not only the women and children who are their intended victims in Syria, but those who come to their aid. They are particularly dangerous because they persist in the environment and because their victims require intensive care facilities that are simply not available in countries such as Syria.

It is only because of the availability of that intensive care here that the three individuals affected in Britain have survived, but their injuries will be persistent. These are hideous chemicals. They attack both the peripheral and the central nervous system, leaving people's lungs filling up with fluid while paralysing the muscles that would allow them to clear their lungs. They cause painful blurring of vision, terrible abdominal pain, muscle twitching and incontinence of bowels and urine. Nerve agents are a particularly cruel way for people to die, which is why it is absolutely right that the Prime Minister took decisive and timely action on the behalf of this House.

The lesson of 2013— "I regret my vote at that time— "is that inaction also has consequences. Of course, Iraq hung heavily over the debate then, and we can never know what might have been. As the hon. Member for Wirral South said, we should not constantly be looking in the rear view mirror, but we must learn from the past as we look forward. The lesson from the past is that if we do not act, we will see the increasing use with impunity of these truly hideous weapons of mass destruction. To those who say that this is not our fight, I say that it absolutely is. It is our fight in Salisbury, and it is a grave threat to humanity all around the world. To those who deny Russia's involvement, I say look at the findings that have already been presented to the United Nations. There is incontrovertible evidence of the use of sarin gas and chlorine gas.

Proportionate and limited action has been taken to degrade the storage and production of truly horrific weapons, and I think we will all come to feel that the action that has been taken jointly with our allies will save lives in the future. It was humanitarian action. I fully support the Prime Minister, and I hope that the whole House will at some point have the opportunity to vote to show that this was the right thing to do.