



By [Stephen Zunes](#) | October 11, 2013

## **The Nobel Committee's Rebuke to Washington's Unilateralism**

**The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) challenges the illegal and ineffective U.S. policy of going to war against alleged chemical-weapons-possessing countries.**

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), one of the most effective instruments for international arms control, sends an important message to those who have insisted that unilateral military action is the best means to eliminate and prevent the use of these deadly agents. Although a case can be made that it is more appropriate for the Peace Prize to go to individuals struggling for justice rather than to international organizations, this is not a bad choice.

After all, the OPCW does not just deserve such recognition for having overseen the elimination of 80 percent of the world's chemical arsenals over the past two decades. It deserves the honor for having challenged the illegal and ineffective U.S. policy that going to war against alleged chemical-weapons-possessing countries is the only means of dealing with these dangerous weapons.

The OPCW enforces the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which has been ratified by all but seven of the world's countries. The OPCW inspects laboratories, factories, and arsenals, and oversees the destruction of chemical weapons. The organization's first and most successful director general, elected in 1997, was the Brazilian diplomat Jose Bustani, praised in the [Guardian](#) newspaper as a "workaholic" who has "done more in the past five years to promote world peace than anyone." Under his strong leadership, the number of signatories of the treaty grew from 87 to 145 nations, the fastest growth rate of any international organization in recent decades. During this same period, OPCW inspectors oversaw the destruction of 2 million chemical weapons and two-thirds of the world's chemical weapons facilities. Bustani was re-elected unanimously in May 2000 for a five-year term and was complimented by Secretary of State Colin Powell for his "very impressive" work.

### **Struggles with Washington**

However, by 2002, the United States began raising objections to Bustani's insistence that the OPCW be allowed to inspect U.S. chemical weapons facilities with the same vigor it does for other signatories. More critically, the United States was concerned about Bustani's efforts to get Iraq to sign the convention and open its facilities to the same surprise inspections as in other signatories. If Iraq did so, and the OPCW failed to locate evidence of the chemical weapons that Washington claimed Saddam Hussein's regime possessed, it would have severely weakened a major rationale for the planned U.S. invasion and occupation of that country.

U.S. efforts to remove Bustani by forcing a recall by the Brazilian government failed, as did a U.S.-sponsored vote of no confidence at the United Nations in March. That April, the United States began putting enormous pressure on some of the UN's weaker countries to support its campaign to oust Bustani. Washington also threatened to withhold its financial contribution to the OPCW, which constituted more than 22 percent of its entire budget. Figuring it was better to get rid of its leader than risk the viability of the whole organization, a plurality of nations in an unprecedented special session called by the United States voted to remove Bustani.

The administrative tribunal of the International Labor Organization, the UN's highest administrative panel, later recognized the U.S.-engineered ouster as illegal and an "unacceptable violation" of principles protecting international civil servants. The OPCW session's Swiss chairman, Heinrich Reimann, referred to it as an "unfortunate precedent," referring to Bustani as a "man with merit." The [Associated Press](#) reported that the United States was concerned that Bustani "might have helped defuse the crisis over alleged Iraqi weapons and undermined a U.S. rationale for war." [Bob Rigg](#), a New Zealander working with the OPCW at that time observed that U.S. hostility toward the organization was rooted in the belief that "they couldn't rely on OPCW to come up with the findings the U.S. wanted."

The principal architect of Bustani's ouster, then-Undersecretary of State [John Bolton](#), [conducted a series](#) of "menacing" and "threatening" communications with the OPCW leader to force his resignation. George W. Bush later named Bolton as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

## **Preventing War**

The subsequent OPCW leadership has been weaker and more averse to challenging Great Power prerogatives. Indeed, the OPCW is currently in the process of eliminating Syria's chemical weapons arsenal while the vast stockpiles belonging to neighboring U.S. allies Israel and Egypt remain intact, which indicates that the organization's priorities are based less on objective criteria and more on *realpolitik*. Indeed, despite the CWC's initial requirement that parties to the convention eliminate their stockpiles by 2012, the United States has suffered no consequences for still being at least six years away from completely eliminating its chemical weapons arsenal.

Nevertheless, the OPCW's existence made it possible for the international community to prevent a U.S. attack on Syria, which had seemed inevitable just weeks ago, and the likely disastrous consequences that would have followed. When the Obama administration initially threatened to deal with Syria's chemical arsenal through unilateral military action and both domestic and international public opinion emerged in opposition, the OPCW's was ready and able to find a peaceful and far more effective means to begin the process of eliminating that country's chemical stockpile.

Despite efforts by the United States to either cripple the organization or focus its energies primarily toward governments Washington doesn't like, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the OPCW serves as recognition that the key to disarming chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons comes not from war, threats of war, of selective enforcement of the geo-strategic preferences of great powers, but through universal enforcement. As history has shown, universality is critical for any serious disarmament effort, and the OPCW has demonstrated how it can work.