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THE RUSSIAN THREAT AFTER WE SEARCHED
FOR CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA

We will destroy you.

A Russian diplomat, in my office.

Chemical weapons are so brutal, so terrible, that they were banned after World War I (1914-1918) and were not used in World War II (1939-1945). Those weapons kill non-combatants such as women and children in the cruelest possible way. However, they began to be used again in the Syrian civil war, which has been going on for more than a decade.

The UN Security Council, where five powerful nations—the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and the United States—are permanent members, expressed concern over this. In 2017, the UN Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons (UNSGM) was created in order to investigate who was behind the use of chemical weapons in Syria and the UN Secretary General was appointed to choose the head of the UNSGM, in consultation with the five permanent members of the Security Council. António Guterres suggested two or three names, but several of the member countries rejected them, and the only name that the five powers accepted was mine, Edmond Mulet. I was then asked if I would accept the position. At that time, I was back in Guatemala, actively involved in the creation of a political party that would run for the 2019 elections. Nevertheless, it was also my duty to stop further deaths in Syria, so I replied that I would accept the

position for a few months, as my main commitment was to serve my country.

I knew Syria before the war. It was a beautiful country, with an admirable infrastructure that includes roads, hospitals, institutes, schools, government bureaus, and a very high standard of living. Highly educated people. Most of its leaders had studied abroad. The Syrian regime was the only Arab country that was secular, not religious. All religions were allowed, except Judaism. Shiite and Sunni Muslims could coexist in Syria and different cultures and minorities were encouraged. There were also Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Evangelical Christians.

Syria was part of the group of Arab countries that declared war on Israel, in 1967. The attack was launched from the Golan Heights, which belonged to Syria. Israel repelled the invasion during the Six Day War, occupied the Golan Heights and annexed them years later. Syria still claims those territories even though it lost them during that war. The Security Council created a mission in the border area to ensure there were no cease-fire violations between the two countries, and I had to travel there on several occasions.

The civil war in Syria was one of the consequences of the Arab Spring, a democratic citizen uprising in most Arab countries. The Syrian civil war began, in 2011, when the internal liberation movement to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime (son of the previous president, that is, a dynasty that had held power for over 46 years) was exploited by fundamentalist groups, radical Islamists.

Many neighboring countries have interests in Syria. There are internal groups supported by Iran, others by Iraq, or Saudi Arabia. There are at least 120 different armed groups. Turkey also has interests in Syria. Israel is also concerned, as the war in Syria may jeopardize its security due to the fact that the status quo has been broken. Israel has had to carry out preemptive strikes to destroy Syrian military installations and attack Islamist groups, which are a great danger to its security. However, a

country bigger than all of its immediate neighbors, a world power, is also interested in Syria. That country is Russia.

Russia has a naval base in the Mediterranean because of a Syrian concession, in the port of Tartous.

Russia was very concerned about the civil war because it realized that radical Islamist groups were already approaching its naval base. At one point, the Russians considered an evacuation, even though that meant losing their presence in the Mediterranean, which is geopolitically important. That's why Russia is so deeply involved in the Syrian civil war and supports dictator Bashar al-Asad with weapons, equipment, ammunition of all kinds, and financial assistance. Russia channels financial resources, subsidizes him and keeps him afloat. Syria and Russia are fighting together and have already enabled the regime to survive for ten years.

CHEMICAL WEAPONS

During this civil war, which pitted all sides against each other, evidence that chemical weapons were being used started to emerge: chlorine bombs, mustard gas and, worst of all, sarin gas.

Chlorine is heavier than air and when it is dropped in bombs, it tends to filter down to underground hiding places, such as basements, where people hide from air raids or bombings. Chlorine also accumulates in the first levels of houses or apartment buildings.

Mustard gas, also used in World War I, is a chemical weapon named for its brown, mustard-like color and oily consistency. When bombs explode, their contents stick to walls, floors, clothes and people's skin, and the gas emanates from there, killing people.

But the most horrific of all is sarin gas. I can't help but think of a well-known expression in intellectual circles when it comes to illustrating the extent to which human beings are capable of acting without scruples when they want to achieve power: "Man

is a wolf to man”. Unlike chlorine or mustard gas, sarin gas can’t be produced in a kitchen. The production of sarin gas requires sophisticated and complex laboratories. It requires careful handling and transportation in very tightly sealed containers. It was developed by the Nazis during World War II, but was never used.

Its most terrible and evil characteristic is that it is odorless and colorless. When a sarin bomb explodes you can’t see or smell anything. Other bomb explosions leave black or yellow-colored clouds. When a chlorine bomb falls, people can smell it and look for clothes and water to protect themselves. However, when a sarin bomb explodes there’s nothing you can do.

Sarin gas began to be used in Syria, which was not a member country of the International Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), based in The Hague, Netherlands. Syria was not a member, and neither were Egypt nor Israel. And since Syria was not part of the OPCW, reports and news of chemical weapons use in Syria could not be verified or investigated.

The bombs that exploded in 2013 and 2014 appeared to be chemical. U.S. President Barack Obama said that if Syria continued to use chemical weapons it would be crossing a red line, which would lead him to invade Syria. That was when Russia became very concerned and started pressuring the Syrian government to agree to join the OPCW, and Syria finally signed the international treaties and conventions against the use of chemical weapons, allowed inspectors to enter the country, and declared its stockpiles of chlorine, mustard gas, and sarin gas. A Danish ship was loaded with all the declared chemicals, in order to destroy them in the high seas.

That Danish ship at the OPCW’s service was very important. We will return to it shortly.

Now, we shall turn our attention to the UN headquarters in New York, in early May 2017, when I was appointed head of the UN Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons (UNSGM) during the Syrian civil war. It was a great honor for a Guatemalan to be unani-

mously supported by China, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. I was known for my work as head of UN Mission in Haiti, as head of Peacekeeping Operations, and as UN Deputy Secretary-General. I had a working and personal relationship with the UN that entailed a daily, intense and honest interaction with the missions of the five countries. I'm grateful for the opportunity I was given to be part of such special tasks, with the aim of shaping a better future for humanity.

Those who believe that Guatemala is a small and irrelevant country should know that being a Guatemalan national and passport holder gives you an advantage over others. Being from Guatemala, a country with a history of commitment to UN principles, was an important factor that allowed me to reach that consensus among the powers that be.

On May 2, 2017, the same day I was given an office to launch the UNSGM, I received a visit from a senior Russian diplomat:

—It's your first day on the job, Edmond, I'd like to congratulate you. When the Secretary General put your name forward, we were the first to endorse you because we respect and appreciate you, and we know how professional you are. But I want to make something clear, and I hope you don't take it personally: We're going to destroy you.

The Russians, who don't smile, were threatening me with a smile on their face. They probably would have intimidated a regular bureaucrat. Fortunately, however, they came across a Guatemalan who had previously stood up to military dictatorships, guerrillas, narco-deputies, Haitian gangsters, and African jihadists, which meant I was not going to be intimidated. My experience has allowed me to move beyond ideas about leadership that belong to the past, but are useless in terms of shaping a better future. However, that meeting with the Russian diplomat did make me remember the magnitude of the position I had accepted. I, Edmond, a Guatemalan, would play a key role in a global geopolitical war, in which control over a key country, that was strategically very important for North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe, a country that was the

gateway to the Arab and Muslim world in Asia, was being fought for. I realized that my work would be decisively important for the future that lay ahead. My role would have a crucial impact on the outcome of a tricontinental war.

My colleagues and I at the UNSGM, worked as independently as possible, and we were extremely careful. The staff we hired did not belong to other UN Security Council member states, in order to prevent them from exerting pressure on us and avoid any misunderstandings. We worked with top global experts, scientists, chemists, and ballistics experts.

Between May and October 2017, there was not single week I didn't have a tense meeting with the Russians in New York or Moscow. They wanted to keep an eye on what we were doing, where we were going, how the research could affect Russia's agenda, interests and involvement in the Syrian civil war. Thus, I'm no stranger to dealing with the Russians or the Chinese, as well as powerful people in the United States or the Middle or Far East.

THE SECOND RUSSIAN THREAT

When my appointment at the UNSGM was coming to an end, I met with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister in Moscow, in a huge palace, one of those incredible legacies of the Tsarist era. The hall was enormous, with only two chairs: one for him and the other for me. The purpose of all of this is to make one feel small in the face of Russia's imperial size and power. There, the Deputy Foreign Minister told me:

—You're going to submit your conclusions now, Edmond, and I would like to ask you to think about your career, your future, the staff working with you. If things are not as they should be, we will be forced to use our power of veto and the UNSGM will no longer be able to survive. Think about the consequences.

The easiest thing to do would have been to say that we hadn't proven anything, get paid, have my photo taken and go home.

But no. I don't take jobs just to get paid. Never, in my entire life, have I done that. If I wanted to do that I would have retired to my house, on lake Atitlán. When I commit to a job, I undertake to do it well, to change things. Today, my task is to question the attitudes of the past that live on in Guatemalans' minds, and build the necessary alliances to build a promising future for all.

At that moment, I remembered Guatemala and the reasons why I had accepted the job in Syria. We share a common humanity, and our planet is a very small house. If we do not put an end to the killing of Syrian children with chemical weapons, then we are going to see Egyptian, Algerian, and Congolese children killed with those same weapons, as there are many armed groups in Africa that want to gain access to them. Then, we will see them used in Venezuela, Haiti, and Guatemala. If we don't get to the root of the problem, it will spread throughout the world.

There and then, I recalled the images of Syrian women and children, who were terrified after learning that chemical weapons were being dropped in neighboring towns. Regular bombs were exploding, and people were fleeing, believing they were chemical bombs and fearing that at any moment they could be breathing sarin gas without realizing it. Sarin gas is a terrifying, atrocious enemy, because not only is it invisible but the pains it causes are dreadful, as it makes the internal organs dissolve. It's not like being shot in the head, it's something invisible and odorless that you breathe and makes your body decompose. It's brutal.

—What are you saying? —I asked the Russian diplomat. Are you trying to impose conditions on me?

He backed down, but he had already said it. And he maintained his position. I repeated what I had told the Russians many times before:

—I understand the geopolitical war you are waging in Syria, the control over territory, your need to have access to the Mediterranean, your relations with Iran and Israel, and other neighboring countries. I understand that and I'm not going to jump

in and tell you what to do, but can't you tell your protégé, Bashar al-Assad, to stop using chemical weapons? Syria can fight the war without them. If you don't put an end to this, if you don't set a precedent in terms of halting the use of chemical weapons in wars, it will all blow up in your face. In Chechnya (the Muslim-majority area of Russia that's seeking independence), many of these Muslim rebel groups are going to end up using chemical weapons. Imagine if they use them in the Moscow subway. If those who use them in Syria go unpunished, these weapons will be used all over the world.

Moreover, the Russians couldn't argue that they didn't have full control over Syria. During my field visits, I noticed that all the checkpoints always had Syrian and Russian police and military—all of them! Every single Syrian province had a Russian military governor. To this day, Syria is in Russian hands. On one occasion, I sent a letter to the Syrian Foreign Ministry in Damascus to negotiate access for some of my team members to a part of Syria. It was three o'clock on Monday afternoon. On Tuesday, at nine o'clock in the morning, a Russian diplomat came to see me in my New York office, with a copy of the letter. And he said to me, "This letter, with these terms, is unacceptable." I had sent it to Syria in the afternoon, and the next day, I received a reply from Russia. Syria is one hundred percent under Russia's control.

In fact, before submitting the conclusions of our investigation, my team members began to hesitate. I don't know if it was because they were afraid that we were going to accuse the Syrian regime, which was Russia's ally. And during meetings they said to me: "Wouldn't it be better to say that the investigation hasn't concluded yet? Then, they will give us another six months to prepare. And I would answer: "No, we already have the results, we already have the evidence; we didn't need more time." "But we could search for more cases to make the report more solid and conclusive," some of them insisted. I replied that no, it wasn't necessary. I don't know if they were saying that in good faith, or if they wanted to extend their work contracts, or if they were saying it because they were afraid of Russia.

Russia, as we know, has regained a lot of its military power. Just as it can influence presidential elections or hack oil pipelines in the United States, it can destroy careers, job opportunities, and orchestrate smear campaigns through social media as we have seen in many countries. It can organize smear campaigns using troll farms and bot farms. When I accepted the position, I was well aware I could receive threats from Russia.

But I'm not afraid of facing the hurdles that life throws at me if I'm going to be true to my principles and values. In 1992, I confronted the entire Guatemalan Congress, demanding that it strip a narco-deputy wanted for extradition by the United States, of his Congressional immunity. I just did it. In 1993, while I was serving as Guatemala's ambassador to Washington, Serrano attempted to stage a coup d'état. We didn't know if he would succeed, like Fujimori did in Peru, and I just decided to confront him. And I smuggled people out of the country to save their lives during the dictatorships, even when doing so jeopardized my life and reputation.

It's a matter of principles. There are things in life you can't compromise on because if you did, you'd no longer be true to yourself. Ceaselessly striving for a better future has consequences and you have to accept them.

Regarding the issue of chemical weapons in Syria, we already had all the scientific evidence, it was just a matter of submitting it to the Security Council. When we submitted the report, I looked back and noticed that my colleagues were very nervous. However, during the press conference we gave after the Security Council meeting, they all rallied behind me, in a show of solidarity.

I was sure of what I was saying, because we had scientific evidence. So how did we obtain it? Because at one point, Syria and Russia could no longer deny that chemical weapons were being used but they blamed the United States and other Western countries for that.

When a chemical bomb exploded in the Syrian city of Khan-Shey-Kun, NGOs collected animal samples such as goat hairs, bird feathers, as well as samples from people who had suffered

the attack. The Syrian government also collected samples and sent them to us, accusing the United States and Britain of being responsible for the bombing. The unbelievable thing is that the samples collected by Syria's civilian opposition matched those collected by the Syrian government.

How could the UNSGM prove who was responsible for those bombings?

Suddenly, a Swiss scientist who was part of my team said during a meeting: "I know the OPCW kept some samples as evidence before destroying all the Syrian chemical weapons on that Danish ship in the Atlantic. The OPCW took samples of each of the chemical weapons before destroying them and stored them in The Hague!"

We asked the OPCW to share the samples it had stored before destroying the chemical weapons stockpiles that Syria had handed over. We sent them to three independent laboratories, from none of the Security Council countries. The aim was to compare the samples collected by the Syrian government and NGOs in Khan-Shey-Kun, and those transported by the OPCW on the Danish ship from Syria's official inventory. It turned out the DNA was identical! It was impossible to replicate. No one could have created two identical sarin gas samples. Everything, including all the markings and impurities, matched one hundred percent.

When I submitted my report with those findings, we proved, with scientific evidence, that the gas used in those attacks was identical to the one produced by the regime the Bashar al-Assad regime, which meant it was responsible for using chemical weapons in Syria and that he had lied in 2015. He hadn't destroyed all of the regime's chemical weapons and was using them to attack his own people. Neither Russia nor Syria was expecting this. My report took them by surprise. They had no defense or justification other than attacking and discrediting me. They said terrible and nonsensical things about me, but that was the end of it. That night, I slept soundly as I felt satisfied, as though I had lifted a weight off my shoulders after performing my duty. However, this was mixed with a feeling

of sadness that the attacks against civilians with chemical weapons had not been stopped. All the investigative work we did, all the evidence, videos, testimonies, statements, everything has been stored in a safe place. I hope someday this will be used as part of a transitional justice effort once the war in Syria has come to an end, to ensure these crimes to be punished and never committed again.

I would offer my fellow Guatemalans the following piece of advice when it comes to facing a frightening situation: always keep moving forward. If you're sure of your principles and are confident you're doing the right thing, when in doubt, keep moving forward, especially when it comes to protecting human rights and saving lives. Today, we are faced with a very simple, but crucially important choice: to remain stuck in the past or to get down to work in order to shape and build our future.

We are all brothers and sisters, God's children. Let us look at the photo of the Syrian boy drowned off the coast of Greece, fleeing the civil war in Syria. It's not so different from the photo of the Salvadoran girl who drowned with her father in the Rio Grande between Mexico and the United States, or the daughter of the Guatemalan woman who died in the same river, all fleeing poverty and violence in Central America.

We need to protect life, in Guatemala and in every corner of the world.

