

The utopianists return

 ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4426254,00.html

Op-ed: Post-WW1 pacifist spirit returning to British parliament, White House; no reason to expect happier ending this time around

Gerald M. Steinberg

Published: 09.05.13, 07:56 / [Israel Opinion](#)

The arguments invoked in the British Parliament in refusing to move against Syria following the use of chemical weapons, and the notable reluctance of US President [Obama](#) to order a military response, are reminiscent of previous bouts of utopianism. In the past, such episodes of wishful thinking did not end well. Instead of peace, this approach allowed despots to increase their power, making the wars that came later (particularly World War II) more brutal than they would otherwise have been. There is no reason to expect a happier ending this time.

The precedent was set almost a century ago, following the devastation of World War I, utopianists and pacifists – particularly in Britain – pursued a policy of unilateral disarmament. They were convinced that if the victorious allies, including America and France, neutralized their militaries, Germany would follow this example, and war would be relegated to the dustbin of history.

As a result, and amid great celebration, on August 27, 1928, US Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg and French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand met in Paris to sign a formal agreement to outlaw war. The treaty called on the leaders of all nations to settle their disputes by peaceful means. Dozens of countries added their signatures, and less than a decade after the horrors of World War I, the diplomats and utopianists assured the world that this nightmare would never be repeated. No enforcement mechanisms were included as to do so would have contradicted the purpose of the agreement.

The Kellogg-Briand Pact disintegrated within a few years, beginning with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, followed quickly by other examples of military action. Similarly, the League of Nations and other idealist efforts of this period proved unworkable, and instead of bringing peace, this inaction in the face of Hitler's rise and German rearmament, proved disastrous.

Today's utopianists are careful to avoid repeating such blatant naivete. Instead, the British MPs who rejected the government's proposed military response demanded absolute proof that the Assad regime had indeed used chemical weapons indiscriminately against civilians (1429 according to US Secretary of State Kerry). The numerous images of hundreds of dead and wounded, including many children were insufficient. Similarly, the audio recordings and other intelligence information directly linking Bashar Assad's forces – particularly the division led by Assad's brother Maher – to this atrocity did not constitute incontrovertible proof.

No, first the UN inspectors would have to bring back samples for analysis, and then write a report. After that, the Security Council, in which [Russia](#) and China had a veto, would have to consider the findings – another forum of delay and prevarication. In other words, while the opponents of action to punish Syria and deter further atrocities do not speak directly about outlawing war, by demanding entirely unrealistic standards, the impact is the same as in 1928.



Victims of chemical attack near Damascus (Photo: Reuters)

In the US, President Obama did not invoke the “absolute proof” criterion to justify his prevarication, but rather focused on gaining formal Congressional approval, as opposed to quick informal consultations. And since the legislators were on holiday during the Labor Day break, the process for gaining their approval will not begin for many days. In contrast, over a year ago, when Obama first tried to deter Syrian use of chemical weapons, as well as in many subsequent statements promising swift American action, there was no mention of [Congress](#).

To be fair, the shadow of the 2003 invasion of Iraq hangs over American and British hand-wringing on Syria. Ten years ago, the justification for war was based on detailed allegations that Saddam Hussein had stockpiled numerous chemical and biological weapons, and maintained an illegal nuclear program. The “smoking guns” were never found, and after Saddam was quickly toppled, the war was mismanaged, and resulted in an ongoing civil war in Iraq, and in thousands of casualties among US and UK forces.

But the comparison is superficial – the evidence against the Assad regime is not based on secret dossiers and ambiguous intelligence data. And the proposed military action against Assad would not involve “putting boots (or bodies) on the ground”. Instead, the Iraq analogy is primarily an excuse to avoid taking any kind of military action, and hoping the threat will disappear on its own.

As shown in the British debate and Obama’s speeches, utopianists share the belief that words are a form of action, and can have the same or even greater impact than displays of military power. Obama is a brilliant orator, and in London, opposition leader Ed Miliband carried the day, defeating Prime Minister [Cameron](#). Similarly, in 1928, the words promising to end all wars and settle conflict between nations by peaceful means became a new reality, at least in the eyes and ears of the true believers.

But for Syria, these words are only important in that they tell both the tormentors and their victims not to expect any action from the outside, at least not any time soon. The war will continue, and may include further use of chemical weapons since no penalty has been extracted for their use.

At least as disturbingly, the Iranian leadership can continue with its nuclear weapons efforts. Obama's numerous warnings and pledges not to allow Tehran to cross the finish line have long been dismissed as more words, with no real substance behind them. And for Israel, any expectations of American action to stop Iran that had remained have now grown even thinner. In the Middle East, utopianism is a hard sell.

Prof. Gerald M. Steinberg teaches political science at Bar Ilan University in Israel, and heads NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based research institute