Introduction

Behaviour is shaped by the forbidden. Murder, nakedness, infidelity, non-heterosexuality, and obscenity are but a few examples of the ways in which human activity is normatively constrained. Such acts are stigmatised as *taboo*. That is, these ideas exist as socially constructed expectations that actors should not engage in, permit, and in some cases even acknowledge certain behaviours that have been deemed unacceptable. In short, taboos are what we should not do. While such expectations are subject to reinterpretation, re-justification, and also Machiavellian claims that actions characterised as taboo can be considered permissible under specific conditions of use, life is framed within a series of moral and normative anticipations, or 'rules', as to which acts are socially tolerable. Likewise, this concept of the taboo extends beyond the personal and into the political arena. Within international politics the notion of the taboo is manifest in numerous issues and controversies including the legitimacy of intervention, the violation of state sovereignty, targeting of non-combatants, and – the focus of this study – weapon prohibitions, where certain types of armament are considered so excessively offensive that their possession and use are intentionally and institutionally delegitimised.

This last category includes the chemical weapons taboo – the claim that chemical arms are so odious that they should be eliminated. There is a social revulsion surrounding these devices, not least where they are considered highly destructive (signified by their frequent classification as weapons of mass destruction, or WMD) and are indiscriminate in terms of effect. These are weapons that so exceed the limits of acceptability that avoidance and proscription are requisite. Within this framework of understanding, policy reflects a normative expectation that chemical weapons use represents a grievous transgression, now evident in a number of prohibitory agreements including the 1899 Hague Convention (from which, according to Richard Price, the taboo first developed, in response to a desire for non-combatant protection from chemical shells; Price, 1995), 1925 Geneva Protocol, and 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

This normative policy structure is widely acknowledged as a 'good' thing. While not all taboos are considered in such positive and flawless terms, this is held up as a political ideal. And indeed, why not? Chemical arms are horrific weapons that can cause, and have caused, repulsive levels of destruction. Who then could object to the expectation that they should be opposed?

This book makes the provocative claim that the chemical weapons taboo is not 'good'. In fact, the taboo frequently makes things worse. It does so by skewing understanding of international security. In particular, it introduces erroneous hierarchies of thinking into arms control discourse. It creates a belief that chemical weapons are more worthy of sanction and concern than other armaments, which pushes non-chemical threats out of consideration. The taboo establishes chemical arms as an exclusive focal point, even in situations where other modes of violence inflict comparable, or even greater, levels of destruction and political damage. This unsustainable prioritisation means that conflict scenarios are misinterpreted, to the extent that they actually escalate and worsen. This is not simply a case in which the taboo distorts political thinking, but one where its knock-on effects are actively detrimental. Using the taboo as the basis of international politics in this way causes more violence, more conflict, and more destruction. The taboo is not a purely positive influence. To employ the obvious cliché, it can do more harm than good.

Critically, this is not to say that the idea that these are horrific weapons we would be better without is necessarily wrong. And indeed, this book does not seek to suggest that this is the case. Nor does it ignore the importance of the chemical arms control regime, particularly the CWC. If we are talking about doing good, then analysis cannot overlook the contribution the taboo has made here in terms of limiting chemical warfare and chemical weapons possession. What this study does demonstrate, however, is that the way in which the taboo is conventionally expressed within international politics is also highly injurious and deeply flawed (this concept of the 'conventional' will be explained more in later chapters). There is a very dark side to the taboo. This exists where the taboo has been translated into certain practical expectations, notably that the issue of chemical weapons and their elimination must come before all other threats, and that it must be pursued at all costs with no recognition of context. For some, this is extremely important. If chemical weapons eradication is as crucial as this understanding of the taboo suggests, then nothing can ever come in the way of that – otherwise we risk a situation in which the taboo is diluted and is left prey to other concerns that may detract from the issue of elimination. Yet this book contests this view to show that (a) this distinction is flawed and (b) those other concerns can be critical too. Allowing the taboo to reduce our thinking to the chemical threat alone, especially in cases where such weapons are not the only or primary threat, can only do harm. The taboo is not working.

This problem is made worse by the fact that there is no meaningful opposition to the taboo. Being such a hallowed construct, there is, it is presumed, simply no basis for criticism. Indeed, to the very limited extent the taboo has been questioned, it is typically for not going far enough in its moral condemnation of chemical devices, or calls for improved verification in terms of the taboo's manifestation within arms control regimes. The taboo itself is treated as beyond reproach. Yet more than that, this is a situation in which criticism is actively proscribed (regardless of whether or not that criticism is warranted), where it is seen to potentially damage and undermine the taboo. The taboo is presented as an essential but fragile concept, and any disparagement could cause that normative structure to disintegrate, taking away the international community's best hope for eradicating these weapons. Even if anything were inappropriate about the taboo, it is argued that it remains the most apposite option available and consequently should be protected at all costs. While the need for strong controls on chemical weapons is not disputed here, it is asserted, however, that the taboo causes serious problems, problems that cannot be overlooked any longer or justified on the basis of utility. Although the taboo may appear to embody the very best of arms control and commitments to peace, this is far from the case. In fact, it poses a considerable threat to both. Consequently, politicians, policy practitioners more generally, and academic analysts alike need to stop thinking that the taboo works within the context of international security and accept that – perversely – it is capable of doing the exact opposite.

This book makes a further claim: that policy-makers' rhetorical employment of the chemical weapons taboo is highly strategic. Its use is the calculated, constructed, and contextualised product of self-interested actors. Conventional understanding considers taboos to be intrinsic and static restraints. Specifically, taboos govern actors: they are ideas and behaviours to which actors inexorably adhere as a consequence of their social construction and which they cannot directly control. Critically, however, this theoretical position neglects the way in which taboos are not merely an issue of involuntary adherence, but an agency-centric resource for strategic discursive construction. In stark contrast to prevailing belief, this book demonstrates that taboos do not solely determine our actions, but provide the rhetorical tools for the deliberate and manipulative shaping of international debate. The same ideas and assumptions that underpin the taboo as a form of restriction can also be strategically exploited for the realisation of actor self-interest. Significantly, this is not the weak claim that taboos are simply used emotively, i.e. that the conceptualisation of a specific act as taboo, and the infringement of that taboo as an unforgiveable and immoral wrongdoing, engenders an affecting response to its violation that in turn can be played on. This is the much stronger assertion that the ideational structure of the taboo provides the rhetorical apparatus for an actor to control debate and political understanding. Actors exert considerable agency over the concepts and

normative language they employ, and they can manipulate them in order to realise their own self-interested ambitions. This is not to suggest that all rhetorical acts are calculated, or that there is no genuine commitment to the chemical weapons taboo. Yet it is to demonstrate that, within this normative context, there exists considerable scope for the taboo's agency-driven strategic interpretation, where this directly influences international and foreign policy.

This is discussed in relation to Syria's civil war, specifically, the way in which Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons would come to define and dominate United States (US) foreign policy on the conflict. A year into the crisis, US President Barack Obama declared his now infamous 'redline'. This was effectively an ultimatum stating that, if Assad engaged in chemical warfare, this would cause a significant change in US foreign policy – an ultimatum that was interpreted more widely as a reference to military intervention. While Obama's exact intentions in laying down this challenge will be questioned here, it was essentially a case in which the entirety of his foreign policy came to hang on the use or not of chemical weapons. This was not limited to the issue of intervention, however. The taboo was also manifest in the later proposition of a diplomatic solution, by which Assad would accede to the CWC and agreed to eliminate all Syria's chemical stockpiles. Consequently, the chemical weapons taboo became the core focus of conflict resolution, where (a) the use of chemical weapons was seen to demand a US response and (b) the taboo formed the exclusive basis of foreign policy activity. This makes Syria a perfect example for analysis in that the chemical weapons taboo was constructed as intrinsic to US understanding of the conflict, particularly in terms of foreign policy decision-making.

On the surface, this appeal to the chemical weapons taboo would appear to be a positive. Not least because the taboo would eventually (ostensibly) underpin a diplomatic solution, so Obama would avoid military involvement, remove chemical weapons from a belligerent dictator, and place conflict resolution on a non-violent footing. There are, however, serious issues with this picture. In fact, the application of the taboo as the basis of US foreign policy has vastly exacerbated the civil conflict. It has made it erroneously appear that progress has been achieved in respect of Syria, while ignoring the reality that an exclusive focus on chemical weapons could never substantially mitigate the crisis. Indeed, all it has done is fuel the conflict further. In particular, it has achieved this by unnecessarily securing Assad's legitimacy. By engaging the dictator in the chemical weapons control regime – and specifically no other actor who could claim leadership in respect of Syria – this strengthened his position. Furthermore, by inviting him to comply with the taboo via the CWC, so this too was legitimating. He could appear to be doing the right thing (when in fact he has continued to use chemical weapons). This has unintentionally skewed the political make-up of the crisis and alienated the opposition, to the detriment of US foreign policy aims. This also plays into the strategic element of the taboo, in that Obama's

deliberate engagement with it – not least surrounding the CWC negotiations – served to exaggerate these problems by contributing to the prioritisation inherent to the taboo. As this book will show, the president strategically employed the taboo to realise his own self-interest, and this act would intensify the harmful issues identified here. Overall then, this case study demonstrates something very interesting about the highly strategic way taboos are used, which changes what we thought we knew about norms and the agency that actors exert over them. Unfortunately, it also shows how the indiscriminate and careless use of the taboo can lead to major difficulties in terms of international politics and conflict. Far from helping, the taboo has constituted the most negative of all influences on conflict resolution in Syria. No other factor has been as detrimental in preventing peace.

In terms of structure, the book constitutes a step-by-step analysis of the Syria crisis and the role chemical weapons have played. The first chapter introduces the chemical weapons taboo and engages in a critical analysis that identifies the two issues at the centre of this study: that the taboo is (a) employed strategically and (b) damaging to conflict resolution. In doing so, it also outlines the theoretical framework used in demonstrating these claims. This is based on the 'strategic narratives' paradigm, which asserts that actors deliberately apply specific narratives in order to promote their political ambitions. Yet this section expands this understanding by incorporating an agency-centric interpretation of linguistic use taken from the work of political theorist Quentin Skinner – in particular, his model of the 'innovating ideologist'. While discussions in the field of International Relations (IR) and strategic language have tended to assume a socially constructed world in which actors levy only limited power over the meaning of discourse, it is shown here that narrative creation is a significantly more manipulative and manipulated process. Actors possess considerable power over the rhetoric they employ, even in relation to intrinsically restrictive concepts such as taboos.

Part I (consisting of three chapters) applies this strategic interpretation to US foreign policy on Syria, explicitly understood as a reference to Obama's redline.[1] It demonstrates that this is not the hard-line ultimatum it was made out to be, but is in fact a calculated construct that expresses Obama's own preferences concerning US involvement in the crisis. Chapter 2 starts by analysing Obama's real intentions in setting the redline to reveal that these have been misinterpreted. More specifically, that pre-existing ideas surrounding the chemical weapons taboo have caused Obama's statement to be misconstrued as a be-all-and-end-all of US foreign policy on Syria. The chapter examines the wider policy context at the time to demonstrate that this interpretation was diametrically opposed to Obama's professed position and that the redline actually constitutes a much softer and more moderate allusion to the taboo. Having established this gap between intention and convention (i.e. between Obama's reluctance to

intervene and the expectation created by the taboo that he should), Chapter 3 examines Obama's rhetorical employment of the taboo as the situation in Syria progressed. Whatever his views against intervention, Obama would engage with the taboo as a core theme of his rhetoric on Syria. This is explained as a strategic move on the part of Obama; explicitly, it constitutes the construction of a strategic narrative. While his inadvertent reference to the taboo forced him towards a more interventionist stance, it also gave him the discursive tools to limit expectations for greater action to a policy that – while it did not reflect his preferences perfectly – was a significantly better fit with his desires than full-on intervention. Chapter 4 takes this a step further, to demonstrate the sheer extent to which this strategic process was agency-driven and calculated. Obama used the taboo not only to limit policy, but to actively control it. This is not merely a case in which Obama drew on conventional understandings of the taboo, but one in which he dug deep into that construct to exploit specific aspects in the promotion of his own self-interest. This was a manipulative and deliberate process, one in which Obama exercised significant control over the idea of the taboo itself. Far from the inevitable adherence to the taboo that the situation has been portrayed as, it was in fact the opposite – a case in which Obama effectively reversed that normative expectation in order to manipulate it for his own gain.

Part II (consisting of two chapters) expands this story of chemical weapons and Syria to demonstrate that the taboo has not been 'good' for the crisis. Chapter 5 analyses issues surrounding how specific weapons are perceived within a conflict, specifically where the taboo causes chemical armaments to be prioritised over others via inappropriate hierarchies of threat.[2] The way in which the taboo has dominated understanding of Syria has seen other threats ignored – notably the vast numbers being massacred with conventional devices, but also the significant biowarfare threat that exists in the country. This means that policy-makers have focused on the wrong issues in respect of Syria, a situation that precludes ever finding workable solutions to the crisis. Simply put, policy-makers are not seeing the real problems. The taboo blinds them; or rather, it applies a lens through which they can see only the chemical threat and none of the other issues driving the conflict. How then could we ever hope that these issues would be addressed? Chapter 6 builds on this to show that Syria is not simply a case of misinterpretation, but one in which the taboo has intensified the conflict. The conflict is worse and more violent as a direct consequence of using the taboo as the basis of US foreign policy. It looks at the physically and politically destructive ways in which the taboo has fed the tensions underpinning the crisis, specifically where these are identified as effects that would not have occurred had the taboo not been prioritised above all other concerns. The chapter then concludes with a more comprehensive analysis of how the taboo is detrimental to international politics and whether it should even be kept as part of IR discourse. If it is not the outstanding,

necessary, and moral ideal that it is held up to be, should the taboo be dispensed with, at least in terms of its current expression? And if so, can that abandonment ever be justified? Could we really say goodbye to the chemical weapons taboo? Or does the engrained and special nature of the taboo mean we can never let it go, no matter how harmful it is?

NOTES

1 Aspects of this work are drawn from Bentley (2014a). Thanks go to Caroline Soper.
2 Aspects of this work are drawn from Bentley (2015). Thanks go to Rob Elias.