

Syria: Aleppo tragedy exposes weakness of Western leaders

Roger Boyes, The Times, August 4, 2016

Black smoke billows over the streets of Aleppo today as the desperate city sets ablaze mounds of tyres to hide targets from Syrian government warplanes and Russian attack helicopters. Five out of the nine remaining hospitals were hit last week; 300,000 people, many thousands of them children, are trapped without water or electricity. Food is running out fast.

This grisly siege is the Sarajevo of the 21st century, and we are ignoring it. Wrapped up in the terror attacks in Europe, by the paralysis of leadership in the US, we are missing Aleppo. By the time we wake up it will be too late: the city, once Syria's commercial hub, its workshop and marketplace, will be empty or flattened. Either outcome is a victory for the Kremlin, for it will mean that its placemat, President Bashar al-Assad, retains power in Syria and that Russia's foothold in the Middle East will be secure. Either outcome is a humiliation for the West, the result of years of defeatism.

The future of Syria hinges on Aleppo. Russia understands this and has given Assad the air support and the intelligence he needs to crush the resistance there. The past months of heavy pounding have become an exercise in military cynicism. Aleppo has swollen over the decades into a major, sprawling metropolis, bloated by people shifting from dusty, unproductive farms into a place that promised jobs. Once in the city, country folk often moved into a single room, a nod not to poverty but to tradition. That's why a solitary shell can wipe out an entire family. That has been happening a great deal.

Little wonder that the people of Aleppo are suspicious when Russia offers them "humanitarian corridors" out of their city. The experience of the siege of Homs has taught them that people who leave in this way disappear. They reckon that this is all about splitting the rebel force, and clearing out some children to avert reputational damage when Assad's forces eventually go in with tanks, smashing their neighbourhoods.

Little wonder kids are told not to open the supposed aid packages dropped from the same aircraft that used to roll out barrel bombs. Parents insist the contents are examined by a doctor to make sure the food isn't poisoned. All they have to do is to find a doctor still alive.

Perhaps this is what Boris Johnson, then mayor of London, meant when he wrote last year: "Let's deal with the Devil — we should work with Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad in Syria." Did he mean handing over Aleppo to the Russians, the Syrian dictator, the Iranian expeditionary force? If this ever became open British policy — and we may be edging in that direction, God help us all — it would signify the end of Western influence anywhere in the Middle East.

How did we get into this extraordinary tangle? Chiefly through US leadership so cautious that it has become reckless. The CIA has been training a supposed New Syrian Army in US camps in Jordan. All men were vetted to ensure that they weren't secret jihadists. They were expensively kitted out. Hoping for the kind of triumphant hosannas that greeted the Russian-backed Assad recapture of Palmyra from Islamic State, 200 men were sent to snatch back a strategic township in eastern Syria from Islamic State. They were given heavy US air cover, airlifted in — and were promptly ambushed. Forty were killed, 15 captured and the rest fled into the desert.

Although it continues to launch air raids on Islamic State, the US has lost all confidence in its ability to change Syria by military means. By recusing itself from the overthrow of Assad, however, it has made itself vulnerable to the manipulation of Putin. Latest stunt: a military council that could supervise the transition away from Assad. It would be made up partly of

US-backed, high-ranking, Sunni military defectors and partly of Alawite officers supported by Moscow. This body would theoretically steer Syria in a nine-month interregnum while parliamentary and presidential elections were prepared.

The initiative shows co-operation with Russia has brought painfully little. The council is as split as all previous attempts to find an interim political class. It cannot agree on a leader and it will plainly be sabotaged by Assad. Russia, by pretending to be an ally, looks as if it has won an intelligence-sharing deal with the US. Washington has won no more than a figleaf, the illusion of progress towards a peaceful settlement.

Russia, the Syrian regimen and Iran reckon they have a six-month window to make Assad unassailable. A President Trump would give them more time, since his manifest lack of interest in the Syria conflict and his overtures to Putin suggest he can live with Assad and with the Russian bombardment of cities. A President Clinton, however, would want no-fly zones and safe havens for those communities under siege in Syria. This would represent a direct challenge to Russia. It could be a re-run of the NATO air offensive to relieve the siege of Sarajevo.

The betting, then, is that Putin has ordered the capture of Aleppo and the consolidation of his puppet dictator before the inauguration of a new president. Hence the energy that is being invested in starving a city.

By linking arms with Putin, the West told the world it was abandoning Syria as being too difficult to solve. It will spur westward migration — the fall of Aleppo will send hundreds of thousands towards the Turkish border — and it will do nothing to stamp out terrorism. If we carry on taking Boris's advice and supping with the Devil we will all be losers; those in doomed Aleppo most of all.

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