

US hapless as Putin marches in

Editorial, The Australian, August 22, 2016

The suicide bombing that left 50 people dead and almost 100 wounded at a wedding party in Turkey is yet another reminder that the Syrian civil war has become even more catastrophic after five years. The attack happened close to the Syrian border, 95km from Aleppo, which was formerly Syria's biggest city with 2.3 million people. The city is being decimated by bombing raids by Russian warplanes from the new base Vladimir Putin has established in Iran, his close ally. In tandem with Iran and Hezbollah, he wants to ensure Syrian despot Bashar al-Assad does not lose power. Aleppo's people have fled in their hundreds of thousands, adding to cross-border turmoil and presenting Islamic State with fresh opportunities for terror. It is suspected of carrying out the suicide bombing.

Heart-rending images of Omran Daqneesh, the five-year-old boy rescued from the wreckage of his Aleppo home after a Russian raid, showed the human face of a civil war that has cost close to 500,000 lives, and left one million wounded and 12 million homeless. The child's bewildered face was bloodied and dusty as his eyes seemed to ask how much longer the madness will last. The images stirred consciences across the world last week. Yet Mr Putin and his allies are virtually unchallenged as they decimate Aleppo.

The UN is investigating credible reports that Assad, in league with Moscow, is targeting hospitals and clinics and using chlorine gas chemical weapons — all war crimes.

Barack Obama has spoken of "vicious attacks on defenceless civilians" and of a "medieval siege" in Aleppo, where food is being blocked from reaching starving families. Yet the lame-duck US President is too weak even to support a no-fly zone that would halt Russian attacks against humanitarian convoys. As with most of its Middle East non-policy, the Obama administration is hapless in the face of deepening humanitarian tragedy and has failed to initiate an effective, long-term solution to the crisis.

In 2012, at the US Holocaust Museum, Mr Obama won widespread applause when he said he was the first US leader to decree preventing mass atrocities "a core national security interest and a core responsibility of the US". There is little sign of that now. Whatever leverage he thought the Iran nuclear deal might bring, one can see few dividends as Tehran hitches itself firmly to the rapidly expanding Putin footprint across the Middle East.

Whoever wins the White House in November must be far more proactive from early next year in addressing the deepening nightmare.