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Enough is enough in Syria



Syrian refugees wait for food near a refugee camp in Bab Al-Salama city in northern Syria, on Feb. 6. (Sedat Suna/European Pressphoto Agency)

by Michael Ignatieff and Leon Wieseltier

. As [Russian planes decimate Aleppo](#), and hundreds of thousands of civilians in Syria's largest city prepare for encirclement, blockade and siege — and for the starvation and the barbarity that will inevitably follow — it is time to proclaim the moral bankruptcy of American and Western policy in Syria.

Actually, it is past time. The moral bankruptcy has been long in the making: five years of empty declarations that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must go, of halfhearted arming of rebel groups, of allowing the red line on chemical weapons to be crossed and of failing adequately to share Europe's refugee burden as it buckles under the strain of the consequences of Western inaction. In the meantime, a quarter-million [Syrians have died](#), 7 million have been displaced and nearly [5 million are refugees](#). Two million of the refugees are children.

This downward path leads to the truly incredible possibility that as the Syrian dictator and his ruthless backers close in on Aleppo, the government of the United States, in the name of the struggle against the Islamic State, will simply stand by while Russia, Assad and Iran destroy their opponents at whatever human cost.

It is time for those who care about the moral standing of the United States to say that this policy is shameful. If the United States and its NATO allies allow its inglorious new partners to encircle and starve the people of Aleppo, they will be complicit in crimes of war. The ruins of our own integrity will be found amid the ruins of Aleppo. Indiscriminate bombardment of civilians is a violation of the [Geneva Conventions](#). So is the use of siege and blockade to starve civilians. We need not wait for proof of Assad's and Vladimir Putin's intentions as they tighten the noose. "[Barrel bombs](#)" have been falling on bread lines and hospitals in the city (and elsewhere in Syria) for some time. [Starvation is a long-standing and amply documented instrument](#) in Assad's tool kit of horrors.

Aleppo is an emergency, requiring emergency measures. Are we no longer capable of emergency action? It is also an opportunity, perhaps the last one, to save Syria. Aleppo is the new Sarajevo, [the new Srebrenica](#), and its fate should be to the Syrian conflict what the fate of Sarajevo and Srebrenica were to the Bosnian conflict: the occasion for the United States to bestir itself, and for the West to say with one voice "enough." It was after Srebrenica and Sarajevo — and after the air campaign with which the West finally responded to the atrocities — that the United States undertook the statecraft that led to the [Dayton accords](#) and ended the war in Bosnia.

The conventional wisdom is that nothing can be done in Syria, but the conventional wisdom is wrong. There is a path toward ending the horror in Aleppo — a perfectly realistic path that will honor our highest ideals, a way to recover our moral standing as well as our strategic position. Operating under a NATO umbrella, the United States could use its naval and air assets in the region to establish a no-fly zone from Aleppo to the Turkish border and make clear that it will prevent the continued bombardment of civilians and refugees by any party, including the Russians. It could use the no-fly zone to keep open the corridor with Turkey and use its assets to resupply the city and internally displaced people in the region with humanitarian assistance.

If the Russians and Syrians seek to prevent humanitarian protection and resupply of the city, they would face the military consequences. The U.S. military is already in hourly contact with the Russian military about de-conflicting their aircraft over Syria, and the administration can be in constant contact with the Russian leadership to ensure that a humanitarian protection mission need not escalate into a great-power confrontation. But risk is no excuse for doing nothing. The Russians and the Syrians will immediately understand the consequences of U.S. and NATO action: They will learn, in the only language they seem to understand, that they cannot win the

Syrian war on their repulsive terms. The use of force to protect civilians, and to establish a new configuration of power in which the skies will no longer be owned by the Syrian tyrant and the Russian tyrant, may set the stage for a tough and serious negotiation to bring an end to the slaughter.

This is what U.S. leadership in the 21st century should look like: bringing together force and diplomacy, moral commitment and strategic boldness, around an urgent humanitarian objective that would command the support of the world. The era of our Syrian abdication must end now. If we do not come to the rescue of Aleppo, if we do not do everything we can to put a stop to the suffering that is the defining and most damaging abomination of our time, Aleppo will be a stain on our conscience forever.

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