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The forces besieging Aleppo are counting on our indifference

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As we mourn the victims of terror in France and Germany, our indifference to Assad's war on Syrian civilians fuels the Sunni anger Isis thrives on.

'Assad's army, assisted by Russian air power, has achieved its long-held objective of encircling eastern Aleppo, where 200,000 to 300,000 people are now helplessly stranded and under attack.'

Photograph: Thaer Mohammed/AFP/Getty Images

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As Europe reels from terrorist attacks, Aleppo, once Syria's second city, is suffering its own nightmare. The connection between these two developments is more than coincidence. As bombs, guns and knives were being wielded in France and Germany, a massive military operation was under way to besiege, and perhaps empty or starve, the eastern districts of Aleppo that since 2012 have been controlled by the anti-Assad rebellion.

UN calls for ceasefires to ease civilians' despair in Aleppo

When responding to the latest terror in Europe, few if any western officials draw parallels with the plight of Aleppo. That is understandable. Public opinion is naturally more focused on the domestic fallout from traumatic events. When security fears take over and political passions are aroused, it is hard to look beyond what lies in your immediate vicinity. Yet Aleppo will have consequences for Europe and for its citizens, and there is little cause to think they will be positive.

This is why: Islamic State cannot be defeated just through military action in Iraq and Syria, or police operations in Europe. It can be defeated only if the attraction that the militant group exerts on young, confused Sunni Muslims, in the Middle East and elsewhere, is somehow neutralised. The massacres carried out by the Assad regime in Syria over the past five years, and the failure of the international community to put an end to them – or even to hold his power accountable – have provided no small reason for the radicalisation now making Europe bleed.

The summer of 2015 went down in history as a time when the chaos of the Middle East suddenly became a vivid reality for Europeans because of the refugee crisis. The summer of 2016 may go down as the tipping point when all hope of a negotiated settlement in Syria's civil war, one that would deprive Isis of much of its ability to recruit and sow terror, entirely faded.

A Twitter post shows the plight of the Hamami family, terrified by Russian bombs in besieged Aleppo. Photograph: Courtesy of Zaher Sahloul

In recent days, Bashar al-Assad's army, assisted by Russian air power and Iranian-connected ground forces, has achieved its long-held objective of encircling eastern Aleppo, where 200,000 to 300,000 people are now helplessly stranded and under attack. Any European who remembers the 1990s should think about parallels with the siege of Sarajevo, and the Srebrenica massacre 21 years ago. As one UN official put it this week: "In the 1990s, we said never again. Aleppo is the new Srebrenica." Those who rightly express solidarity with refugees need to go one step further and ask why nothing has been done to prevent the mass atrocities that have sent so many people struggling over land and sea to reach our world. We should question the faulty western strategies that have focused entirely on combatting Isis and not on protecting Syrian civilians.

Right now more questions should be asked about Russia's behaviour in Syria than about its cyber warfare in the US (however huge that story) because the consequences of Moscow backing Assad are a bigger threat to Europe's liberal, democratic order. If Assad stays in power, which seems to be the ultimate goal of recapturing Aleppo, more – not less – radicalisation will ensue; the absence of political transition in Syria will fuel the Sunni anger that Isis thrives on. That, in turn, will lead to more terrorism in Europe, providing even more fertile ground for far-right movements who want to up-end fundamental democratic principles.

And if progressives who care about preserving those principles join the dots, they should realise the need to look a bit further outwards. However strong the “no more wars” slogans of the western left, in the past five years there have been no significant street demonstrations against the war that Assad and his allies have waged on Syrian civilians. What does that say about the solidarity with Muslims that many claim to profess?

We mourn our dead in Europe, and that sorrow cannot be minimised; but our difficulty in concentrating even a little on the suffering of Syrians may one day be something that haunts us. Rather than worry about how jihadi terrorists' pictures are published in our newspapers, we'd do better to relentlessly draw attention to the wider picture of how an unravelling in the Middle East leads to a political unravelling in European societies; and we should spend more energy trying to overcome the difficulty of covering Syria and what its citizens are being put through.

There are no simple answers to the mess the Middle East finds itself in, but building awareness of how the safety of citizens in Europe cannot be dissociated from the question of protecting civilians in Syria should be a constant focus. In recent decades no large-scale atrocity, whether Rwanda, the Balkan wars or post-2003 Iraq, has affected Europe's political and social fabric like the Syrian war has. As Aleppo's agonies deepen, the distant dream of a peaceful, democratic country emerging from the wreckage may live on among the Syrian diaspora in Europe. But in the meantime, it is our confusion and our fatalism – the “western bombs are the biggest problem” line, or the “what can we possibly do” line – that so many refugees live among.

It's a good thing voices are calling for Europeans to stay steadfast and to refrain from conflating immigrants with terrorists. But we are still missing part of the equation: we can no longer ignore the connection between our fate and that of Syrians whose remaining hopes of being saved are fast dwindling.

The forces now besieging Aleppo are counting on our indifference as much as on their military hardware – witness the effort they have put into producing propaganda images. Russian and Syrian official announcements about “humanitarian safe passage” aren't just aimed at tightening the noose on a whole population before it falls prey to a state machine of repression (a tactic from the Kremlin's Chechnya war, by the way). They are also a ploy aimed at making the rest of us turn our gaze away, in the – not unfounded – belief that our attention span and our empathy for distant victims are limited.