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February 15, 2016 6:37 pm

A Syria policy that dare not speak its name

Michael Ignatieff

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Risk avoidance has led a conscientious American president into a diabolical transaction, writes Michael Ignatieff



Refugees fleeing the violence in Syria waiting at the Turkish border

Once President Barack Obama had let Bashar al-Assad cross his “red line” and use chemical weapons in 2013, America was left with a policy in Syria that dare not speak its name.

The policy is not what the US wants but, in light of the ceasefire plan agreed last week in Munich between Moscow and Washington, it appears to have become what it reluctantly accepts: to allow Mr Assad and Russian president Vladimir Putin to win by focusing attacks on anti-regime rebels in strongholds such as Aleppo — and then, after a decent interval, to join

with them to crush the militants of Isis.

The consequences of this policy are becoming clearer by the day: free Aleppo is dying under continuing Russian bombardment and a civilian uprising that began in 2011 is collapsing for want of help. Mr Assad is re-establishing his tyranny and is certain to take vengeance on surviving insurgents.

This is where risk avoidance has led a conscientious, prudent American president — to a diabolical transaction in which he and his allies regretfully sacrifice the lives of innocent civilians in the name of the mistaken belief that the west's only overriding strategic interest in Syria is the defeat of Isis.

If this is the actual policy of the US the consequences should be spelt out. Russia and Iran will consolidate control of a rump state in the Middle East but the millions of Syrians who have fled the fighting will never return home and the region will never know peace.

Once the US abandons the rebels to their fate, those who survive will surely align with their Sunni brothers in Isis. Instead of reducing the number of America's enemies, this betrayal is likely only to swell their number.

US policy has left Europe with the worst of all worlds. Its actions have failed to stop Isis-trained terrorists from attacking European cities and their failure to stop the Syrian civil war has overwhelmed the continent's borders with refugees. If the war ends on Mr Putin and Mr Assad's terms, with the dictatorship over Syria restored, the exodus will increase and even Germany may have to join other European countries in closing borders. This will not stop the desperate from trying and they will have to be turned back with razor wire, water cannon and brute force.

Is there, even at this late hour, an alternative course of action? John Kerry, US secretary of state, has tried to save Aleppo with a deal guaranteeing humanitarian access but the Syrian army, with the help of Russian special forces, has the strangulation of the city and the defeat of the rebels within its grasp.

Only if the cost of further advance becomes prohibitive will Mr Assad and Mr Putin be persuaded to halt their actions

Only a credible threat from the US and Nato will stop it. This could include further economic sanctions on Moscow in addition to those levied for its invasion of Crimea and violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. It could include rapid supply of anti-aircraft and anti-missile equipment to trusted rebel forces.

As a final resort, Nato and the Americans could establish an aerial protection zone from the outskirts of Aleppo to the Turkish border, ensuring that the city is not cut off from its supply lines and protecting civilians seeking to flee the violence.

Only if the cost of further advance becomes prohibitive will Mr Assad and Mr Putin be persuaded to call a halt to their military advance and return to negotiations for a ceasefire and the end of bloodshed.

The risks of accident, miscalculation or escalation are not small but they can be reduced by means of strict rules of engagement, hourly contact with the Russian military to manage “deconfliction” and a clear message to Mr Putin that the way out lies in an immediate, stand-in-place ceasefire and negotiations to create a political solution in Syria.

The risks are justified because the stakes are nothing less than the credibility of the Nato alliance, the survival of Europe as a union and the lives of hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

The writer is Edward R Murrow professor at the Harvard Kennedy School

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