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***Listen to a 7-year-old girl in Syria.***



**Nicholas Kristof**

Our excuse for failing to respond to mass atrocities used to be that we didn’t fully appreciate the horrors until it was too late. “If only we had known,” became one refrain, along with, “Never again!”

In Syria, we are deprived of that excuse: We have a daily window into war crimes. If you’re on Twitter, follow a 7year-old girl in Aleppo, Bana al-Abed, @alabedbana, who with her mom’s help is tweeting the carnage around her.

One tweet shows a video clip of Bana looking out the window and plugging her ears as bombs drop. “I am very afraid I will die tonight,” she worried in imperfect English. “This bombs will kill me now.”

“This is my friend house bombed,” Bana tweeted with a photo. “She’s killed. I miss her so much.”

Her mother, Fatemah, an English teacher who has been teaching Bana English for several years, chimes in as well.

“Sleeping as you can hear the bombs fall,” Fatemah tweeted. “I will tweet tomorrow if we are alive.”

I interviewed Fatemah and Bana by email, which they access on a cellphone that they recharge with a solar panel. Bana’s school was destroyed by a bomb last year, and Fatemah said that they were surviving on pasta and rice that were now running out. “Bana is very weak,” her mom told me. Russia and Syria appear to be deliberately targeting civilians like Bana. The aim seems to be to bomb and starve civilians into exhaustion and submission, so that they flee or no longer support the opposition, or else support extremists regarded as better fighters. That would bolster the Syrian government narrative that the opposition consists of terrorists who must be fought.

For those of us who generally admire President Obama as a man of principle, it is wrenching to watch his paralysis. As I see it, Syria has been his worst mistake, a huge blot on his legacy.

We can’t be sure that more robust strategies advocated by Hillary Clinton, David Petraeus, John Kerry and others would have succeeded, but Obama’s approach has manifestly failed — and after five years, it should be time to reconsider strategy.

Some of you are thinking: This is horrific, but what can the West possibly do? In a previous column, I quoted a former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, James Cartwright, about the “many things we can be doing now” in Syria. Charles Lister, author of a recent book on Syria, has written a detailed nine-page plan of action for the U.S. I’ve suggested cratering Syrian military runways with missiles fired from Turkey so that Syrian military aircraft can’t take off (Turkish officials have told me that they would go along with this).

Of course, we shouldn’t dispatch ground troops. But if we had cratered Syrian runways several years ago, as many suggested, the horrors of barrel bombing would have been reduced.

One sign that curbing Syrian bombing is feasible is that we’re already doing it. In August, the U.S. quietly imposed a de facto no-fly zone over parts of northern Syria where American advisers are located. I’m wary of military adventurism and opposed the Iraq war and the surge in Afghanistan, but I also note that in places from Kosovo to Kurdistan the military toolbox has saved lives. Obama himself conducted a military intervention on Mount Sinjar on the Iraq-Syria border that saved the lives of thousands of Yazidi.

The Syrian government has shown that it doesn’t respond to moral appeals but to credible threats of military force. In 2013, when Obama looked as if he might order airstrikes, Syria hurriedly agreed to give up chemical weapons. Secretary of State John Kerry has pleaded with the White House for more aggressive military measures precisely to make a cease-fire more achievable; instead, Obama undercut his secretary of state and denied him leverage.

As a senator, Obama used to complain to me and others that President George W. Bush was too passive about atrocities in Darfur. “I am strongly supportive of us doing what it takes to stop the slaughter that is taking place, and I think that no-fly zones have to be part of that formula,” Obama told me in 2006. He should listen to himself.

Look, cratering runways may not work. It’s easy for those of us on the sidelines to agitate; everything is always more complex than it seems. Except when it’s simpler: Bill Clinton says that his biggest foreign policy mistake was not stopping the Rwanda genocide.

Let’s have this discussion, and also acknowledge the risks of remaining passive. So far, Obama’s paralysis has been linked to the loss of perhaps half a million lives in Syria, the rise of extremist groups like the Islamic State, genocide against the Yazidi and Christians, the worst refugee crisis in more than 60 years and the rise of ultranationalist groups in Europe. Aleppo may fall, and lives like Bana’s hang in the balance.

If we don’t act after half a million deaths, will we after one million? After two million? When?