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“If Assad Stays, So Does the Islamic State”:

The Coalition Airstrikes as Reflected in the Social Media in Syria

Orit Perlov

On September 23, the United States and the military forces of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar launched a joint air campaign against targets associated with the Islamic State organization and the Jabhat al-Nusra Front in the Syrian cities of ar-Raqqah, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo, and Idlib. According to a U.S. military official, "the air strikes are intended to damage the Islamic State command posts and control systems, as well as supply channels and training camps...The first wave of attacks is meant to strike a crushing blow against the organization." When the U.S.-led airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Iraq were initiated, they enjoyed sweeping public support within the Arab world as a whole and within Syria in particular, as reflected in discussions in the social media and elsewhere. Moreover, it was frequently argued that broad intervention was required beyond Iraqi borders and that the Islamic State organization in Iraq could not be effectively confronted without striking at the Islamic State organization in Syria, as "cutting off and burning one of the two heads of the monster without cutting off and burning the other" would be ineffective at best, and may also lead to a rapid and extreme spread of the disease it represented. Consequently, there were expectations of widespread legitimacy for the attacks in Syria. Three weeks into the offensive, however, the atmosphere has changed. Many of its supporters are thus far disappointed, voicing serious criticism regarding its goals and execution.

Are the United States and its allies losing the legitimacy to undertake air strikes against the Islamic State in Syria? Furthermore, discussions taking place in the social media in Syria reflect a sense of doubt whether the air campaign will succeed in liberating the citizens of the country from their current stance between a rock and a hard place – that is, between the Assad regime, which is responsible for the death of some 230,000 Syrians and for turning approximately nine million Syrians into refugees since the beginning of the civil war, and the threat of the oppressive radical Islamic regime currently being set up by the Islamic State organization.

These questions are being raised in the social media throughout the Arab world in general and among the forces identified with the Syrian opposition in particular. Analysis of the discussion underway in the social media among Syrian citizens who regard themselves as part of the opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime allows us to account for this apparent erosion in the campaign's legitimacy. These issues are deliberated by approximately 12% of all social media users in Syria (with the exception of radical Islamist groups or, of course, supporters of the Assad regime). Analysis of this discussion points to a number of major and clearly intertwined explanations for the erosion of the air campaign's legitimacy. The discussion also mentions possible courses of action that participants believe will restore the legitimacy of the campaign against the Islamic State and help cure Syria of its ailments.

Treating the Symptom -- Not the Problem: "If Assad stays, so does the Islamic State, and if the Islamic State stays, so does Assad"

A commander of the opposition group Liwa al-Tawhid stated that "the coalition force's military operation in Syria is not balanced...They are not dealing with the root of the problem causing the radicalism – the regime that enabled the Islamic State organization to exist. If they remove the Islamic State but not the regime, another Islamic State organization will arise, and it will never end." Indeed, according to civil opposition forces and the rebels fighting against the regime, without the destruction of "Assadism"—Assad and his regime—it will be impossible to effectively confront the

Islamic State. "One fires chlorine bombs while the other chops off heads," they maintain. "One kills us from above – the other kills us from below."

Injury to Civilians

A recurring claim in the social media discourse is that the allies' current strategy, which focuses on the air campaign, detrimentally circumvents attempts to address the problem on the ground. This claim is related to the large number of civilians injured during the first wave of attacks. The airstrikes' lack of precision has raised concerns regarding continued unintentional deaths, as the widespread injury to civilians may ultimately help the Islamic State expand its circle of supporters – a result that will compensate for the damage to its forces and its military infrastructure.

The Failure to Arm the Rebels and to Designate No-Fly Zones

Another point of criticism raised in the social media is the fact that the airstrikes have not been accompanied by the arming of opposition fighters on the ground. Without arming the rebels with advanced weaponry, it is being argued, the rebel groups will not be able to fill the vacuum left by the weakened jihadists, thus paving the road for Assad's forces. In addition, the failure to designate no-fly zones—a measure being awaited by many Syrians—has intensified their frustration, as it enables the Assad regime to continue launching air strikes against population centers. Furthermore, Turkey has specified the designation of no-fly zones as a precondition for joining the campaign against the Islamic State, and it is therefore being argued that the failure to implement this measure is preventing an expansion of the coalition.

Broadening the Target Bank

In addition to Islamic State targets, attacks have also been launched against installations and explosives' laboratories belonging to the Khorasan group, a local al-

Qaeda affiliate operating in northwest Syria that has been integrated into the al-Nusra Front. According to American sources, the group has entered the advanced stages of preparing terrorist attacks against American and Western targets in the United States and Europe. Nonetheless, strikes against the group resulted in a loss of trust among the Syrian civilian population and the organized rebel groups in the coalition and its efficacy, since many civilians do not regard the Khorasan group as a terrorist organization, as it does not support world jihad, is not involved in harming civilians, nor does it impose radical Islamic ideology on the residents in its area of operation. Within the ranks of the rebel groups, some voices have proclaimed the attack against the Khorasan group a "war against Islam" and have declared that Sunni countries that take part in such attacks will themselves become targets of terror and jihad. This decisive opposition appears to reflect a concern that the attack of non-Islamic State forces will lead to a situation in which all rebel factions may, at some time in the future, find themselves in the coalition forces' target bank.

The Focus on Airstrikes

The social media is also bearing witness to the recurring assertion that the decision to refrain from involving American ground forces in the struggle (the "no boots on the ground" policy) is indicative of the absence of a true intention to eradicate the Islamic State, and that the current U.S. policy may even be creating an insurance policy of sorts for the organization. Even before the beginning of the airstrikes, it was widely believed that the United States had no intention of striking a direct and destructive blow to the Islamic State's military wing, and that its attacks would target infrastructure related to the civilian realm, such as refineries, factories, training camps, produce storage facilities, and communications facilities. Approximately one week before the beginning of the attacks, the inhabitants of ar-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor began an evacuation, and the Islamic State operatives have also abandoned their installations, some blending in with the civilian population, assuming that the allies would refrain from attacking them under such circumstances. Others moved into Iraq. One major argument being voiced in the social media is that because the tactical blow has been against infrastructure and funding sources, the immediate victims are the Syrian citizens living in the regions being attacked from the air in northeast Syria. The

damaged refineries and food storage facilities were the lifeline of the local communities, and it is feared that the arrival of winter will create a humanitarian crisis in this region.

The Local Communities are the Name of the Game

The solutions to the bloody conflict in Syria being proposed in the social media alongside the criticism of the manner in which the campaign against the Islamic State has been carried out thus far relate to three courses of action. An effective combination of these three courses of action, it is argued, can prevent the failure of the American strategy against the Islamic State and help the future rehabilitation of the country.

One course of action is the destruction of the Islamic State, which must be carried out by means of attacks against its strongholds, from the air and on the ground, and by arming the rebel groups with advanced weaponry. The second course is the toppling of the Assad regime, which, as a result of the extreme force it has exercised against the civil protests and the armed rebels in an effort to retain its control over Syria, is now regarded by many as the primary factor that enabled the radical groups' penetration alongside local communities' support of the Islamic State. The third course of action, which is mentioned in the discussion underway as the most important measure of all, is the strengthening and rehabilitation of the local communities. This, participants in the discussion argue, is the only way to encourage Islamic State supporters to abandon the organization, curb the trend of civilians joining its ranks, and deprive it of funding and legitimacy on its home turf. Another recurring argument being voiced is that "the legitimacy [of the air campaign against the Islamic State] will not come from the regional Sunni coalition but from the local Sunni community." This means that it will be difficult and perhaps even impossible to stifle the rise of the Islamic State within Syria without carrying out parallel action with the resolute aim of toppling the Bashar al-Assad regime.

