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"If Assad Stays, ISIS Stays":

The Coalition Airstrikes as Reflected in the Syrian Discourse on Social Media

Orit Perlov

On September 23, the U.S. military and its Arab partners: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar launched a joint air campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS) and the Jabhat al-Nusra Front targets in the Syrian cities of a-Raqqah, Deir a-Zor, Aleppo, and Idlib. According to a U.S. military official, "CENTCOM's plan includes targeted actions against ISIS safe havens in Syria including its command and control, logistics capabilities, and infrastructure...The goal with this first move is to have an initial, definitive blow to 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 the discourse on 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 expansion of the disease. Consequently, there were expectations for broad local and regional backing for the attacks in Syria. Three weeks into the offensive, however, the atmosphere has

changed. Many of the coalition's supporters are thus far disappointed, voicing widespread rejection of the strikes across the dividing lines inside Syria.

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 to change the citizens' current placement between a rock and a hard place – that is, between the Assad regime, causing the death of nearly 230,000 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.

These questions are being discussed in the social media by Arab users in general and by Syrian opposition activists in particular. An analysis of the discussions on social media among the various groups as well as leaders of public opinion in Syria reveals growing erosion in the campaign's legitimacy. These trends represent approximately 12% of all social media users in Syria (with the exception of radical Islamist groups or, of course, supporters of the Assad regime). The discussion also suggests 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.

The Formula Actually is: "If Assad stays, ISIS stays, and if ISIS stays, Assad Stays"

Abu Hammoud, a commander of one of the opposition groups named Liwa al-Tawhid stated that "[The coalition forces'] military action in Syria is unbalanced. They are not striking the root cause of extremism, which is the regime that allowed [ISIS] to exist. If they remove [ISIS] but leave the regime, another will come along; it will never end." Indeed, according to Syrian opposition activists and "moderate" rebel factions fighting against the regime, without a formula that undermines "Assadism"—Assad and his regime—it will be impossible to effectively confront "Da'ashism" (ISIS). "One attacks us with chlorine barrel bombs while the other beheads us," they maintain. "One death from Above, one death from below."

Civilians under Fire

A recurring claim in the social media discourse is that the allies' current strategy, focusing on the air campaign, is hindering the elements who are supposed to address the problem on the ground. This claim is related to the killing of numerous civilians in the first wave of missile attacks. Due to the aerial attacks' inaccuracy, there is a growing fear of countless civilian deaths. Overlooking this can, ironically, lead to an undesirable outcome: what ISIS may lose in terms of strength and numbers may be gained in terms of popular opinion.

The Absence of No-Fly Zones and the Failure to Arm the Opposition Forces

Another point of criticism being raised in the social media is the fact that the airstrikes were not accompanied by adequate arming of opposition fighters on the ground. Without providing the rebels advanced weaponry, it is being argued, the rebel groups will not be able to assert their control, thus paving the road for the regime to exploit the vacuum. In addition, the absence of 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 establishment of no-fly zones and safe havens 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.

Expanding the Mission

Two weeks after outlining a narrow fight with ISIS, the U.S. suddenly expanded its offensive, opening a two-front war in Syria against the original target and an al Qaeda-linked group known as Khorasan, a smaller network affiliated with the al-Nusra Front. According to American sources, the group has entered the advanced stages of preparing terrorist attacks against American and Western. Nonetheless, strikes against the group resulted in a loss of trust among the Syrian activists and the organized rebel groups in the coalition. Many Syrians do not consider Al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization, and support them for fighting against the regime, not promoting international jihad, not committing crimes and not imposing its own

ideologies on people, as has been stated on social media. 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.

Can the "No Boots on the Ground Policy" Be Truly Effective?

Based on repeating conversations in the social media, many believe that the working assumption of refraining from involving U.S. ground forces in the struggle (the "no boots on the ground" policy) is indicative of the absence of a true intention to destroy the Islamic State, and that the current U.S. policy may even provide the organization with a life insurance policy. Even before the beginning of the airstrikes, it was widely believed that the U.S. had no intention of striking a direct and destructive blow to the Islamic State's military wing, and that its attacks would target infrastructure causing detrimental harm to civilians, including refineries, factories, training camps, produce granaries, and communications facilities. Approximately one week before the beginning of the attacks, the inhabitants of a-Raqqah and Deir a-Zor began an evacuation while the Islamic State operatives have also abandoned their posts; some escaped into civilian population areas, assuming that the allies would refrain from attacking them under such circumstances, others moved into Iraq. One key 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 residents living 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 further contribute to a humanitarian crisis in this region.

The Local Communities as a Game Changer

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 ISIS 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 U.S. 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 overthrowing 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 and a game changer, is the strengthening and rehabilitation of the local communities. "Unless the strategy against ISIS shifts to a broader one appealing to the local communities, the fight against it is doomed" as one Syrian activist stated. 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 rather the local Sunni community." This means that it will be difficult and perhaps even impossible to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS within Syria without carrying out parallel action with the end goal of overthrowing the Bashar al-Assad regime.