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Conflict Update

International Coalition Airstrikes Against the Islamic State in Syria

October 20, 2014

In Brief

The US-led international coalition's (the Coalition) air campaign against Islamic State (IS) targets in Syria is seeing mixed results after nearly four weeks of engagement. The Syrian opposition's response to the international intervention has been overwhelmingly negative, with detractors claiming that the effort is helping the government of Bashar al-Assad, killing civilians, and generally adding to the misery of the Syrian people. The Syrian government, on the other hand, has so far praised the campaign, saying it is a positive step to combat terrorism. Others still have written it off as ineffective, noting the IS' steady advance into the predominantly Kurdish city of Kobane (also known as Ayn al-Arab).

From the IS' perspective, the campaign is a public relations windfall. Regionally, the campaign has largely been viewed as strengthening the "Shia axis" at the expense of Sunni populations in Iraq and Syria and has led to rival fundamentalist organizations (including elements of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) calling for unconditional support for the IS. This narrative was aided by the US' decision to simultaneously strike elements of Jabhat al-Nusra, which has long been one of the most active groups fighting both the Syrian government and the IS. Though the US made clear that they were only attacking a few key individuals from Jabhat al-Nusra, which the Department of Defense has labeled the "Khorasan Group," the optics were unavoidable.

With such a mixed response to the first strikes of what will inevitably be a lengthy campaign, what then has been the result after four weeks of bombing? This report aims to detail the location of strikes, shifting areas of control, and examine the effects of the campaign thus far. It concludes that coalition forces are making a concerted effort to avoid active government front lines in an apparent attempt to ensure that government and pro-government forces do not benefit from the campaign. Additionally, while the international coalition's campaign has freed the Syrian government to redirect air power towards opposition forces, the effects of this shift have been negligible due to the fact that the Syrian government has historically allocated relatively little air power to target IS forces.

Coalition Airstrikes

Coalition forces have conducted more than 100 air strikes in Syria since the beginning of their campaign on September 23. As previously noted, these strikes have targeted both the IS and elements of Jabhat al-Nusra. Responding to the IS advance on Kobane, the coalition has directed nearly 50% of strikes toward IS positions in the surrounding area and, more recently, in the city itself. Though the city of Kobane is dear to Syria's Kurdish population, it is not of great strategic importance. Despite this, it has quickly gained symbolic importance as it became the first battleground between IS and coalition forces. With such intense media coverage, both forces need to prove themselves against the other, and are thus unable to disengage. This has led to IS forces directing an increasing number of resources towards Kobane and, as of October 19, US forces air-dropping arms, ammunition, and medical supplies to Kurdish defenders.

The Coalition's activity against the IS in Kobane and other Kurdish enclaves is unique in that it is directed towards a front line. Elsewhere in the country, the Coalition does not appear to have struck within 16km (10 miles) of any front line, choosing instead to target IS supply lines, command centers, and sources of revenue such as oil fields or production facilities. Coalition airstrikes against "Khorasan Group" elements of Jabhat al-Nusra were similarly distant from front lines, only coming close in the area surrounding Aleppo. These targeted strikes against Jabhat al-Nusra affiliates have not translated into any noticeable drop in the group's activity, and it remains active on front lines throughout the country.

The following map shows Coalition and Syrian government aerial bombardments from September 23 through October 20. Information for airstrikes was drawn from US Central Command press releases, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, online activist forums and posts, video footage, and contacts in the country. Nearly 900 reports were recorded in total. In the event that these reports conflicted with one another in terms of who was responsible (or omitted the information entirely), additional research was conducted and, in some cases, the responsible party was determined based upon historic data and apparent trends.

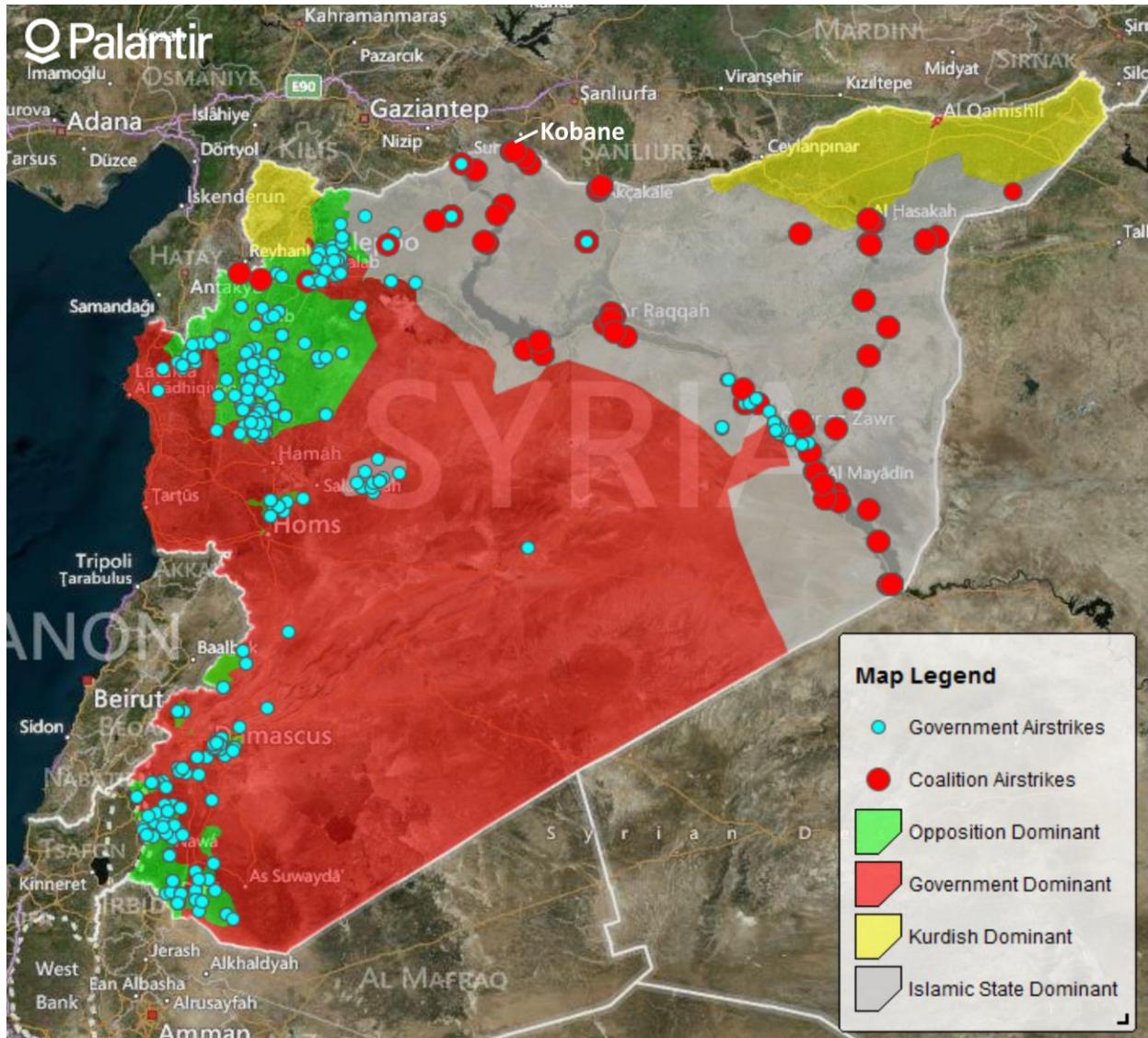


Figure 1: Coalition and Government air strikes from September 23 through October 20th. Reports of airstrikes in unspecified locations (for example, “Kobane countryside”) are not represented in this map.

Shifting Front Lines

Front lines and areas of control throughout Syria have remained relatively unchanged over the past month – with the notable exception of the Islamic State’s advance on Kobane. Opposition forces have made limited gains against remaining government military bases in the northern governorate of Idlib, in the southern governorate of Deraa, and in Aleppo governorate along government supply lines. Government forces, on the other hand, have continued to gain ground to the northeast of Aleppo city, and have scaled-up an ongoing offensive to re-capture suburbs of Damascus city. The gains made by government forces north of Aleppo represent a continuation of an ongoing effort to encircle opposition positions in eastern Aleppo city and do not appear to be the result of decreased pressure from IS forces in the area or increased air support to ground forces.

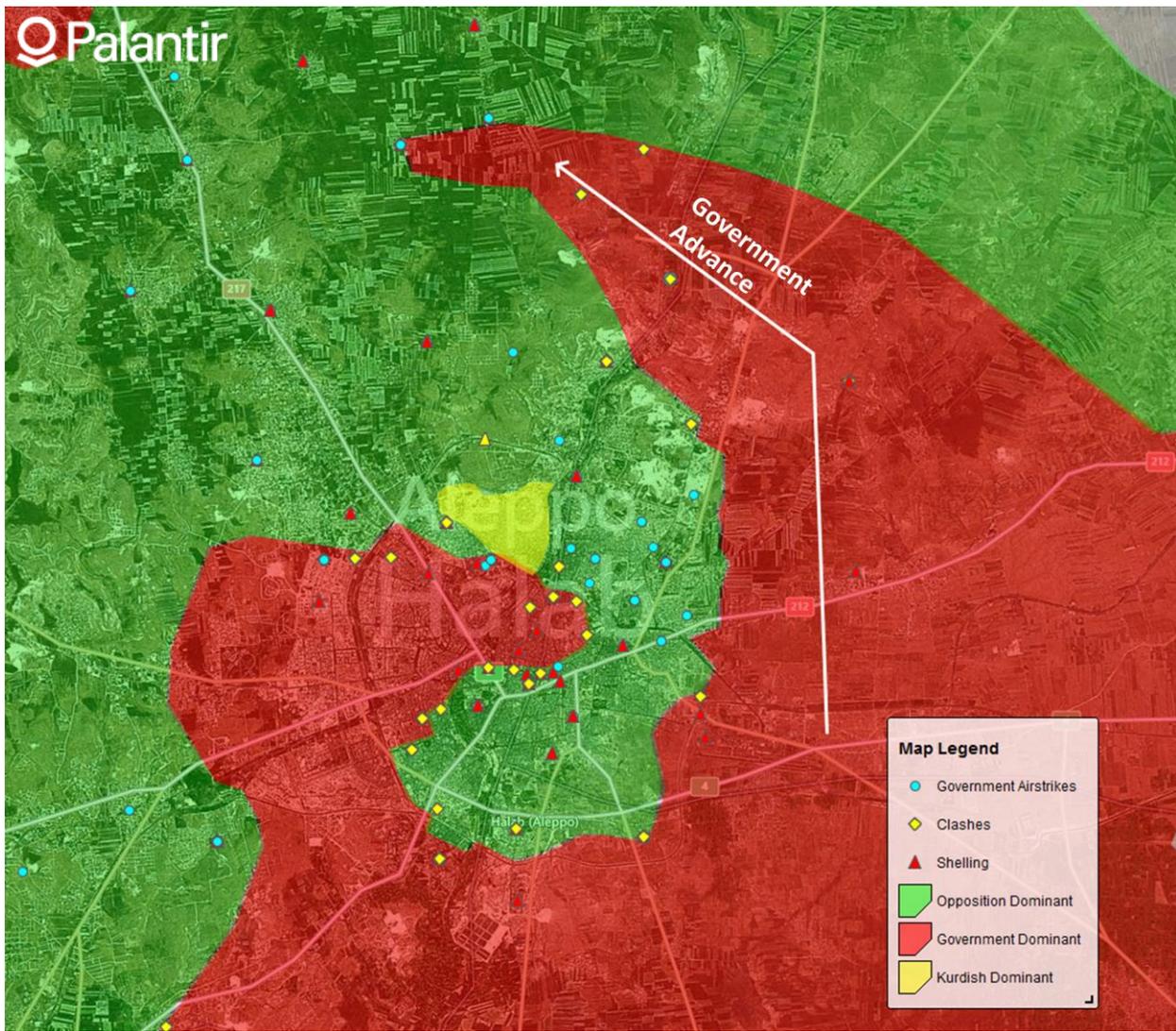


Figure 2: Areas of control and recent conflict events in and around Aleppo city (September 23-October 20).

Conclusions

With the exception of Kurdish controlled areas, international airstrikes in Syria do not appear to be affecting the status of forces in Syria in any noticeable way. Despite the fact that the majority of countries contributing military support to the effort have also aided Syrian opposition forces, the involvement of these countries as part of the Coalition has so far followed a policy of non-intervention. It is likely that this limited engagement was agreed upon with the Syrian government beforehand, which benefits from the anti-terror discourse as well as the reduced pressure from IS forces. The likelihood of a pre-existing agreement is further supported by the almost complete absence of government aerial bombardments in areas where the Coalition has been active, which suggests that Coalition and government war planes and drones are intentionally avoiding one another.

Should the next major frontline with the IS progress towards either opposition or government positions, it will be difficult for the Coalition to maintain its current policy of non-intervention while still engaging the IS in a major way. As long as the IS maintains its focus on Kurdish enclaves in northern and eastern Syria, however, Coalition forces will be able to continue to weaken the IS while avoiding crossing the Rubicon, and becoming a true party to Syria's ongoing internal conflict.