

Conflict Update

International Coalition Airstrikes Against the Islamic State in Syria
October 20, 2014

In Brief

The US-led (the Coalition) air

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 not of great strategic importance, 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.

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 strikes against 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 represented in this map.

Shifting Front Lines

Front lines and areas of control throughout Syria have remained relatively unchanged over the past month. 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 the Coalition has a pre-existing agreement with the Syrian government and of uroeitehas

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 ongoing internal conflict.