

The Virgin Islands Consortium

U.S. And Allies Bomb ISIS In Syria

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The New York Times -- BEIRUT, Lebanon — The United States and five Arab allies launched a wide-ranging air campaign against the Islamic State and at least one other extremist group in Syria for the first time early Tuesday, targeting the groups' bases, training camps and checkpoints in at least four provinces, according to the United States military and Syrian activists.

The intensity of the attacks struck a fierce opening blow against the jihadists of the Islamic State, scattering its forces and damaging the network of facilities it has built in Syria that helped fuel its seizure of a large part of Iraq this year.

Separate from the attacks on the Islamic State, the United States Central Command, or Centcom, said that American forces acting alone “took action” against “a network of seasoned Al Qaeda veterans” from the Khorasan group in Syria to disrupt “imminent attack planning against the United States and Western interests.”

An undated image posted on a militant website shows ISIS fighters marching in Raqqa, Syria. The United States and allies struck targets in militant-controlled territory early on Tuesday.

Officials did not reveal where or when such attacks might take place.

Al Qaeda broke with the Islamic State earlier this year, saying its tactics were too extreme. Just days ago, American officials said the Khorasan group, led by a shadowy figure who was once in Osama bin Laden’s inner circle, had emerged in the past year as the Syria-based cell most intent on launching a terror attack on the United States or on its installations overseas.

The latest campaign opened with multiple strikes before dawn that focused on the Islamic State’s de facto capital, the city of Raqqa, and on its bases in the surrounding countryside. Other strikes hit in the provinces of Deir al-Zour and Hasaka, whose oil wells the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, have exploited to finance its operations.

The extent of the damage caused by the strikes remained unclear. Centcom said the wave of fighter planes, bombers, drones and cruise missiles struck 14 targets linked to the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

“All aircraft safely exited the strike areas,” the statement said.

Almost 50 cruise missiles were launched from two American vessels in the Red Sea and the north of the Persian Gulf, it said, adding that four other attacks were launched on militant targets in Iraq in the same period, bringing the total there to 194.

The intensity and scale of the strikes were greater than those launched by the United States in Iraq, where it has been bombing select Islamic State targets for months. The air campaign also marks the widest scale direct military intervention into the Syria crisis since it began more than three years ago.

Centcom identified the Arab states participating in the campaign as Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Their participation is seen as important to limit criticisms that the United States is waging war alone against Muslims. But their role varied between support for the strikes and participation, the military said.

The Jordanian Army said on Tuesday that it had carried out airstrikes against “terrorist groups” that were plotting to attack Jordan, according to Reuters.

In intervening in Syria, the United States is injecting its military might into a messy and brutal civil war between the government of President Bashar al-Assad, the Islamic State and a range of rebels group who originally took up arms to fight Mr. Assad but have also come to oppose the Islamic State.

It was unclear what effect the American-led strikes would have on the larger conflict, although they risked opening up a new vacuum with little certainty about which of the country's combatants would benefit most.

The Islamic State, while having chalked up numerous victories against the Syrian and Iraqi security forces and against Syrian rebels, has proved vulnerable to air power in Iraq, and it is unlikely that it can continue to hold all of its territory and facilities amid a sustained air campaign.

American officials said that the strikes were not coordinated with the government of Mr. Assad, whom President Obama has said has lost his legitimacy to rule and should step down.

But Syrian state television claimed on Monday that the United States had informed Syria's ambassador to the United Nations before the attacks were launched. This followed weeks of threats by Syrian officials that any uncoordinated strikes on Syria would be considered an act of aggression.

Some of Syria's allies have suggested that the government in Damascus would benefit from strikes, although analysts question whether the Syrian military has the forces it would need to do so.

Syria also has hundreds of rebels groups, many of which hate the Islamic State, and the United States has been working with allies to build up a small number groups deemed moderate. But these forces remain relatively small and are geographically far from the Islamic State's locations, so there is little chance that they will soon be able to seize control of any areas vacated by the Islamic State.

Reuters quoted an unidentified ISIS fighter as saying "these attacks will be answered." The militants have already released videos showing the apparent beheading of two American hostages and one British captive, and have threatened a fourth hostage, a Briton, with the same fate.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported strikes in five Syrian provinces, in the country's north and east, targeting bases and training camps of the Islamic State and other groups.

In addition to Islamic State bases in the provinces of Raqqa, Hasaka, Deir al-Zour and Aleppo, strikes also hit bases belonging to the Nusra Front further west, killing at least seven Nusra fighter and eight civilians, according to the Observatory, which tracks the conflict from Britain through a network of contacts in Syria.

Even for a population that has grown used to the sounds and sights of war, the new strikes proved surprising.

In a video posted online, a man in Idlib Province inspected a greenish metal hunk of what he said was the remainder of the munitions used in a strike.

"No one knows what happened yet," the man said. "This was the first time we have heard an explosion like this during this revolution."

