

In total more than 12 different airforces are currently throwing bombs over Syrians. France retaliated with aerial bombardments on [Da'esh strongholds in Raqqa](#) after the Paris bombings, the [United Kingdom](#) has said they will join the coalition forces in the bombing campaign that they started back in 2014, [Germany has joined](#) and other European countries such as the Netherlands are contemplating their participation to follow suit soon. [Saudi Arabia](#) will be leading a military coalition of



*Destruction of the hospital in Daret Ezza, Aleppo Province, Syria photo: J.I.Wessels © 2014*

34 Islamic countries to fight terrorism and bomb Da'esh in Raqqa and beyond. Will all these bombs bring peace to Syria ? A roadtrip in Syria and the opinions of twenty prominent Syrians.

After four years of war and violence, Syria is now geographically divided into four major areas under the control of moving checkpoints and military factions;

- The territory under the control of the Assad regime army, which rarely had any aerial bombardments but has suffered under mortar attacks and suicide bombers
- The areas under the control of the Kurdish forces, or also called Peshmerga, who also rarely had any aerial bombardments. Except the area of Kobani and other areas previously occupied by Da'esh forces. They were destroyed by aerial bombardments.
- Areas under the control of the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front, who have had massive aerial bombardments by the Assad regime army which is lately joined by the Russian planes and occasionally those of the coalition forces
- Then the areas that are under the control of Da'esh who have had most aerial bombardments by the coalition forces and some by Assad and the Russians.

Last year, I travelled personally to the so-called “*liberated areas*” of Aleppo province inside Syria, under the control of the Free Syrian Army. For five days, I made a roadtrip and I met with Syrians from all kinds of backgrounds. These areas are called the “*liberated areas*” because they are under the control of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Kurdish forces (YPG). At that time, before the coalition bombings started, these opposition forces had managed to push back the Islamic State militants (Da'esh) to the East, far away until cities like al-Bab and Raqqa. Since 2013, the Assad regime army had been defeated in these areas by the FSA. The regime army had not dared to enter these lands



*Illustration by Rafiq Ibn Jubair*

again with ground troops. As the only faction with an airforce, they were just bombing from above. Their groundtroops were nowhere to be seen. Every 5 to 10 kilometers on my trip there would be a military checkpoint, first all FSA, then some Kurdish checkpoints in Afrin, with the Peshmerga women.

It was August 2014 and the main problem was that the Syrians living in these liberated areas suffered the indiscriminate and horrible aerial bombardments and attacks with barrelbombs by the Syrian regime army. Everybody would be looking up in the air whenever a plane or helicopter would fly over. I personally saw the aftermath of these [barrelbombs on civilian areas, hospitals, schools](#). My friend who was driving me around in his car, pointed out the widespread destruction on civilian areas in villages such as Daret Ezza and Atareb. With Da'esh kicked out, the danger was mainly coming from the air and the only one who had an airforce and helicopters at that time was Assad. This all changed when, five days after I left Syria, the international coalition airforces started bombing Da'esh controlled areas, especially in Raqqa. Besides Da'esh areas, the coalition forces also bombed civilian areas and Islamist factions like Ahrar al Sham, who were in Idlib and not at all in Da'esh areas. For many of the Syrian civilians in these liberated areas, it felt like the Assad regime was coordinating with the coalition airforces. With the widespread destruction in cities like Aleppo, Homs and Hama, the Syrians lost the last little hope and faith in the international community they still had.



*Syrian refugees in Aleppo province, Syria*

*photo: J.I. Wessels, © 2014*

In my current work researching Syrian video activism in Aleppo, I meet many inspiring Syrians. I have watched countless YouTube clips which contain the brutal images of the aftermaths of aerial bombardments. The video activists I interview have to deal with these traumas on a daily basis. Many of their footage contain the deep traumatic experience of Syrians having to dig up their loved ones, holding up the body parts of their children, crying out in despair what they have done to deserve this and why everyone has abandoned them.

This is in fact what bombs do. Bombs destroy lives and livelihoods and leave deep, deep scars on the local Syrian population. The coalition bombardments proved to be counterproductive in 2014 and 2015. A year after bombing Syrians and Da'esh is still not gone, in fact Da'esh has gained territory and the Syrian refugee crisis has swollen to historic proportions. Russian planes started to get involved and Putin has until now mainly bombed FSA controlled areas and not Da'esh. The cities of Aleppo and Raqqa have been hit with [Russian clusterbombs](#). Yet after the [Paris bombings](#), the international community still thinks bombing is a solution in Syria. Rarely is the international community really listening to the Syrians themselves. Now Syrians on the ground have lost the little trust they ever had in the civilized world.

## **The opinions of twenty prominent Syrians**

With all these air forces currently bombing Syrians, I set out, together with a Dutch colleague Esseline van de Sande from our Dutch Middle East platform, to listen to Syrians from all kinds of backgrounds and originating from all these four areas, to ask them what they think about the decisions by foreign countries to start bombing Syria. Although they came from a variety of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds and political viewpoints, there is one thing these Syrian voices all unanimously agreed upon; *bombing is not going to solve the war.*

“Conventional wisdom says that violence begets more violence. This wisdom was among the justifications for not adequately arming the secular Free Syrian Army at a time when it could have toppled the Assad regime and spared the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians. Near five years into the Syrian uprising, violence is begetting more violence as Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and the US-led International Coalition bomb what is left of Syria into oblivion. In the fight against Da’esh, governments will mobilize their military might within hours. When the issue is civilian protection from a genocidal maniac, governments take years to wring their hands, condemn atrocities loudly, and embark on a political process with the very criminals who delivered Da’esh to the world and committed Hitlerian crimes against their people. As Russia and Assad continue to target civilians instead of Da’esh, and as Syria continues to hemorrhage, I am reminded of the two words international leaders consistently fail to respect: Never Again. Stop the bombs. Stop the slaughter. Stop the Assad regime, and in doing so, stop Da’esh. Let us, the weary, starving, traumatized civilians of Syria, exercise a fundamental right. Let us live” – *Rafif Jouejati, spokesperson of the [Local Coordination Committees of Syria \(LCC\)](#), a network of 70 coordination groups (tansiqiyat) operated by media and street activists connected to the grassroots revolt inside Syria.*

“This is no longer about Syria, this is about the world. It is clear that the global mobilization against Da'esh is extermination-oriented not justice-oriented. It is in this way paying tribute to Dae'sh mobilization of its “Mujahideen”. This raises a question: Does a world incumbent on killing and war, while dismissing issues of justice and human dignity, deserve better than Da'esh? Germany is only an additional drummer in the chorus” - *Yassin al Haj Saleh, [Syrian Writer and Dissident from Raqqa/Damascus, now in Turkey.](#)*

“It is counterproductive and even naïve to try to contain Da’esh without remedying the ongoing agony of the Syrian people. The mass targeting of civilians and civilian structures by the Assad regime made the frontline safer than homes and served as a successful recruitment strategy, planned by Assad and now benefiting Da’esh. Yet many countries chose to ignore the central role of Assad in creating Da’esh and allowing them to control such a large territory and are now suggesting to collaborate with him against Da’esh, falsely portraying him as the lesser of two evils. The US, Australia, Canada, France and other states have been bombing Da’esh for over a year now yet they failed to contain their harm or achieve any notable victories, meanwhile the Syrian people just a few miles away continue to be mass exterminated by the Assad forces and no one seems to be doing anything to stop that. These people are a central factor in defeating Da’esh, and once they are no longer hiding from barrel bombs, trapped in siege, or forced into displacement they can, and will, defeat Da’esh. Focusing all efforts on the military will ignore a large section of society who live in Da’esh controlled areas, civilians, civil society and women who have always been the natural opposition of Da’esh and who managed to do wonders protecting their societies and creating a small space for living in these insane circumstances.



Unless significant support is provided to them, I do not see how Da'esh will ever be defeated"- **Laila Alodaat from Damascus, crisis response manager at Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, now living in the UK**

"Before the Russian involvement, we were only hit daily by barrelbombs thrown from helicopters. They are not accurate and lead almost exclusively to civilian casualties. Now they are joined by Russian bombs: we get 10 to 15 air strikes per day. In addition, we are hit by so-called Elephant missiles, and I hope they get just as a bad name as the barrelbombs: these rockets are locally made, shot from the ground to the other side of the frontline. They have about 70% to 80% percent of the impact of barrelbombs and there are fired six to seven times per minute. Bombing Da'esh ? I know of no Syrian here who has any problem with bombing ISIS. However, there is resentment and the reason is that Da'esh has first been given the opportunity to expand considerably by Assad and that provided an excuse to frame the opposition as extremist . The support that was given the opposition against Assad initially, an opposition who sincerely asked for democratic change, is therefore eroded because people thought, perhaps we encourage terrorism by supporting the opposition. Now they call on Assad for cooperation in the fight against Da'esh ! If Assad is this winning again in these areas, the only result of the campaign will be that people who are potential allies, also turn radical, since they will never accept that Assad occupies recaptured ISIS areas under any circumstance. "- **Rami Jarrah, Syrian-British media activist in Aleppo**.

"I think that with the European countries involved in the bombing on Syria, it will only get worse. If the European governments want to check targets of the bombing, they should look at what the aerial bombardments of Assad, Russia, the US and the Arab world on Syria have achieved. The impact of the bombing on civilians has been very bad. I remember once I heard in the news about a drone targeting a Da'esh car in the city center of Al-Raqqa, the bomb killed the target but the sad thing is they had killed seven civilians as well. The question here is, do the bombings benefit or harm the Syrians? The bombing on Syria caused the deaths of many civilians, who had decided not to flee and risk crossing the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece. The bombing caused the destruction of many houses and shops in Raqqa. Bombing enters the terror and fear in people's hearts and will lead to the cessation of life in motion" - **Moayad Hariri from Raqqa, now young violinist student in the Netherlands**.

"Since the occurrence of the bombings in France, which killed more than 127 people, all the eyes of the world turned to the stronghold of Da'esh in the eastern Syrian city of Raqqa. The response of the international alliance forces was quick, where the French planes launched more than 30 air-raids on the Da'esh headquarters in Raqqa, one the first day that followed after the events in France. As a result Da'esh closed all the city's roads, preventing people from going out of it. They confiscated all the Internet devices in the Internet cafes under the pretext that there are persons who had used the internet to send coordinates to the international alliance forces. Mohamad (not his real name), a doctor from Raqqa , reported that *"more than 60 bodies of Da'esh militants arrived on the first day to the Public Hospital, and that number increased to more than 180, who were Syrian civilians; because Da'esh transports the bodies of the foreign fighters to confidential hospitals affiliated to it"*. He added that *"the number of the injured from Da'esh, as a result of the raids, was more than 200 fighters, and that there is no room for the bodies in the hospital refrigerator"*. When asked about the bloody events happened in Paris, Mohamad answered: *"What happened there is really a pity. Those people are innocent. According to Islam, one is not allowed to kill a man without cause, our religion forbids that because it violates the teachings of Islam. What happened there was a real terrorism, but it is a small part of what is happening here in Raqqa, and the daily practices of Da'esh against the Syrian*

civilians. *We wish to get rid of this terrorist organization today before tomorrow.*” Following the air strikes carried out by the international alliance forces, Da’esh responded with great cruelty against Syrian civilians, and tried to impose forced recruitment, closing the roads to and from the city completely. Probably as a new plan to protect itself from the coalition raids and make the civilians like human shields. Abu Mohamad, a civilian from Raqqa, said that *“the past few days were the most difficult days experienced by the city, due to the fear of the great explosions, and the large number of air raids on the city. At the same time these raids do not kill us but the Russian and Syrian Regime aerial bombardments do kill us. We are assured that the coalition raids target the terrorist groups of Da’esh, who pretend to be powerful, but when the coalition planes come, we do not see any fighter of them in the street. They flee like rats and hide in the houses or amongst the civilians”* Da’esh is actually a cowardish organization, pretending to be powerful, under the pressure applied from all sides, and trying to summon its strength; but the coalition forces from one side, and the attacks of the FSA and Kurdish forces on the other side do not let it breathe. The organization is living its last breath in the city of Raqqa, and the people of the city hope to see it liberated within a very short period of time - **Zaid al Fares, Activist journalist, from Raqqa**

“The death of civilians is the number one recruitment tool for Da’esh. Bombing civilians promotes the Da’esh narrative of *“us versus them”* and increases animosity towards the West. Russia's bombing of civilian areas far from Da’esh territory, is driving recruitment to extremist groups while destroying moderate communities that might defeat them. The same is true of Assad regime bombing of civilian areas, and to a lesser extent, US-led coalition bombing. The most effective way to undermine Da’esh is by protecting civilians from all aerial bombardment, and eliminating all aircraft specifically those which are resulting in high civilian death tolls” - **Kenan Rahmani from Idlib, now in the US**

“In my opinion, bombing in Syria by some EU countries (France and Britain) will never be a solution, neither to stop the terrorism threat by Da’esh nor for the Syrian war as a whole. It will make the conflict much more complicated and far from any possible solution. It's time to think differently and face the real reasons not the *“results”*. If they really want to stop Da’esh, they could have done that long time ago by stopping the killing machine of the brutal dictatorship Assad regime, which is behind Da’esh and all the problems we have had. Even the refugee crisis in Europe will not be solved by bombings, it will only will increase the number of people who are fleeing Syria to Europe. Finally, bombing in Syria will not make Europe safer. It will make the problem bigger and the extremists stronger. And it will add to the suffering of Syrian people who are under daily attack from Assad and Russian-Iranian warplanes and rockets.” - **Mohammed Nesrini from Aleppo, MA student now living in Sweden**

“There are two issues that need to be taken into consideration with regard the bombing..First, Da’esh controls large parts of Syria and Iraq and its fighters are entrenched within civilians in Raqqa and other parts of the country. The concern is that any military action against Da’esh will lead to more casualties with Syrian civilians which would reinforce Da’esh narratives that this is another crusade against the Muslims and enable them to get more recruits. Second, for while Islamic State has attracted the attention of western politicians and military personnel, the majority of Syrians are more fixated on Assad as the principal threat to daily life in Syria. They see that the international community is hypocrite when it chose to ignore Assad after using chemical weapons against its people while it is targeting Da’esh now. Assad has been using barrel bombs against its own people for many years which lead to destruction of whole cities and the displacement of hundred thousands of refugees. Any military action against IS in Syria must not lead to strengthening Assad’s positions in Syria against other opposition groups. It must also rely on precise intelligence information that try to

avoid any casualties among civilians. Otherwise, the campaign would lead to adverse results.” – ***Haian Dukhan from Palmyra, now PhD student in the UK.***

“The decision by Francois Hollande to bomb Raqqa following the Paris bombings is an extremely worrying development on the Syrian front. Not only is Hollande acting without a clear political strategy but only to satisfy an appetite for revenge, he is replicating the Bush administration's fatal error to attack Afghanistan and Iraq following the attacks of 9/11. We know from that history that Bush's decision was a major strategic error that worked to strengthen rather than weaken Islamic groups, and that the invasion of Iraq that followed is the main context that gave rise to Da'esh. I fear that the European revenge in Syria will only exacerbate matters and will further strengthen an already strong criminal gang”- ***Rana Issa from Damascus, now Postdoctoral Fellow in Norway.***

“There are many reasons why the bombing is not going to solve the problem, but I would put my view on a bit higher level: Since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution the international community has been selectively reactive, with no strategy for Syria, and maybe no interest. The bombing of Syria is the embodiment of this no-strategy state and this is bad and dangerous because it looks like Da'esh is the one setting the rules of the game; Da'esh planned the attacks in Paris expecting the West to "react" with bombing, and the West didn't fail them. Bombing is a reaction to the terrorists' acts, the world needs to act against extremism, not react to it, which means that the world should work on a comprehensive and principled strategy to confront extremism that includes, among many other things, putting an end to Assad's atrocities, the source of injustice in Syria” - ***Murhaf Fares from Damascus, now PhD student in Norway.***

“It gives Da'esh all the justification to continue the escalation of violence against the Syrians firstly and against the international community secondly. In my opinion, this military intervention happens because of revenge originally to what happened and anticipate to what may happen. Bombing Syria makes the civilians in those areas worthless and it would be easy for Da'esh to convince them to be on their side. Because they will propagate the discourse that Sunnis have been attacked from countries which double-speak of protection of human rights and diversity, but they attack the Sunnis. This leads civilians to choose to side with the devil, to survive in very basic daily life. Bombing Syria, is bombing the memories of people, history of the country and bombing humanity. Bomb Syria is the easiest way to fight the terrorism, but there are many other ways like: invest the money to empower the Syrian civil society, empower Syrian women who are working in silent right now even in the Da'esh areas, having serious education project in neighbourhood countries so civilians can flee from Da'esh areas, but the most effective way is to cut off the supply arms to Da'esh, in order to weaken them” - ***Rula Asad from Damascus, Journalist and executive director of [Syrian female Journalists Network](#).***

"ISIS is fighting more against the Free Syrian Army than against Assad. Another reason why ISIS has appeal to many young boys and sometimes Syrians is that the regime has made the conflict sectarian by importing militias such as Hezbollah and others Shia militias from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. They resurrected a 1400-year old feud between the Shiites and the Sunnis which has nothing to do with the Syrian uprising itself! Everyone calls ISIS terrorists. What is the difference between ISIS, Hezbollah, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia? They all perform the same practices: torture of innocent civilians, the death penalty "- ***Bassam (pseudonym) from Aleppo, now lives in the Netherlands.***

“The work of the past 3 generations of moderate and/or secular social, legal and political movements in the Middle East altogether, that have tried so hard to plant and root down a common understanding and general belief in International Human Rights as a global ethical reference and standard is being shattered by every systematic international-government-approved bomb that hits hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians in return for the random targeting by a handful of fanatics of a few hundred Europeans. This is the best gift West-hating extremism rhetoric could ever wish for.

This level of destruction and random life-threat will push all those able to, to flee. It leaves only the terribly helpless & poor, under the mercy of the ruthless powerful. That is perhaps the only formula more dangerous than the geographic gathering of the world’s most extreme thousands in what is called Da’esh, because bombing won’t stop suicide bombers of course, so the only major impact of this international coalition is bombing Syrians, and it is what will turn Da’esh from selective individual global attraction, to a contagious collective disease spreading out geographically further and deeper into millions of people.

The further you bomb, the more you make sure the cycle of poverty and violence does not end with the arrival of the long awaited “political solution” that will lead to an end of the “war” in the armed battle sense of it. The more air-force shelling, the less infrastructure, the more international reconstruction loans will be needed to rebuild, an endless poverty and corruption cycle will be our fate. The only thing more special about Syria than its handy central location was the fact that it was one of the very rare few third world countries left without international debt or globalized banking and financial market. This makes the robin-hood argument of Da’esh and it’s “independent” currency system actually sound like “a thing” for some Syrians.

If regime scale violence created the abomination that is Da’esh, do we really want to find out what global-scale violence will create? Or is the plan to exterminate the entire nation? Because those that survive this amount of violence, are very unlikely to be terribly sensitive and soft people” – ***Laila (pseudonym) from Damascus, civil society & media activist***

"The revolution began with songs, slogans and pens. After some time, some internal and external parties became involved at various levels and have begun to intervene so it became such a complex conflict that the ordinary citizen is no longer able to follow what is happening. The air was full of Syrian aircrafts, now it is full of international planes that kill civilians. Husbands, wives, children come, homes are destroyed. Ordinary citizens, farmers, traders have lost everything, their families, their homes, their businesses. The hatred grows and grows because these ordinary people are the target and not Da’esh. As a result, it is understandable that ordinary citizens to go against these bombs and grenades, against those who throw off the bombs and destruction and destruction. The air raids are ostensibly aimed at Da’esh but hit innocent civilians. These attacks make Da’esh stronger. Da’esh has only one goal and that is to sow utmost hatred between Muslims and the West. The bombing works to achieve this goal. Therefore, the Western countries should consider a different strategy in the whole region and not just combat the effects but the cause. " - ***Shaykh Mohammed Abdullah Waddah from Palmyra, now living in Jordan.***

“The European decision makers should understand that they can't behave in the very similar reckless manner their American and other counterparts follow. This reality comes from a very simple reason that while oceans separate between the Middle East and the US, only a the Mediterranean puts the two banks of the region apart. This sea was proven not to function as a boarder, in the security meaning of the world. Soon around 1 million asylum seekers would have reached the EU and the bombardment of

their countries, whether Syria or not will not deter their numbers and would set the future relationship with them as citizens-to-be of EU in a hostile context that perpetuate the unproductive relationship that governed EU attitudes towards their southern neighbors. It is the time for EU policy makers to think of venues to invest in a business of peace rather than violence. Although the latter makes quick profit. The former is way more sustainable” - ***Salim Salamah from Yarmouk, Head of [Palestinian League for Human Rights – Syria \(PLHR\)](#), now living in Sweden.***

“From the very beginning of the syrian revolution the Syrian opposition asked for a peaceful and transformative exit of the regime and a cessation of attacks and sieges on unarmed civilians. The unwillingness to do so speaks to the length to which the regime is willing to go in order to create chaos and destruction in areas where any opposition still resides. The fact that we as people in the region know what military occupation and bombardments do to people who are already weary and defenseless has made us distrust any military machine telling us that bombing has a greater good. Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and not least Palestine shows us that bombing an already weakened population with the excuse of rooting out the enemy only makes that enemy stronger. In this case the main enemy, Assad, remains in power precisely because of that strategy. If western powers were interested in defeating terrorism they'd stop selling weapons to the dozens of countries already involved in bombing Syria. They'd stop the militarization of the conflict and use all means of weakening and punishing Assad for his crimes and hold accountable all those who've committed atrocities against a defenseless population. Bombing an already war-weary people only feeds the terror mechanism in Syria and the region” – ***Hanin Shakra from Yarmouk, Human Rights Activist and television producer, now living in Sweden***

“Bombing are killing civilians in Syria, even the bomb so smart that it always hits its target, even supposing the target is legitimately, as US, Russia, and Syrian regime demands. But the facts on the ground are different, few weeks ago, The US airstrike killed many civilians in Afghanistan, they killed the staffers and patients of a hospital belong to Doctors Without Borders the international organization. The number of civilians who killed from such airstrikes are double and tribal than the number of militants in Syria. In fact it will increase the number of refugees, last year the number of refugees has rocketed highly, and that's because the number of the hospitals, schools, houses and other infrastructures destroyed by the Airstrikes bombed. On the other hand, bombing increasing Daesh followers, because it's support their accusations and because it entirely confirms their picture of the West as a lawless, colonial armed camp determined to wipe out Muslims'. Finally, I believe the way of bombing will not end Daesh, what can end Daesh is ending the war in Syria, by ending the dictatorship there” - ***Hazem Younes from Yarmouk, now living in Sweden.***

“As a Syrian-Palestinian ambitious and caring double refugee and mother of three wonderful kids, I believe that the best and most efficient way to destruct Syria and destroy Syrian civilization and hope is the blind bombings, shellings and bombardments that are targeting civilians mainly in my beloved country killing the souls and future of my people... Stop bombing Syria ! Stop destroying our souls and hopes !” - ***May Samhouri Younes from Yarmouk, First responder and MA student now living in Sweden.***

“We, as Syrian voices, have never been heard since the beginning of the Syrian Uprising and hence we lost the ownership of any decision to end the violent conflict. Bombing Syria to fight Da'esh is a myth; it is fueling more terrorism, it is targeting civilians and it does not provide any political solution to end the war and bring us back to our homeland. We have been absented and we are out of any discourse except when we are merely numbers for a humanitarian crisis or refugee crisis. The



international community and the countries that are taking part in bombing Syria must be ashamed of intentionally ignoring the key reason of five years of death, destruction, violence, displacement, and the agony and losses of many generations yet to come” - ***Kholoud Mansour, development scholar and feminist activist, now living in Sweden.***