

Rise of Islamic State and its Effect on the War in Syria□ (For the full "Crisis in Syria" page click [here](#))

With the crisis in Syria spiraling out of control, ISIL, a group of militant Sunnis, began to [capture](#) large swaths of territory in the eastern part of the country, [proclaiming](#) an Islamic state in Iraq and Syria on 29 June 2014. (For more information on ISIL's formation, please see our ["Crisis in Iraq"](#) page.) It established control over key cities, making [Raqqa](#) its stronghold. On 16 September 2014, ISIL [began](#) to advance toward the town of Kobani, which has effectively been [governed](#) by Syrian Kurds since [July 2012](#) when they captured it from the Syrian government forces. The battle for Kobani appeared to be a part of ISIL's larger [strategy](#) to consolidate the few areas in the northwest part of the country that are not under its control and also to [gain](#) access to a long stretch of the Turkey-Syria border.

In the first day of the offensive, ISIL brutally [took over](#) 21 villages, forcing close to [60,000](#) Syrian Kurds to flee their homes within 24 hours. As the crisis dragged on, about [400,000](#) people from Kobani and the surrounding villages fled to neighboring Turkey. The ISIL advances toward Kobani provoked [fears](#) of a large-scale massacre similar to the one in the Iraqi town of [Sinjar](#) earlier in the year. As a result, the crisis prompted calls for action to prevent any impending atrocities. Thus, the president of Iraq's Kurdistan region [appealed](#) to the international community to "use every means" to protect the people of Kobani. As the siege of Kobani continued, the UN Special Advisors on the Prevention of Genocide and the

Responsibility to Protect issued a joint [statement](#)

on 10 October 2014, urging regional and global actors to take “concentrated and coordinated action...to ensure the protection of the populations and avert the possibility of further atrocity crimes.” In addition, the UN Special Envoy for Syria

[called](#)

on Turkey to take action in order to protect the civilians of Kobani, reminding the world of the horrific atrocities that ISIL is capable of. He compared the situation in Kobani to that of Srebrenica in 1995, stating that “when there is an imminent threat to civilians we cannot, we should not remain silent.”

The international response to the crisis was initially [complicated](#) by Turkey’s refusal to take action to protect Kobani because the Kurdish forces fighting in Kobani, the People’s Defence Units (YPG), are [affiliated](#)

with the

[Kurdistan Workers’ Party](#)

(PKK), an organization which Turkey considers to be a terrorist group. Amid growing

[criticism](#)

, Turkey finally decided to cooperate by

[opening](#)

its borders to allow Kurdish peshmerga from Iraq and Syrian rebels to join the Kurdish soldiers battling ISIL in Kobani. Furthermore, in October of 2014 Turkey did vote to allow

[military involvement](#)

in the fight against ISIS. Turkey thus became part of a wide coalition in the effort to suppress the actions of ISIS that includes the

U.S., Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Australia, and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, and

[Bahrein](#)

Members of this coalition, particularly the United States and Arab countries carried out [airstrike](#) [s](#) again

st ISIL in Syria for the first time on 22 September 2014. The airstrikes faced

[no objection](#)

by the Syrian government, which was reportedly

[informed](#)

of them

in advance. While the first airstrikes did not specifically target the ISIL advance on Kobani, on

[1 October 2014](#)

the U.S. led the first strikes against ISIL forces attempting to take over the town. Despite the airstrikes, ISIL militants

[continued](#)

to advance toward Kobani, and as a result, on 19 October 2014 the U.S. Central Command [announced](#) that they have conducted airdrops providing Kurdish fighters with arms, ammunition and medical supplies.

The U.S. airstrikes in Syria provoked [concerns](#) over their legality under international law. [Australia](#)

, [France](#)

, and the

[Netherlands](#)

, despite being a part of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL in Iraq, expressed legal reservations about airstrikes in Syria. Legal scholars

, such as

[Deborah Pearlstein](#)

from the Cardozo School of Law, have also pointed out the problematic nature of the airstrikes. Under international law there are only

[two exceptions](#)

to the general prohibition on the use of force expressed in Art. 2(4) of the UN Charter: Security Council authorization and self-defense. Based on these two criteria, the U.S. airstrikes in Syria are

[questionable](#)

because they lack Security Council approval and ISIL

[does not pose](#)

a direct threat to the US. However, as Alex Bellamy

[points out](#)

, Art. 51 of the UN Charter affirms states' right to "individual or *collective*

self-defense." Since ISIL poses a direct threat to Iraq (which has openly

[called for](#)

external assistance against the organization), Bellamy argues that the United States has the right to assist Iraq against ISIL's advances in Syria. The U.S. government itself

[evoked](#)

this position in defense of its actions. Commenting on the airstrikes, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

[stated](#)

that, even though they were not carried out at the direct request of the Syrian government, Syrian authorities had been informed of them beforehand.

Thus, a second problem arising from the U.S.-led airstrikes is the perception that they work in favor of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Not having to commit resources to the battle with ISIL, the

Syrian government would be able to fight the Free Syrian Army more intensely. In fact, [reports](#) soon surfaced that the Syrian government has intensified attacks against rebels as the world's attention was diverted by the crisis created by ISIL. Alex Bellamy acknowledges this hard reality but also

[argues](#)

that nobody can deny that the U.S. airstrikes support RtoP because “the time for perfect solutions is long past” and “the fate of many depends on the international community’s resolve in dealing with the ISIS threat.” Failure to respond to this humanitarian crisis would

[doom](#)

the people of Kobani to almost certain death, potentially leading to another Srebrenica as Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria,

[warned](#)

. Overall, there is no clear-cut answer as to whether the US airstrikes have legal justification under international law, even though some have

[argued](#)

that they are “widely recognized as legitimate.”

Even if the airstrikes have legal justification, they must still meet the strict [standards](#) of protection of civilians contained in international humanitarian law. Instead, however, the US [acknowledged](#)

that the U.S. strict standard of “near certainty” of no civilian deaths will not apply to U.S. military operations in Iraq and Syria. As a result, US airstrikes have been

[criticized](#)

because of their

[potential](#)

to cause high civilians casualties among the very populations they are seeking to protect. On 28 September 2014,

[Human Rights Watch](#)

reported that US airstrikes with no apparent military target had killed 7 civilians. It urged the US and its allies to investigate the incident and ensure that it will not be repeated in the future. As of January of 2015 the US Central Command was investigating 18 claims of civilians deaths.

Syrian aid workers also [stated](#) that the suffering of civilians has increased since the airstrikes began. In addition, on 17 October 2014, a group of [15 NGOs](#) signed a letter urging the U.S. government to take all measures to ensure that airstrikes do not endanger the lives of civilians in Syria and Iraq. Ultimately, gaining legal and moral justification for the airstrikes is the first step towards ensuring their legitimacy. The next is to guarantee that the airstrikes are implemented in a way that ensures that the civilians they are trying to protect do not end up suffering more as a result.

The situation in Kobani ultimately came to a close after months of conflict in January of 2015, and it is estimated that [700](#) US airstrikes had targeted the area. While it was reported that ISIS was pushed out of Kobani, [a](#)
[i](#)
[rstrikes](#)
[in the area](#)
continued. In addition, airstrikes continued not only in Syria but also in areas of [Iraq](#)
which began in August of 2014. The US Department of Defense released a [news article](#)
, in February 2015, saying that US and coalition military forces had continued to conduct airstrikes.