

# The Role of Logistics in the War Against ISIS in Syria

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As the Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of Arab and Kurdish fighters, continues to gain ground in their fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), logistical support will remain key to its success. The SDF's capture of the city of Tabqa on May 21 as well as its ongoing offensive at the ISIS-held city of Raqqa has been made possible in large part by U.S.-led Coalition partners supplying weapons, ammunition, medical supplies and food from inside Syria and across the border in Northern Iraq. In this article we explore how logistics is playing an important role in the war against ISIS in Syria.

### **Background: The War Against ISIS in Syria**

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has been present in Syria since 2013 when its affiliate in the country declared a "caliphate" and took control of large swaths of territory in the eastern and northern regions of the country. Although ISIS was initially welcomed as a homegrown alternative to President Bashar al-Assad's government, its brutality soon turned the Syrian people against them. In 2014, the U.S. began to lead an international coalition against ISIS in Syria with the stated goal of "degrading and ultimately destroying" the terror group. Since then, the U.S. and its partners have conducted thousands of airstrikes, sent hundreds of U.S. troops to Syria and provided millions of dollars worth of humanitarian assistance. The U.S. has also trained and equipped various Syrian Arab and Kurd fighters and provided them with strategic and logistical support.

### **U.S. and Coalition Logistical Support in Syria**

The U.S. and its coalition partners provide logistical support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Arab and Kurdish fighters, inside Syria and in Northern Iraq. In order to do so, the U.S. relies on the Air Force's massive fleet of transport aircraft and a select number of ground and sea ports of embarkation (POEs). Currently, the U.S. operates two major transportation hubs in Iraq and Syria where it pre-positions millions of dollars worth of weapons, ammunition and other supplies. Major General James Jarrard, the commander of Special Operations Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, said that the U.S. has pre-positioned "enough equipment, enough ammunition to sustain the SDF's operations in this area against ISIS for the next several years."

### **Resupplying the War Effort in Syria**

The coalition has an established network of facilities and transportation hubs in Iraq and Syria from which it pre-positions supplies, then ships them to major POEs such as Erbil, Turkey and Kuwait. To ensure the flow of supplies from the U.S. and its coalition partners does not halt once the SDF reaches ISIS's capital city of Raqqa, the U.S. and its partners are actively working to expand their logistical network in Syria. In March 2017, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers awarded a \$295 million contract to expand the al-Uqayr airfield near the

city of Tabqa. Once complete, al-Uqayr will be capable of receiving large transport aircraft such as the C-17 and C-130. In addition, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is currently building a \$54 million cargo handling facility at an undisclosed location in Syria. Once complete, the new facility will be capable of handling large volumes of cargo being sent to the SDF. In September 2017, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also awarded a contract worth over \$100 million to expand the Q-West airfield in Northern Iraq. Upon completion, the Q-West airfield will be able to receive and handle large volumes of cargo from nearby POEs. The U.S. has also announced plans to increase the number of contractors and subcontractors supporting the war effort in the Middle East.

The U.S. and its coalition partners continue to support the SDF's march towards ISIS's capital in Raqqa. The SDF has made significant gains in the past year, but capturing Raqqa will be no easy task. The coalition's logistical network in Syria is critical to ensuring the SDF has what it needs to win the war against ISIS. Although ISIS remains a serious threat in Syria, the coalition has succeeded in reducing the group's territory, cutting off its access to funds and limiting its ability to travel. If the coalition is able to expand its logistical network in Syria and cut off ISIS's ability to receive supplies from outside the country, there is a good chance that ISIS will be defeated in Syria. ]Conclusion

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