# U.S. Taxpayers Are Helping Bashar Al-Assad in a Strategic City

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Almost every weekday, tons of lentils, salt, oil and wheat flour are loaded onto an Ilyusin-76 cargo plane at an airport in Jordan. Russian contract pilots then fly nearly 400 miles across the Syrian border and parachute the supplies from about 15,000 feet over the outskirts of a government-controlled neighborhood in Der Ezzor.

The costly air drop operation organized by the World Food Program has saved countless lives in the besieged Sunni-majority city, which has been encircled by hostile forces of the Islamic State for more than three years. But the operation — heavily funded by American and European taxpayers — has also benefited the Syrian regime, and its Russian and Iranian backers, providing a lifeline to a strategic eastern city.

The feeding of Der Ezzor provides a poignant illustration of how Syria and its allies have harnessed the good intentions of the United States, the United Nations and other international donors to advance its military interests during the country’s more than 6-year civil war.

In contrast, Syria has been starving hundreds of thousands of civilians in opposition held towns, imposing an Kafka-esque set of regulations that systematically delay and deny the delivery of food and medicines to those in need. The impediments, U.N. emergency relief coordinator Stephen O’Brien recently told the Security Council, reflects “a mindset and approach by the government of Syria that uses civilian suffering as a tactic of war.”

“The Syrian government has a big interest in having the U.N. feeding these people in Der Ezzor, because food is loyalty,” said Joshua Landis, a Syria expert who heads the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma. “It reassures the locals that the government, not ISIS, is on their side.”

Securing the support of locals has gained importance in recent months as Der Ezzor has emerged as a major flashpoint in the battle to defeat the Islamic State. With U.S. backed forces on the attack in Raqqa, Islamic State fighters have been fleeing towards Der Ezzor.

Bashar Al-Assad’s military, backed by Russian and Iranian firepower, is advancing on eastern Syria in an effort to dislodge the Islamic State, reestablish government control over eastern Syria, and secure a government-controlled border crossing into Iraq.

The conquest of Der Ezzor, the administrative capital of eastern Syria, would ensure Assad’s dominion over the east, at least below the Euphrates. But it would also undercut a key strategic U.S. objective in the region: thwarting Tehran’s efforts to extend its influence in the Middle East by establishing a so-called “Shia Crescent,” a land corridor connecting Iran to its allies in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

“If you want to rule eastern Syria, Der Ezzor is a very good thing to have,” said Aron Lund, and expert on the region and the Century Foundation, noting that possession of the eastern administrative capital is critical to laying claim to the region’s oil reserves and farmland along the Euphrates River. “It seems to me what’s happening is that Assad is on the way to being ruler of most of Syria west and south of the Euphrates, which includes the capital, the other big cities, and most of the population.”

The Syrian advance has heightened tensions with the United States and allied Arab and Kurdish fighters, who are battling the Islamic State for control of Raqqa in northeastern Syria. The rival coalitions appear to be jockeying for position as they compete to fill a security vacuum that would follow the defeat of the Islamic State.

On Sunday, a U.S. fighter jet shot down a Syrian warplane after it dropped a bomb near a group of U.S.-backed fighters in the town of Tabqa, near Raqqa. The U.S. has also shot down Iranian drones overflying territory occupied by U.S.-trained militia in southern Syria.

Iran, meanwhile, has for the first time launched missiles strikes into Syria from its own soil, targeting Islamic State forces around Der Ezzor. At the same time, Iranian-trained Iraqi militia are poised to advance from Iraq towards the city’s eastern border.

The Der Ezzor airdrops are part of a broader humanitarian relief plan brokered by the U.N. special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, and backed by Russia and the United States. The arrangement — which was endorsed by the 17-nation International Syria Support Group, or ISSG, in February, 2016 — placed the burden on key international powers, including the U.S. and Russia, to ensure that combatants on all sides abided by the agreement.

The United States, which has footed the majority of the bill, poured more than $10 million into it its first months of operations, with Britain, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands throwing in several million more. There have been more than 260 airdrops to date, at a total cost of between $36 million and $65 million.

Initially, the pact saw U.N. and Syrian Red Cross convoys delivering food and other goods to towns that had been cut off from basic supplies for years.

“For a few months, it worked really well,” said one State Department official. “The government provided the approval for the convoys, ensuring that even the government besieged areas received assistance. We were shocked at how well it was working.”

But over time, and as the world’s attention turned elsewhere, Syria resumed its policy of blocking aid deliveries to rebel-controlled towns. Those convoys that did get through were required to unload stocks of medicines. “The initial success had gone down the tubes.”

Russia, which offered strong political support for the U.N. aid drops, but no funding, scored propaganda points as Russian media credited Moscow with shipping foods supplies to Der Ezzor, paid for by the United States and its European allies.

A WFP spokeswoman acknowledged that the source of the airdrops — which are carried out by a Russian company on contract to the U.N.– are “occasionally misrepresented in the media” as Russian and that the food agency “continues to address this challenge.”

Inside the State Department last Fall, there were calls for shutting down the air drops, on the grounds that Russia and Syria had not lived up to their part of the bargain, and the West was being played for fools. The WFP drops, officials noted, simply freed up resources to supply their own troops.

“The Americans paid while the rest of the opposition areas starved. Only Der Ezzor got stuff,” said a former State Department official. “I pushed hard to end it since the Russians reneged. But the State Department’s humanitarian advocates, as well as the National Security Council, argued for maintaining the program because it was saving lives, according to the former official.

“These are hungry people who are besieged” Jeremy Konyndyk, who served as the director of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance during the Obama administration, told FP. “We have a very fundamental humanitarian imperative to try to assist who we can.”

In the end, a compromise was reached.

The program would continue, but the U.S. and other donors would stop contributing to a special airdrop fund, leaving it to the World Food Program to determine whether it could meet the costs within its own operating budget. The expectation was that Der Ezzor would no longer be a major priority.

But the food drops to Der Ezzor, continued. The food agency’s donors, including the United States agreed to increase its operating budget to accommodate the Der Ezzor air drops.

The airdrops are carried out by a Russian contract airliner, Abakan Air, which is owned by two Russian nationals, Nikolai Ustimenko and his son Patel Ustimenko. They had previously been barred from UN business following allegations that a separate company they owned paid bribes to a Russian UN procurement officer, according to a report in the New York Times. Abakan Air did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

But it appears the ban does not extend to Abakan.

Abeer Etefa, a World Food Program spokeswoman based in Cairo, Egypt, defended the decision to hire Abakan, saying the company was not on any U.N. blacklists, and that “it was the only company that was able to do the high altitude airdrops and was accepted with insurance.”

Etefa acknowledged the operation poses “ethical and moral dilemmas,” but she suggested it would be unfair to punish civilians besieged by the terror organization.

The crucial questions the food agency needs to weigh, she said, is “do the people who receive food need it or not? Will those people starve if they don’t get the food or not? That will determine whether we deliver to this area or not.”

For many at World Food Program, the Der Ezzor air drops have become a source of pride. The agency had never before dropped food from such a high altitude in a conflict zone, she said. The initial drops strayed from their target, sometime falling into the hands of the Islamic State. Some of the parachutes didn’t open.

The food agency was forced to halt for two months, carrying out trial runs in the Jordanian desert until they could perfect the operations.

Etefa said the food is distributed on the ground by representatives of the Syrian Red Cross, which oversees much of the humanitarian assistance throughout Syria. But she acknowledged that the U.N. food agency, which has no access to Der Ezzor, can’t independently monitor how the food is delivered.

That said, she noted that there are indicators suggesting that civilians are being fed. Prices for basic food commodities in Der Ezzor have fallen. For instance, in the first six months of 2016, when the air drops were started, prices of food staples dropped by 52.7 percent.

Critics say the airdrops are potentially aiding the Syrian military operation and several observers indicated that food may be diverted to the Syrian military, or locals who are loyal to the regime. The aid drops “pull civilians into your orbit. If they want the aid they have to deal with the government. But that is the story all over Syria,” said Lund.

But it has also served another American objective: denying the İslamic State control over another critical city near the Iraqi border, according to Landis. “It’s in America’s interest not to allow ISIS to take Der Ezzor and set up a new caliphate,” he said. “It means the Americans will not have to defeat them in Der Ezzor.”