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USAID's Syria Essential Services (SES II) project helped rehabilitate this well in southwest Syria and installed solar panels to power the pumps. Photo credit: USAID/SES II

Turning on the Water: USAID Collaborates with Local Partners to Restore Water Access to Northeast Syria

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“It really is an exciting thing to turn back on the water,” says USAID’s Development Advisor David Isaak. “It gives communities some sense of normalcy, that things are coming back to life.”

Before the outbreak of war in 2011, millions of Syrians had their water consistently delivered through a vast network of pipes and thousands of large-scale pumps. Nearly all Syrians enjoyed access to potable water, and massive man-made canals irrigated the arid northeastern countryside, which facilitated a productive agricultural economy.

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The conflict took a heavy toll on the country's infrastructure, often deliberately as a tool of war: aerial campaigns and/or improvised explosive devices targeted miles of water networks and destroyed thousands of water pumps. Other water pumps were simply abandoned after the massive civilian exodus. In northeast Syria, "a combination of all these factors led to the deterioration of almost every pumping station in Ar-Raqqa area," Daniel Bichanich, USAID's Syria Essential Services II (SES II) project director explains. The danger and complexity of working on the ground during the ongoing conflict made reconstruction of these systems especially challenging, and at times, impossible.

Inside Syria today, 13 million people lack basic provisions, including water, food, and electricity. In addition, more than 5.8 million internally displaced people fled their homes and sought refuge in neighboring communities or regions. To address these urgent needs in areas previously under Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) control, USAID supports local officials to restore essential services through SES II. Since June 2016, USAID, through SES II, contributed nearly \$45 million to support the rehabilitation of infrastructure and capacity-building activities throughout the country, and has worked in northeast Syria, particularly Ar-Raqqa, since September 2017. To date the project rehabilitated 34 wells and six pumping stations in the northeast, providing clean drinking water to more than 300,000 people.

Water Access in Northeast Syria

The capture of Ar-Raqqa by ISIS in 2013 displaced an estimated 1 million people across the region. In October 2017, ISIS was driven out of the region, and nearly 150,000 people have since returned to the city. Those who make the journey home are faced with further challenges. "The level of devastation was absolute," says Bichanich. Many homes and businesses, if still standing, are unsafe, as explosive remnants of war (ERWs) remain hidden throughout the city.

"One of the key issues has been the level of ERWs — particularly when looking at critical infrastructure sites. We couldn't repair a site until it was cleared," says Gretchen Murphy, USAID's stabilization advisor for activities in Syria's northeast region.

As project activities began in Ar-Raqqa, USAID heard a steady refrain from residents, business owners, and local officials about the pervasive shortage of drinking water. According to the director of engineering for SES II, "the situation was devastating. People, if they were not dying from ERWs, were suffering from diseases, children were getting sick, so providing clean water for drinking was the most essential need in Ar-Raqqa."

An Inclusive Approach to Systems Management

SES II focuses on the rehabilitation of infrastructure in a variety of sectors. The activity is designed to enable local authorities to support their communities from urgent early recovery needs to the stabilization of infrastructure and organizational management. By partnering with a wide range of stakeholders, Isaak explained, "the program seeks to stabilize communities and build longer term resilience in a conflict setting."

To address drinking and agricultural water needs, SES II focuses on reconstructing water pumping stations and irrigation canals, and reconnecting critical water infrastructure to the electric grid. Simultaneously, the activity helps local authorities improve the management of the water delivery systems by improving their ability to sustainably manage resources and incorporate transparency and accountability into program activities. “I think SES is one of the few programs that does both [bottom-up and top-down],” Murphy says. For USAID and its partners, essential service repair is most successful when it balances local priorities with technical understanding of water and electricity systems. “It’s about understanding the way in which this infrastructure is connected and making strategic choices about where to invest,” she adds.

Following the liberation of Ar-Raqqa, USAID helped local authorities establish the Ar-Raqqa Water Office and develop a management and operational plan for its water delivery systems. The plan also helps the office dictate an organized approach to reconstruction. “We guide the local authorities to do the project themselves,” the director of engineering explains; SES II helps them, “implement through a systematic schedule, that’s technically guided, in a timely manner, with the required inputs of all the technical experts.”

Emphasizing transparency, accountability, and participation, SES II encourages the new Water Office to hold public town hall meetings to broadly publicize its decisions. “We want to focus on community engagement and outreach as it relates to essential service delivery and help build capacity for equitable delivery of services,” Murphy explains. This approach ensures community engagement at every level and facilitates an informed approach to systems management.

The Water Office identified limited access to electricity as a key barrier to water service delivery. Because the conflict rendered much of the country’s electric grid inoperable, reliable power is needed to keep drinking and irrigation water stations pumping. As the region began to stabilize and the local authorities became better equipped to manage these systems, Murphy says, “the project focused on the issue of power and reconnecting some of the key water infrastructure back to the grid.”

More than Drinking Water

“[SES II] goes beyond drinking water services,” Isaak explains, “water is a huge part of the economy in northeast Syria,” which is primarily agricultural. Farmers irrigate their fields with water from the vast canal systems that serviced the region for decades. With the destruction of water networks and canals, farmers cannot irrigate their land, which has led to a decrease in agricultural output and more food insecurity.

SES II collaborated with the Ar-Raqqa Agricultural Office to identify key areas of the Raqqa Main Irrigation Canal to be reconstructed. This collaboration led to the reconstruction of more than 51 kilometers of the canal and reconnection of five key irrigation pumps along the canal to power from the nearby Tabqa Hydroelectric Dam, Syria’s largest. The reconstructed irrigation waterway provides water for nearly 15,000 acres of farmland, benefitting 1,000 farmers and their families.

Keeping the Water Running

As communities in Ar-Raqqa rebuild, SES II will continue its work increasing access to clean, safe drinking water, adding connections to the power grid, and enhancing irrigation water delivery.

Challenges abound for the Syrian people. The Water Office in Ar-Raqqa and other local authorities are just beginning their work. They must continue to engage communities and practice transparent governance of their essential service systems, while navigating a complex, unstable, post-conflict landscape. Meanwhile, USAID will continue to bridge the gap between urgent response to critical service needs and longer-term stabilization through high-quality technical support and community engagement. To do so, USAID will, “respond to communities while also prioritizing and sequencing interventions that improve sustainability and make our response all the more effective,” says Murphy. “You can’t just turn the water on. You have to keep it running.”

By Melissa Burnes



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