

BATTLE

BRIEF



The Battle of Tabqa Airbase 2014

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THIS account of the Battle of Tabqa Airbase 2014, fought during the Syrian civil war, is the first instalment in the Battle Research Group's *Battle Brief* series. Designed as a supplement to the existing *Battle Studies* series, each *Battle Brief* offers compact, open-source driven reporting on historical and ongoing battles. These reports focus on areas where field research opportunities for a deeper battle study are limited. Each *Brief* is anchored in the same four descriptive factors central to all Battle Research Group studies: (1) order of battle; (2) geometry of forces; (3) timeline; and (4) narrative.

Our *Battle Brief* series presents original but concise summaries of primarily 21st century skirmishes or battles involving at least a platoon, multi-ship or multi-aircraft engagement employing more than one type of fires, e.g. combined arms for ground units. Each *Battle Brief* is a stand-alone product that may later be integrated into longer narratives. Our intended audiences are military professionals, historians, regional experts and interested members of the public.

Limitations and benefits of this series. Exclusive use of desk-research allows only for a first draft of history; this is by necessity a limited analysis that will benefit from extensive follow-on research. Weaving together contradictory and often sparse sources while preserving the narrative flow of battle leaves room for errors, any of which appearing in this *Brief* are our own. Nevertheless, this account and those that follow offer value by providing details and analysis of battles where they may now be absent. As the Battle of Tabqa Airbase 2014 shows, the study of even little-known engagements can reveal complex, combined arms operations involving advanced military technology as salient as drones and ballistic missiles. And all skirmishes and battles, regardless of scale or notoriety, remind us of the enduring importance of war's human factors.



Battle Research Group conducts objective analyses without implying or inferring preference or sympathies for any involved party or for their actions.



BATTLE OF TABQA AIRBASE 2014

WAR: Syrian Civil War, 2011-

COMBATANTS: Syrian Arab Army and the Islamic State

LOCATION: Tabqa military airbase, Syria
35.7631703 38.5751259

SCALE: Brigade versus battalion reinforced

PERIOD OF FOCUS: 10-27 August 2014

BATTLE CONTEXT

By the summer of 2014, the Syrian civil war had devolved into a multifaceted conflict. While various rebel groups fought the Syrian government (officially the Syrian Arab Republic), the Islamic State (IS) was in the midst of a seemingly unstoppable ascent as it battled all the war's major parties, including the Syrian government, anti-government rebels and Kurdish forces.¹ After the group finished expelling rebels from the eastern province of Deir al-Zour in July, it turned its attention to clearing out remaining pockets of government control in the northern Raqqa province. By the end of August 2014, Islamic State forces had won three decisive battles in this campaign, and Raqqa became the first province in the civil war to fall entirely outside the government's control.

The battle for Tabqa airbase was the third of those victories and it was a serious blow to the morale of Syrian government supporters. Shortly before the airbase fell, government news outlets broadcast reports showing the forces of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA or Army) and Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF or Air Force) mounting a steady and sure defense against the Islamic State assault. But these same forces were routed en masse on the sixth day of fighting. Shortly thereafter, IS released videos of its fighters parading a column of semi-naked captive soldiers through the desert before summarily executing them.

Tabqa's disastrous loss prompted a wave of public criticism in government-held areas against Syria's leadership, which alternately ignored and silenced the criticism. In the official



narrative, the military had performed a 'tactical retreat' from Tabqa, while those who fell were considered missing rather than killed in action.² Open-source reports indicate that for years afterwards, soldiers' bereaved relatives sought in vain for information regarding the fate of their loved ones.³

The battle for Taqba airbase came to represent a humiliating military defeat for the Syrian government and a symbol of its callousness towards its rank-and-file soldiers. It also solidified the (albeit short-lived) aura of invincibility surrounding the Islamic State as it burst onto the world stage.

¹We refer to the Islamic State as it has referred to itself (Islamic State or IS) since June 2014, and not by widely used terms like ISIS, ISIL or other intentional pejoratives like Daesh. While we certainly do not support the Islamic State, its rationalizations for violence or its direct or inspired behavior, scholarly work requires accuracy. We also refer to Al-Qa'eda as Al-Qa'eda, Al-Shabaab as Al-Shabaab, etc.

²"Syria: Hundreds of dead in the battle for Tabqa airport and Daesh captures al-Raqqa province," Euronews via YouTube, August 25, 2014. As of February 26, 2026: [youtube.com/watch?v=wJSGRvypw_eo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJSGRvypw_eo); To escape from what they're due ... Assad does not consider those killed in the battle for Tabqa airbase 'martyrs,'" Zaman Alwsl, September 21, 2018, zamanalwsl.net/news/article/93212.

³Facebook, "The Missing" Page, "I will continue to publish these truths...until their fate is known," February 26, 2016, [facebook.com/almafakoden/posts/pfbid02Dz3F74tfRQxKXZxDfgdPdyZD7iY9BqqZhAvJ8frECvrJmm8jF2iNp3HXiK9ipTeYI](https://www.facebook.com/almafakoden/posts/pfbid02Dz3F74tfRQxKXZxDfgdPdyZD7iY9BqqZhAvJ8frECvrJmm8jF2iNp3HXiK9ipTeYI); "The families of the kidnapped nourish their hopes with tears," al-Akhbar, January 24, 2019, al-akhbar.com/node/265195.

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

Many of the government soldiers who fought at Tabqa airbase had fled recent engagements, funneling into what they might have believed to be a haven from the onrushing militants. Late on the night of 23 July 2014, IS forces attacked the garrison of the Syrian Arab Army's 17th Reserve Division, located north of Raqqa city. By this stage of the civil war, the 17th Division had dwindled to the equivalent of a Western battalion-sized force with some 800 personnel.⁴ Its subordinate brigades had long-since been destroyed or were operating independently.⁵

After fierce fighting, the 17th Division garrison fell late on 24 July. Dozens of surviving soldiers hid in villages north of Raqqa city before fleeing to Tabqa Airbase, while others made their way towards the garrison of the 93rd Armored Brigade, located 45 kilometers further north beside the town of Ayn Issa.⁶ Two weeks later, IS assaulted the 93rd Brigade's positions, beginning with another night attack late on 6 August. Within hours the base's defenses had collapsed under the repeated detonations of suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs or suicide trucks), barrages by BM-21 Grad 122mm multiple rocket launch systems, and ground assaults by teams of aggressive militant fighters.⁷ A ragtag group of Army survivors from multiple units fled the 93rd Brigade's garrison in the direction of the next nearest regime stronghold: Tabqa Airbase.⁸

Figure 1 (overleaf) provides overall operational context for the Battle of Tabqa Airbase. It shows the area of interest including the 93rd Brigade complex in the northeast, the 17th Division base and Raqqa city to the east, and then Tabqa Airbase and the villages of Al-Ajal and Al-Ajrawi to the southwest; both villages would play an important role in the aftermath of the battle for the airbase.

In mid-2014, Tabqa Airbase housed the Syrian Arab Air Force's 24th Brigade, comprising a squadron of fighter-bombers and an assortment of attack and transport helicopters (see the annotated image of the apron area, Figure 3).⁹ These aircraft had proven a persistent menace to IS operations in the area, repeatedly striking targets during the earlier sieges of the 17th Division and 93rd Brigade bases.¹⁰

Facilities and terrain at Tabqa Airbase allowed for the creation of a reasonably strong defensive position with mutually supporting outposts. Terrain on and around the base was generally flat or low rolling, allowing for good line of sight around the approximately 18-kilometer perimeter berm. Inside the perimeter, individual complexes of fighting positions and ammunition bunkers were surrounded by their own berms. Clusters of hardened aircraft shelters and concrete administrative buildings stretched along the edges of the 3,000-meter-long runway. Small villages

⁴Omar Ashour, *How IS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 92.

⁵For details of the fates of 17th Division's sub-units, see Tom Cooper, *Syrian Conflagration: The Syrian Civil War, 2011-2013, revised edition* (Helion & Company, 2022), 26.

⁶"Dozens of pro-Assad forces arrive at Tabqa military airport," SOHR, July 27, 2014, tinyurl.com/2k2xau29; Ashour, *How IS Fights*, 93.

⁷Ashour, *How IS Fights*, 93; "Large Scale IS Attack on Syrian Air Base," *Military.com*, August 28, 2014. As of December 21, 2025: military.com/video/operations-and-strategy/terrorism/large-scale-is-attack-on-syrian-air-base/3754197212001 [This article incorrectly attributes the IS footage to the assault on Tabqa, but it is in fact from the earlier assault on 93rd Brigade].

⁸"After taking control of Brigade 93... IS mobilises to storm Tabqa airport," *Zaman Alwsl*, August 8, 2014, zamanalwsl.net/news/article/52350.

⁹Cooper, *Syrian Conflagration*, 53.

¹⁰Ashour, *How IS Fights*, 93; "Large Scale IS Attack on Syrian Air Base," *Military.com*.

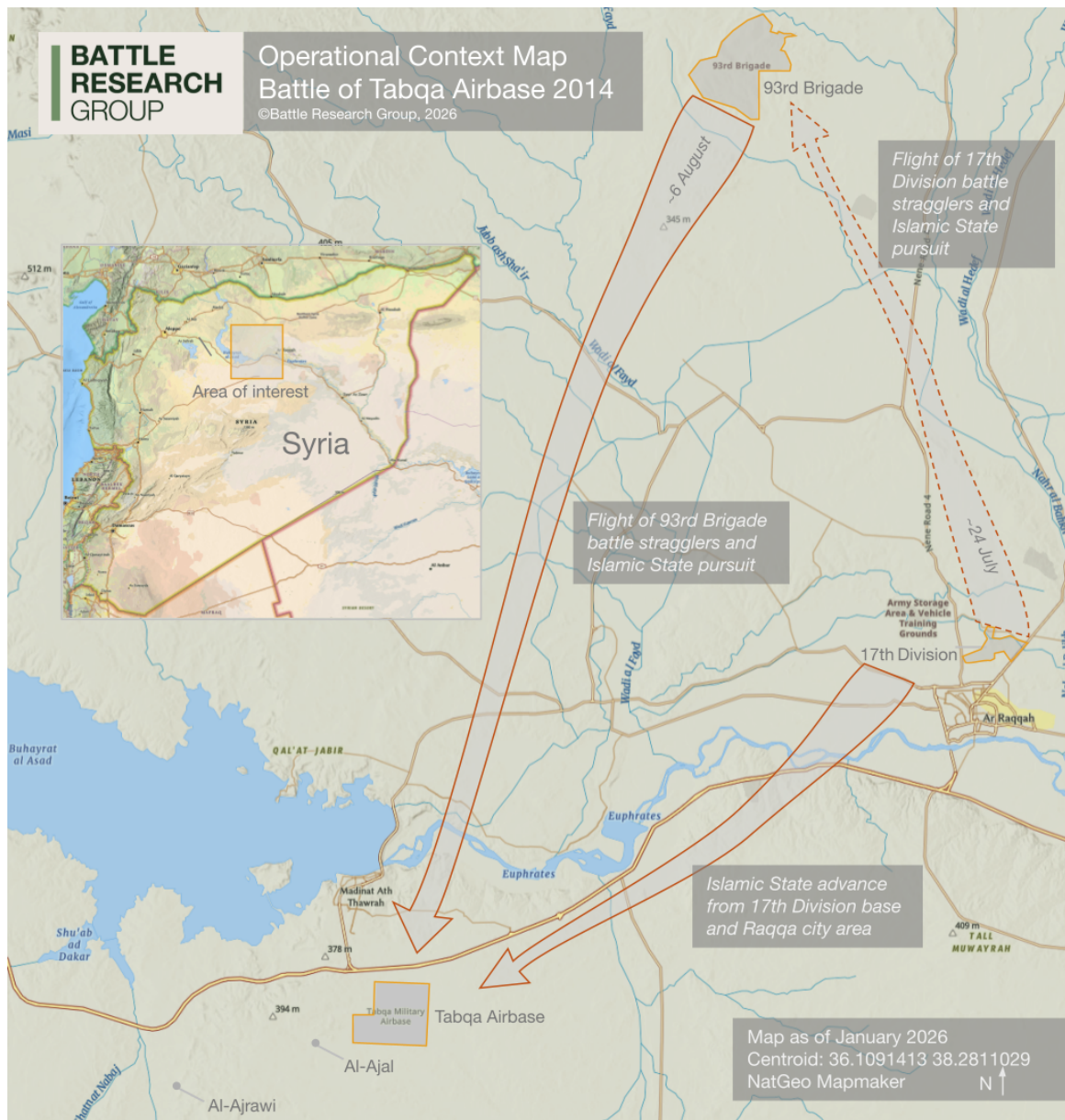


Figure 1. Operational Context Map for the Battle of Tabqa Airbase 2014.

Note: Map does not include all unit movements or all retreat routes from the various government bases depicted. Lines of movement are generalized from cited sources.

rested along low rises overlooking the airbase, while a raised east-west highway and a railway line ran perpendicular to its northern perimeter, together providing some limited cover and concealment for attacking forces.

The base was held initially by a force of over 1,000 personnel, consisting of the remnants of the 17th Division and 93rd Brigade, as well as the base's own security elements.¹¹ This mixed defensive unit fielded a considerable amount of former Soviet heavy weaponry, including probably 24 S-60 57mm anti-aircraft guns – most of which were levelled for ground-defense fires – at least two T-62 tanks (variant pictured right), several ZU-23-2 23mm anti-aircraft guns, DshK 12.7mm heavy machine guns, mortars and artillery pieces¹² of various calibers, and 9M113 Konkurs anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs).¹³ Syrian commanders at Tabqa could also call on other air support as well as surface-to-surface ballistic missile fires from the 115th Missile Brigade, which was based 300 kilometers to the southwest in Al-Qutayfah District.¹⁴

Figure 2 (page 8) depicts annotated overhead imagery of the airbase taken in June 2014, approximately two months prior to the battle. It shows the internal defensive berms created by bulldozed sand that were in some cases collocated with zig-zag

infantry trench lines and armored vehicle revetments. Resolution was inadequate to show individual vehicles or artillery pieces. And some of the combat equipment would have been repositioned, added or moved before the August battle.

This image also conveys the general concept of internal mutually supporting fires but also the relative isolation of each outpost and the flimsy nature of the external perimeter. While the Battle of Tabqa Airbase does not compare in scale, terrain or intensity to the 1953-54 battle at Dien Bien Phu, any reader familiar with the French dispositions at Dien Bien Phu will see similarities in the defensive layout.¹⁵

It is difficult to determine how many combat aircraft the Air Force



¹¹Personnel number from Ashour, *How IS Fights*, 94. Ashour later cites a range of 1,000–1,400, possibly reflecting the arrival of reinforcements later during the battle.

¹²Satellite imagery from 19 June 2014 indicates the presence of at least three towed artillery pieces defending the base, likely D-74 122mm or Type-59 130mm field guns.

¹³Oryx, "The Islamic State Resets Balance with Spoils of Tabqa Airbase," *Bellingcat*, August 25, 2014, bellingcat.com/news/mena/2014/08/25/920; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle: Tabqa Airbase, 22-24 August 2014," *From Chechnya to Syria: Tracking Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Syria* (blog), October 2, 2018, web.archive.org/web/20181011013818/http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=26141 [Use URL with caution].

¹⁴This was the chief Syrian Arab Army unit operating SCUD ballistic missiles, as mentioned in use at Tabqa in the following accounts: "Violent clashes and explosions and the killing of 7 regime soldiers in Raqqa" SOHR, August 20, 2014, tinyurl.com/jx4vnjea; "Barrel bombing on Aleppo and ongoing clashes in Raqqa," SOHR, August 21, 2014, tinyurl.com/mr2xsfee; "Dead and wounded in the intensification of battles at Tabqa military airport," SOHR, August 23, 2014, tinyurl.com/4v663eub; Cooper, *Syrian Conflagration*, 19.

¹⁵For more on Dien Bien Phu we recommend: Bernard Fall, *Hell In A Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (1966), various imprints.



Figure 2. Tabqa Airbase, Syria, circa June 2014.

Subsequent footage also confirmed the presence of at least one SA.342 Gazelle light helicopter (armed with HOT ATGMs) and an Mi-25 helicopter gunship during the defence of the base.¹⁷

While sources are limited, will to fight was likely low among the defenders of Tabqa airbase at the time of the battle. Troops would have been well aware that their comrades in Raqqa province had been repeatedly routed and killed by advancing militants over the preceding weeks. Indeed, an unknown number of soldiers from routed units were integrated into the base's garrison.

Reported internal dissent amongst the defenders could not have helped matters. A Facebook page titled *Syria's Missing Association* claimed after the battle that there had been petty disagreements between the airbase's commanding officers, including Brigadier General Adel Issa and his associates, and also with subordinate commanders who had arrived to reinforce the base.¹⁸ This page also published an unconfirmed claim that on 18 August, with Islamic State fighters already circling the base, the garrison discovered its water supply had been poisoned.¹⁹



Omar Al-Shishani

Picture: IS

By contrast, the Islamic State forces concentrating for the assault on Tabqa included some of the organization's most battle-hardened and fanatical fighters. De-facto commander of the operation was likely Abu Omar Al-Shishani, a Georgian-Chechen jihadist widely considered to be tactically gifted.²⁰ Al-Shishani was a veteran of the Second Chechen War and Russo-Georgian War. In Georgia, he had participated in a large-scale ambush that reportedly defeated the command group of Russia's 58th Combined Army.²¹ Now applying his skills in Syria, Al-Shishani had acquired a reputation for ruthlessness. He frequently employed waves of fresh recruits as cannon fodder before sending in his better trained and experienced units, a tactic applied again to good effect at Tabqa Airbase.²²

Al-Shishani aggregated an estimated 2,000 fighters under his command, some arriving as reinforcements after the initial assault. His probable core element consisted of three ethnic Chechen battalions (Al-Aqsa, Badr and Yarmouk) each with about 150 men.²³ A unit called the Sabri Brigade made up of fighters from around Al-Tabqa town provided valuable local insight. Supporting

¹⁷Visible in Syria News Press, 'Syria News 24/8/2014, Army thwarts third terrorist attack on al Tabqa airport Low', YouTube, August 25, 2014. As of 26 February 2026, [youtube.com/watch?v=3Jl7cFlIN3A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Jl7cFlIN3A). Unconfirmed reporting by Oryx describes a detachment of two Mi-25s operating from Tabqa at the time, along with multiple Gazelles. The Mi-25 is the Russian export version of the Mi-24D model attack helicopter. See, Oryx, "The Syrian Arab Air Force – Beware of its Wings," Oryx (Blog), January 15, 2015, oryxspioenkop.com/2015/01/the-syrian-arab-air-force-beware-of-its.html.

¹⁸⁻¹⁹Facebook, "The Missing" Page, "I will continue to publish these truths...until their fate is known."

²⁰Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle"; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "The Islamic State's Anbar Offensive and Abu Umar al-Shishani," *War on the Rocks*, October 9, 2014, warontherocks.com/2014/10/the-islamic-states-anbar-offensive-and-abu-umar-al-shishani.

²¹Bender, "One of IS' top commanders was a 'star pupil' of US-special forces training in the country of Georgia," *Business Insider*, September 17, 2015, [businessinsider.com/omar-al-shishani-isis-commander-and-us-2015-9](https://www.businessinsider.com/omar-al-shishani-isis-commander-and-us-2015-9). For more details of ambush, see: Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgian War: Lessons and Implications* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2011) 28-29.

²²Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle".

IS fighters bow their heads in prayer on the eve of the battle



Picture: IS

armor and fires included a small number of T-55 tanks, BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles, BM-21 Grad multiple-launch rocket systems, and truck-mounted 23mm and 57mm anti-aircraft guns.²⁴ According to Islamic State doctrine, armored vehicles probably would have been concentrated into a so-called 'platoon

of special tasks' to act as a task-organized reserve for offensive operations.²⁵ Attackers also fielded several suicide trucks; 50mm, 82mm and 120mm mortars; and a variety of technical and tripod-mounted heavy machine guns, including variants of the DshK 12.7mm M1938 system.²⁶

²³Anna Borshevskaya, *The Future of Chechens in IS* (Hate Speech International, 2017), 9, 12, hate-speech.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Future-of-Chechens-in-IS-.pdf; Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle." Note that irregular units in Syria scaled at the Western company to battalion level often described themselves as 'brigades.' A brigade could consist of 100 to several thousand fighters.

²⁴"Photo Report on the Liberation of Tabqa Military Airport, Part One," [in Arabic] IS, accessed December 22, 2025, archive.is/xVICf; Omar AL Naddaf, "The Syrian regime media reveals how the Tabqa airbase was handed over by the regime to IS," YouTube, October 4, 2014. As of December 11, 2025: youtube.com/watch?v=KdJ8PKwDVs&rco=1.

²⁵Oryx, "Armour in the Islamic State – The Story of 'The Workshop'," Oryx (blog), August 31, 2017, oryxspioenkop.com/2017/08/armour-in-islamic-state-story-of.html.

²⁶"Photo Report on the Liberation of Tabqa Military Airport, Part One," [in Arabic] IS; "Spoils captured by the lions of the National Defence, Raqqa Center, in the Tabqa airbase 21/8/2014," YouTube, August 22, 2014. As of January 1, 2026: youtube.com/watch?v=y2AZR9Fwcs0.

THE BATTLE OF TABQA AIRBASE 2014: 10-24 AUGUST

Starting around 10 August, an Islamic State force numbering some 500 strong started to loosely surround the base and probe the defenses with harassing fires, presaging the onslaught to follow.²⁷ The arrival of shaken survivors from the 17th Division and 93rd Brigade presented another unhappy omen for the defenders.²⁸ Over the following week, at least one fixed-wing reconnaissance drone buzzed over the complex, while dismounted scouts probed the perimeter.²⁹ Following more than a week of this gradual encirclement and harassment, Tabqa's defenders surely would have been on high alert.

Note: Information on geometry of forces, axes of attack, and details of each tactical action is inadequate to produce detailed phase-by-phase battle maps with reliable accuracy. Please refer to Figure 2 [overview], page 8, to anchor the narrative.

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Al-Shishani committed his forces on the evening of 19 August. Under the cover of darkness, two suicide trucks barreled into the perimeter and detonated, apparently without creating adequate assault breaches. Teams of Islamic State fighters advanced behind the trucks. In the aftermath of the self-initiated blasts, some teams got close enough to the Army positions to detonate



Picture: IS

An IS truck-mounted S-60 anti-aircraft gun in action during the assault on Tabqa Airbase.

at least two suicide vests. Others became bogged down in the base's perimeter minefield and were then struck by artillery and mortar fire.³⁰ By dawn on 20 August, combat still raged and the perimeter had held, intact. Now fighting in the open and in daylight, the attackers were taken under fire by supporting MiG-21s, Mi-8 transport helicopters dropping barrel bombs, and possibly at least two (probably SCUD-D, possibly Fateh-110) ballistic missile strikes.³¹ Having lost a number of fighters both killed and wounded, the militants probably withdrew beyond the range of defensive direct fires.³²

²⁷Ashour, *How IS Fights*, 94.

²⁸"Dozens of pro-Assad forces arrive at Tabqa military airport," SOHR; "108 members and officers of the regime forces reach the last strongholds of the regime in Raqqa," SOHR, August 14, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/3wdsa7nw>; "After taking control of Brigade 93... IS mobilises to storm Tabqa airport," *Zaman Alwsl*.

²⁹"The Fall of al-Tabqa Airbase Part II: Fighter Accounts" *The MENA OSINT Blog (blog)*, September 9, 2014, themenaosint.blogspot.com/search/label/al-Tabqa%20Airbase.

³⁰Ashour, *How IS Fights*, 94.

³¹SCUDs are specifically mentioned in the SOHR reporting: "Explosion at Tabqa military airport coincides with clashes," SOHR, August 20, 2014, tinyurl.com/3pdawkcs; "Violent clashes and rocket shelling in the vicinity of Tabqa military airport," SOHR, August 20, 2014, tinyurl.com/jx4vnjea. For more on Syrian ballistic missiles available during this period see: Defense Intelligence Ballistic Missile Analysis Committee, *Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat (Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio: NASIC, June 2017)*.

Al-Shishani's next assault began late on the evening of 21 August, also under the cloak of darkness to mask his advance and complicate supporting defensive fires. Arriving as reinforcements from the city of Manbij, the Islamic State Badr Battalion dismounted from its vehicles in the southern outskirts of Al-Tabqa town and, apparently in stride from the road march, split into teams to advance on foot toward the airfield. At 2200, a pair of armored suicide vehicles rushed for the airbase's main gate to initiate this second phase of the attack.³³ One was reportedly struck by three Kornet ATGMs and exploded before it could reach its target while the second did manage to detonate at the gate.³⁴ Still, the defenders held.



Picture: IS

Another IS T-55 tank in action against the airbase, shooting from a hull-down position



Picture: IS

An IS T-55 tank is prepared for a fire mission during the siege.

As the Badr Battalion fighters continued forward, the defenders engaged them with horizontal-trajectory anti-aircraft fire, tank main-gun rounds, mortars and artillery. The weight of this fire forced the battalion to halt behind the railway line north of the base and reply with its own ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns and Grads.³⁵ Separate Islamic State formations attacking on two other axes found themselves similarly suppressed. One of the assault unit commanders, Abu Sara al-Ansari, was killed.³⁶ As the attack stalled and the dangers of daylight encroached, Islamic State commanders probably pulled all of their infantry back from the immediate contact area. This second attempt brought the total of IS dead to 70, with many more likely wounded.³⁷

³²"Syrian Observatory: Syria sends reinforcements to an air base under attack," SOHR, August 22, 2014, tinyurl.com/muee6ph7.

³³Abdullah Suleiman Ali, "Tabqa airbase: The army repels the second assault," *As-Safir Al-Arabi*, August 22, 2014, archive.assafir.com/ssr/10740382.html.

³⁴Ziad Fadel, "Syrian Army Ambush at Tabqa Kills Hundreds of IS Terrorists!", *Syrian Perspective*, August 22, 2014, web.archive.org/web/20140824152006/http://www.syrianperspective.com/2014/08/syrian-army-ambush-at-tabqa-kills-hundreds-of-is-terrorists-syrpers-ziad-interviewed-on-staggenborgs-show-saturday.html [enter into Internet Archive Wayback Machine].

³⁵Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle".

³⁶Suleiman Ali, "Tabqa airbase: The army repels the second assault".

³⁷"70 IS fighters killed in two days of fighting with regime in northern Syria," SOHR, August 22, 2014, tinyurl.com/5t595z2c.

With the encircled perimeter at Tabqa still holding but clearly under heavy pressure, Syrian Arab Army command decided to reinforce the base by air. A detachment of the Republican Guard's 124th Special Forces Brigade – stood up earlier that year as a specialized anti-insurgency force – flew straight into their first combat deployment during the day of 22 August.³⁸ Transport aircraft also delivered pallets of ammunition, including large quantities of 23mm shells for the anti-aircraft guns. However, some of the munitions arriving reportedly were incompatible with the garrison's weapon systems. For example, one report suggests 125mm shells for T-72 tanks were delivered instead of the 115mm shells needed for the base's T-62 tanks.³⁹ If true, it is likely these blunders further dampened the will to fight of the base's hard-pressed defenders.⁴⁰

Al-Shishani ordered the third assault for the evening of 22 August. Following IS doctrine and the pattern of previous attacks; this night assault opened with a suicide truck attack against the main gate. This time, the truck apparently struck home, destroying the gate and badly damaging the surrounding complex of buildings.⁴¹ Badr Battalion



Picture: IS

An illustrative photo of an IS armored VBIED, in this case from Aleppo, Syria, January 2016

fighters exploited the breach and pushed through Tabqa's outer perimeter for the first time. However, accurate fire from anti-aircraft gun and heavy machine gun positions deeper in the airbase prevented any advance beyond the gate complex. As daylight approached – bringing with it rising threat from both direct fire and air strikes – Badr fighters instead set about trying to recover their wounded. Having suffered approximately another 14 killed and 150 wounded, the Islamic State appears to have been forced to give up its foothold at the gate and, for the third time, withdraw.⁴²

While al-Shishani's casualties had so far been heavy, the successful storming of the gate complex also provided evidence that Tabqa's defense was finally beginning to falter. Accordingly, as dusk fell on 23 August, an Islamic State assault force cobbled together from various sub-units gathered for the fourth assault attempt. Accounts diverge significantly as to what happened next. It is, however, clear that a joint Badr and al-Aqsa battalion assault successfully stormed the northern gate complex before continuing through the perimeter and then up across a gently rising plain 600 meters to the southwest to seize a separate combat outpost. Figures 4 (page 15) and 5 (page 16) depict the probable course of this assault.

³⁸Gregory Waters, *Syria's Republican Guard: Growth and Fragmentation* (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2018), 9; Leith Fadel, "Syrian Republican Guards Newly Formed 124th Arrives at Tabqa Airbase," *The Arab Source*, August 22, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140824075926/http://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-republican-guards-newly-formed-124th-arrives-tabqa-airbase/>; "Syrian Observatory: The army sends reinforcements to Tabqa airport," SOHR, August 23, 2014, tinyurl.com/3jn894hc.

³⁹Facebook, "The Missing" Page, "I will continue to publish these truths...until their fate is known"; Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle".

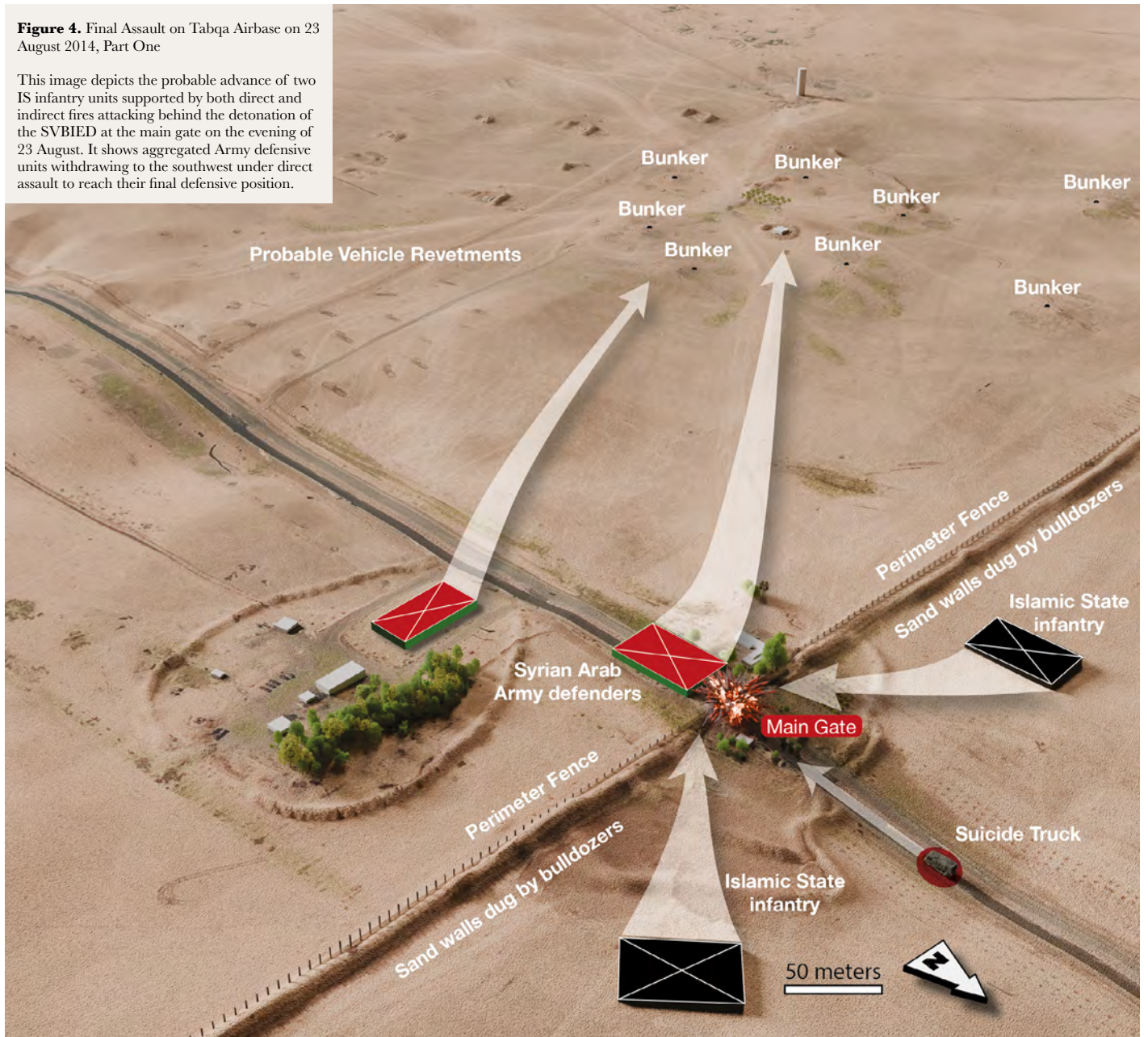
⁴⁰For more on will to fight see: Ben Connable, et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).

⁴¹Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle".

⁴²"Third IS attack on Tabqa airport in Raqqa fails," SOHR, August 23, 2014, tinyurl.com/mr3uexp5.

Figure 4. Final Assault on Tabqa Airbase on 23 August 2014, Part One

This image depicts the probable advance of two IS infantry units supported by both direct and indirect fires attacking behind the detonation of the SVBIED at the main gate on the evening of 23 August. It shows aggregated Army defensive units withdrawing to the southwest under direct assault to reach their final defensive position.



Graphic by Fernando J. Sanchez Menendez

Figure 5. Final Assault on Tabqa Airbase on 23 August 2014, Part Two

This image depicts the final IS assault from the main gate to the Army's fallback defensive position, a bermed bunker complex with slight elevation looking down towards the main gate.



Graphic by Fernando J. Sanchez Menendez

Government fire sweeping the open ground beyond this position prevented further advance by the IS attackers, forcing them to consolidate and dig in to repel an expected daylight counterattack.⁴³ Meanwhile, General Issa, seeing the perimeter well and truly breached, reportedly issued orders for the base's garrison to withdraw to the area of Al-Ajrawi Farm, 13 kilometers to the southwest of Tabqa Airbase, and to wait there for relief.⁴⁴ As the garrison retreated toward Al-Ajrawi, varying accounts describe General Issa fleeing by helicopter or fixed-wing aircraft.⁴⁵

As dawn broke on 24 August, the Badr and al-Aqsa battalions were surprised to see an Islamic State pickup truck freely driving about the airbase. Rather than counterattack, Syrian Arab Army troops had abandoned the base and slipped through the siege



An abandoned and likely derelict Air Force MiG-21UM jet trainer pictured in the aftermath of the battle

Picture: IS



IS fighters inspect an Army T-62 tank knocked out inside the airbase, with the bodies of government soldiers lying nearby

lines unnoticed.⁴⁶ Left behind, corpses of government personnel were strewn about the airbase. The facility's heavy equipment had also been deserted, including some 23 MiG-21s, and possibly one or more functional T-62s.⁴⁷

Fleeing soldiers streamed in a south-westerly direction across the open desert toward Al-Ajrawi as Islamic State technical trucks raced to pursue. A possible rear-guard action was fought in the village of Al-Ajal, but elsewhere the retreat dissolved into chaos: Stark scenes from militant propaganda footage show hundreds of Army soldiers running away as fighters accurately engage them with truck-mounted ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns

⁴³Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle".

⁴⁴Facebook, "The Missing" page, "I will continue to publish these truths...until their fate is known".

⁴⁵Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, "Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors from Islamic State: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, 6 (2015): 106; "The mystery of the fall of Tabqa airbase and the handing over of Raqqa to IS," *al-Arabiya* via Youtube, February 28, 2016, [youtube.com/watch?v=SN0beO55BMw&rco=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN0beO55BMw&rco=1).

⁴⁶Paraszczuk, "Chataev's First Big Battle".

⁴⁷"Photo Report on the Liberation of Tabqa Military Airport, Part One," [in Arabic] IS; Oryx, "The Islamic State Resets Balance with Spoils of Tabqa Airbase".

and heavy machine guns.⁴⁸ Some soldiers reportedly made it to Al-Ajrabi, where they took up defensive positions to await more robust relief promised by General Issa.⁴⁹ Another 150 were captured by militants in the vicinity of the airbase and a total of 170 were reported killed during the August 19-24 assault and its immediate aftermath.⁵⁰

Unfortunately for the men at Al-Ajrabi, the promised relief never arrived. By 26 August, ammunition, food and water had reportedly become so scarce that soldiers or their commanders made the decision to flee yet again. They made independently for the village of Ithriyah, the nearest government-held settlement and a long 65-kilometers to the south-west.⁵¹ Only 60 men appear to



Picture: IS

An IS truck-mounted ZSU-23-2 anti-aircraft gun engages targets in Al-Ajrabi Farm



Picture: IS

Jubilant IS fighters pose with a wrecked MiG-21, originally a display aircraft mounted outside the entrance to the airbase

have reached Ithriyah alive on 28 August.⁵² Some of those who came up short were killed in a scattered series of desperate last stands around Al-Ajrabi. Others were captured and subsequently executed, including a group of 160 captives on 27 August.⁵³ Army officials later listed many of the soldiers almost certainly killed in the battle for Tabqa Airbase and its aftermath as missing, depriving their families of the benefits due to the relatives of soldiers killed in combat.⁵⁴

⁴⁸There are reports of fighting taking place in Al-Ajal, but details are lacking. See: "Islamic State takes full control of Tabqa military airport," SOHR, August 24, 2014, tinyurl.com/3mfu6v67; Omar AL Naddaf, "The Syrian regime media reveals how the Tabqa airbase was handed over by the regime to IS.

⁴⁹Facebook, "The Missing" Page, "I will continue to publish these truths...until their fate is known".

⁵⁰"320 regime forces killed and missing in the battle of Tabqa airport," Arabi21, August 25, 2014, tinyurl.com/huthwbjic; "Syrian Observatory: 500 killed in battle for Tabqa military airport," SOHR, August 25, 2014, tinyurl.com/58ysb5m8.

⁵¹Facebook, "The Missing" Page, "I will continue to publish these truths...until their fate is known".

⁵²Joseph Adams, "Anatomy of a Massacre Part I: The March," Syria Direct, December 3, 2014, syriadirect.org/anatomy-of-a-massacre-part-i-the-march.

⁵³Joseph Adams, "Anatomy of a Massacre Part II: The Killing," Syria Direct, December 4, 2014, syriadirect.org/anatomy-of-a-massacre-part-ii-the-killing.

⁵⁴Facebook, "The Missing" Page, "I will continue to publish these truths...until their fate is known"; "To escape from what they're due ... Assad does not consider those killed in the battle for Tabqa airbase 'martyrs,'" Zaman Alwsl.

OBSERVATIONS

While no Western military force would seek to emulate the Islamic State – and certainly not its despicable treatment of civilians and soldiers hors de combat – there is much to learn about modern warfare from this battle. And this event should be treated as a battle in the generally accepted sense of the term: It involved two roughly Western brigade- or battalion-sized (~2,000 versus ~1,000) infantry forces; integrated tank and mechanized support; artillery, rocket and surface-to-surface missile indirect fires; and both drone and manned close-air supporting fires. A major military airfield and lynchpin defensive position changed hands and – perhaps arguably – the battle contributed to the effective collapse of an entire operational front.

Was this a conventional battle? That judgment will remain inherently subjective. Islamic State forces generally are categorized as irregular rather than conventional, giving the broad impression they were lightly armed, poorly trained, fanatical to the point of tactical stupidity, and at best only loosely coordinated. This impression is refuted by a number of expert analyses including several cited herein. At least in this battle, IS operated as an effective conventional military unit.

Al-Shishani and his subordinate (or at least temporarily aligned) commanders employed standard combined-arms tactics: They isolated the objective, conducted ground and aerial reconnaissance using Group 1 (small) drones, and then launched aggressive infantry and at least motorized assaults supported by both direct and indirect fires. When they were overpowered or exposed

to daylight aerial attacks they withdrew while retaining some semblance of order and then regrouped for follow-on assaults.

Clearly the Battle of Tabqa Airbase 2014 was a defeat for the Syrian Arab Army. That begs an age-old question that commonly recurred throughout the 2010s across the Middle East: How could a substantively stronger army with greater technical capabilities and resources be so resoundingly defeated by what was in practical terms a stateless force? We offer specific considerations, including repeated focus on will to fight.⁵⁵

How could a substantively stronger army with greater technical capabilities and resources be so resoundingly defeated by what was in practical terms a stateless force?

■ **Operational-level command and control.** Some sources suggest that the breakdown of division-brigade ties in the Syrian Arab Army prior to 2014 forced its strongholds in Raqqa Governorate to fight at least semi-independently, allowing them to be destroyed piecemeal and culminating in the disaster at Tabqa.⁵⁶

■ **Supply.** Advantages in both quantity and quality of troops and equipment can be eroded in the face of supply problems.

Shortages of ammunition, water and food were reported after the battle. If these claims are true, they might help explain – at least in part – why government forces abandoned an otherwise favorable defensive position.

■ **Leadership.** While reliable details are limited, it appears that a combination of tactical leadership and higher headquarters failures underpinned the fall of Tabqa and slaughter of its garrison. General Issa's reported abandonment of his troops at the critical

⁵⁵For more on will to fight see: Ben Connable, et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*.

⁵⁶Gregory Waters, "The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth," *The Middle East Institute*, July 18, 2019, mei.edu/publication/lion-and-eagle-syrian-arab-armys-destruction-and-rebirth; Jeffrey White, "Military Implications of the Syrian Regime's Defeat in Raqqa," *PolicyWatch 2310*, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 27, 2014, washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/military-implications-syrian-regimes-defeat-raqqa.

moment may have triggered the rout that became apparent on the morning of 24 August. In contrast, Islamic State leaders were able to help generate will to fight despite heavy casualties through ideological commitment, discipline and the projection of competence and confidence.

■ **Comparative experience and training.** IS combat experience was apparent in the organized assaults and the capacity to adapt and reconsolidate after temporary setbacks. By comparison, the airbase's garrison probably included a number of poorly trained and cognitively unprepared support troops forced into combat roles.

■ **Suppression.** Al-Shishani's use of suicide trucks to generate a suppressive effect immediately before ground assaults was typical of contemporaneous Islamic State tactics, encapsulated in the Arabic phrase *al-qasif bil nasf* (shelling by blowing up).⁵⁷

■ **Comparative will to fight as the probable deciding factor.** Will to fight can never be accurately quantified or explained, but it can be assessed. In this case, a disparity in will to fight is readily apparent. Acting together, the factors above – poor leadership, uneven training, isolation, cascading defeat, lack of supply, etc. – significantly weakened the Syrian Arab Army's will to fight. In contrast, apparently well-led Islamic State units manned by individually and collectively motivated fighters, fresh off a string of victories, reinforced by allied units, and restocked with captured weapons and equipment, had comparatively stronger will throughout the battle.

Epilogue note. In March 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces captured the airbase from the Islamic State.⁵⁸ At the time of writing, it is controlled by the Syrian transitional government.⁵⁹

⁵⁷For Ashour, *How IS Fights*, 102.

⁵⁸For example: "U.S.-backed troops captured Syrian airbase from ISIS," *CBC*, March 26, 2017.

⁵⁹"Syrian forces capture oilfields, dam as allied tribal fighters inside Raqqa," *Al Jazeera*, January 18, 2026.





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