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UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE IN SYRIA: OPERATION ROUNDUP

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Solo Flight

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INTRODUCTION

1. “After all the fighting we did together, we had lots of trust in the Americans. We never imagined everything could change in just two days. We know this was a political decision. We still have confidence in our American brothers-in-arms.”¹ In an interview with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Commander, General Mazloum Kobani Abdi reflects on President Trump’s decision to abandon Kurdish forces in Syria while simultaneously looking back on his partnership with US Special Operations Forces (SOF) with nostalgia. The polarizing sentiment is indicative of how the US executed unconventional warfare (UW) in Syria. Despite President Trump’s repeated messaging since Mar 2018 to withdraw military forces partnered with Mazloum SDF,² SOF continued a successful partnered military campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This conundrum invites the question of whether UW with partnered forces in Syria was a success, a failure, or something in between.

2. Unfortunately, contemporary UW is evolving faster than the declassification of secret documentation, thereby preventing the academic community from keeping pace. Nevertheless, without rigorous and continuous analysis, SOF risk failing to adapt to a rapidly changing threat environment. This examination will, therefore, function as a start point and must continue to evolve as documents are declassified over time. Initial studies of special operations are necessary to better inform political leadership and, by extension, policy to set the conditions for successful future campaigns. The US campaign against

¹ Luke Mogelson, “America’s Abandonment of Syria,” *The New Yorker*, April 20, 2020.

² White House. Remarks by President Trump on the Infrastructure Initiative. Transcript, Washington, D.C., August 13, 2019. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-infrastructure-initiative/>

ISIS presents a unique opportunity to examine contemporary UW and provide an assessment through a strategic and operational lens. Furthermore, sufficient unclassified material exists to examine the execution of operations in Syria in order to provide recommendations on how SOF may adjust their doctrine, structure, and capabilities in the conduct of future UW campaigns.

3. Unconventional warfare, as defined by US Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations are "activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area."³ This examination will focus on US SOF partnered with Coalition Aligned Security Forces (CASF) in Syria. Although non-US SOF operated in Syria, this piece will not focus on their contribution to the overall campaign.

4. This paper will demonstrate that, at the operational level, Special Operations Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR) successfully executed the UW campaign in Syria, despite strategic miscalculations outside the purview of the Department of Defense (DoD). It will do so by first setting the strategic context of the environment to include key stakeholders. It will then discuss events preceding the creation of SOJTF-OIR. Finally, it will examine Operation Roundup, highlighting the conditions that SOJTF-OIR surmounted while developing operational level

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, JP 3-05, Vol. 1. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), 181.

recommendations for the conduct of future UW campaigns. Operation Roundup was a SOJTF-OIR led operation in 2018 to complete the annihilation of the physical caliphate.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

5. In 2014, ISIS seized territory across Iraq and Syria and declared the creation of a caliphate. Their success resulted from a leadership ability to exert influence through ideology. This influence provided ISIS with an organizing principle for its members and enabled them to influence a global audience, govern territory and sustain operations. On the ground, ISIS was able to support sufficient numbers of the population to enable them to establish safe havens; maintain command, control and communications networks; gather and distribute resources; generate combat power for local attacks, and plan external operations.

6. Since 2015, the Syrian Regime strengthened its position, defeating opposition groups in Aleppo and restricting others to de-escalation zones. The de-escalation zones, established with Russian support through the Astana Peace Process⁴, enabled the Syrian Regime to consolidate their combat forces and accelerate their campaign against groups, such as ISIS, who occupied vital terrain. The Regime's behaviour enabled extremist groups, including ISIS, to draw from moderate opposition groups and increase the likelihood of an enduring insurgency in areas liberated by Regime and pro-regime forces.⁵ The instability produced by the Syrian civil war in poorly governed areas of

⁴ Republic of Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official Site, "Factsheet on the Astana Process," last modified July 4 2017. <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/kratkaa-spravka-po-astaninskomu-processu>

⁵ Melissa Dalton, "Defeating Terrorism in Syria: A New Way Forward," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* 12. February 2017.

Syria provides ideal conditions for ISIS resurgence. The Syrian Regime has not been able to deliver essential services throughout the country and relies on support from its Russian and Iranian guarantors, and from the United States to mitigate the humanitarian impact of the Syrian civil war. The Syrian Regime's history of repression and violence led Sunni tribal factions in some parts of Syria, such as the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV), to welcome ISIS as an alternative to regime governance.

7. Russia's strategic priorities remain focused on securing a pro-Moscow regime in Damascus, increasing Russian regional influence, countering extremism in the region, and forcing cooperation with the international Coalition in order to boost its prestige while undermining US restrictions. Of these priorities, the first two are the primary ones, easily outweighing the counter-ISIS fight. Russia influences the Syrian Regime and will likely continue to take actions to limit coalition freedom of manoeuvre.

8. The government of Turkey has expressed concern regarding the security environment in Syria and conducted three separate incursions into northern Syria. From Aug 2016 to Mar 2017, Turkish Armed Forces and Turkish Supported Opposition (TSO) conducted Operation Euphrates Shield to drive ISIS and Syrian Kurdish YPG (Kurdish People's Protection Units) from the northwest Syrian border. Turkey believes the YPG are a group of terrorists with links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The PKK was labeled a terrorist group by US and Turkish governments.⁶ Operation Olive Branch, the second major offensive, occurred from January to March 2018 and extended Turkish control from Aleppo to Afrin and Manbij. SOJTF-OIR executed Operation Roundup

⁶ Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Report to The United States Congress," Washington, DC, (July 1, 2017-September 30, 2017), 18

following the completion of Operation Olive Branch. Lastly, Operation Peace Spring was the latest Turkish offensive into northern Syria. Turkish Forces conducted this operation in October 2019, three days after President Trump's withdrawal of SOF from the region.

UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE CAMPAIGN - STRATEGIC

9. In 2013, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) launched Operation Timber Sycamore: a train and equip program arming Syrian rebels opposed to Bashar Al-Assad.⁷ The program was successful in producing thousands of trained rebel fighters but was set back in 2015 due to Russian military offensives in support of the Syrian Regime. After having failed to recover, in 2017, President Trump supported the recommendation of CIA Director Mike Pompeo to end the \$1 billion program, a decision favoured by Russia.⁸ However, parallel to the CIA operation was a Department of Defense program established in September 2014 to generate, train, and equip Syrian opposition forces to combat the growing threat of ISIS.⁹ Special Operation Command Central (SOCCENT) created the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force-Syria (CJIATF-S) to spearhead the initiative. The \$500 million program has trained fewer than 150 trainees¹⁰ cost approximately \$10 million per fighter, and was unsurprisingly cancelled 13 months after

⁷ Mark Mazzetti and Ali Younes, "CIA Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say," *New York Times*, June 26, 2016

⁸ Greg Jaffe and Adam Entous, "Trump ends covert CIA program to arm anti-Assad rebels in Syria, a move sought by Moscow," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2017.

⁹ Stewart Welch, and Kevin Bailey, "In Pursuit of Good Ideas: The Syria Train and Equip Program," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, no. 36 (September 2016): 1.

¹⁰, Department of Defense. Pentagon Shifts Focus in Syria, Transcript. Washington, DC, October 9, 2015, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/622663/igphoto/2001875933/>;

its inception.¹¹ Although many government officials attribute this failure to DoD, the testimony of General Nagata, Commander SOCCENT, would suggest otherwise. Nagata acknowledged the limited results of the program, but emphasized that "synchronization of US agencies' efforts must significantly improve, and that interagency cooperation and coordination has not led to fully harnessing US power."¹²

10. The cooperation between the CIA and US Special Operations Forces has historically yielded substantial results with the context of unconventional warfare. The most notable and recent declassified example is Operation Crescent Wind. Fifteen days after the 9/11 attacks, a CIA team set down in Afghanistan to begin setting conditions for a SOF led UW campaign.¹³ They supported targeting and established liaisons with the Afghan Northern Alliance leadership. Most importantly, all their actions were complimentary and in support of US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and US Central Command (USCENTCOM).

11. In Afghanistan, there was a unity of effort in the preparation and execution to build up the Northern Alliance and then support them through a well-coordinated campaign. In Syria, the CIA and DoD failed to achieve the same level of cooperation. While the CIA focused on Al Assad, the Pentagon's priority was ISIS. In addition to a lack of a common objective, both programs overlapped in time and space. Moreover, second and third-order effects were far more detrimental to the counter-ISIS mission. The

¹¹ Phil Stewart and Kate Holton, "US pulls plug on Syria rebel training effort; will focus on weapons supply," *Reuters*, October 9 2015; Department of Defense. "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Report to United States Congress." Washington, DC, (October 1, 2015–December 31, 2015), 2.

¹² Department of Defense. "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Report to The United States Congress." Washington, DC, (October 1, 2015–December 31, 2015), 48.

¹³ Leigh Neville, *Special Operations in the War on Terror*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2015), 16-22.

Hamza Brigade was amongst the groups that received DoD support. Once the program collapsed, Turkey began financing Hamza and used their combat power to augment the ranks of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Operation Euphrates Shield and later Operation Olive Branch.¹⁴ During all three Turkish offensives, the counter-ISIS mission stalled. SOJTF-OIR partnered with the SDF directly opposed Hamza forces within the FSA, which the US had previously trained and developed. The convergence of miscalculations represents the highest degree of strategic error beyond the scope of either the CIA or DoD.

12. In Oct 2015, the Obama Administration augmented the DoD program by supporting the provision of weapons and training to existing Syrian opposition groups rather than generating them from scratch.¹⁵ Four DoD Inspector General recommendations to the program were satisfied following congressional guidance, paving the way for the establishment of the current Counter ISIS Train and Equip (CTEF) program. DoD marked the new program by transitioning out CJIATF-S and replacing it with the SOJTF-OIR¹⁶ and an increase of SOF from 50 to 300. SOJTF-OIR instituted CTEF, focusing on Sunni-Arabs appropriately vetted opposition groups per Section 1209 of the US National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015.¹⁷

¹⁴ Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Who Are Turkey's Proxy Fighters in Syria?" *New York Review of Books*, November 27, 2019.

¹⁵ Department of Defense. "Overseas Contingency Operations: FY 2017 Comprehensive Oversight Plan." Washington, DC, (October 2016). 103.

¹⁶ Department of Defense. "Lead Inspector General Reports to The United States Congress: Overseas Contingency Operations – Operation Inherent Resolve / Operation Pacific Eagle Philippines." Washington, DC, (January 1, 2018-March 31, 2018), 62.

¹⁷ United States Congress, Committee on Armed Services. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015: An Act to authorize appropriations for the fiscal year 2015 for military activities of the Department of Defense on HR 3979. Washington: US Government Publishing Office, (2015), 245.

13. The strategic risk and political sensitivity of UW operations require a whole-of-government approach.¹⁸ The evolution of political decisions should not undermine this requirement. The congressional decision to authorize non-lethal aid to Syrian opposition groups led to the creation of Operation Timber Sycamore. The fact that President Obama received approval for lethal aid the following year, leading to the development of parallel DoD programs, does not absolve the government from consolidating and synchronizing both CIA and DoD operations as a whole of government effort. SOF commanders will likely continue to observe divergent objectives in state and defence agencies and will need to communicate the risks accordingly.

UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE CAMPAIGN - OPERATIONAL

14. In September 2014, the US government initiated the DoD program led by CJIATF-S. The same month President Obama announced the creation of a expansive international coalition to defeat ISIS. By October, DoD had established the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR). CJTF-OIR is the theatre level higher headquarters to SOJTF-OIR. CJTF-OIR campaign to militarily defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria directly supported the global coalitions' broader counter-ISIS campaign. The military campaign created time and space for the international community in Iraq and Syria to provide stabilization assistance to the local populations. CJTF-OIR accomplished the military defeat of ISIS by, with, and through partner forces (Line of Effort 1) while concurrently improving their capacity and capability to defeat ISIS (Line of Effort 2). In support of these efforts, the CJTF maintained a line of effort to maximize

¹⁸ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, JP 3-05, Vol. 1. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), II-8.

the leverage achieved from a diverse Coalition (Line of Effort 3).¹⁹ The aim throughout the campaign was supporting partner forces prosecuting operations against ISIS. Along the lines of effort, CJTF-OIR developed a four-phase approach. Phase 1 – Degrade, Phase 2 – Counterattack, Phase 3 – Defeat, and Phase 4 – Support to Stabilization. Operation Roundup was the last major SOF operation in Phase 3. The success of the campaign would hinge on CJTF-OIRs ability to conduct unconventional warfare, cyber and space operations, counter-messaging, disrupting ISIS' finances, and disrupting foreign fighter flow.

15. While CJTF-OIR is a three-star organization commanding the entire campaign across Iraq and Syria, SOJTF-OIR is the two-star supported command for all counter-ISIS operations in Syria. In addition to training and equipping, SOJTF's function was to advise, assist, accompany, and enable CASF to defeat ISIS in Syria, while synchronizing all SOF effects in support of CJTF-OIR.²⁰ CASF consisted of multiple organizations aligned in the defeat-ISIS campaign, and comprise of trained Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO) who become eligible for training, sustainment, and operational support. VSOs in northwest Syria include Firqat al-Hamza and Liwaa al-Mu'tasim.²¹ North-eastern VSOs comprise of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is a multi-ethnic alliance, including the YPG and the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC); Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis, and Christians,

¹⁹ Department of Defense. "Operation Inherent Resolve Campaign Design." Last accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/campaign/>

²⁰ Department of Defense. Press Briefing by General Jarrard via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, Transcript. Washington, DC, October 31, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1359137/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-jarrard-via-teleconference-from/>

²¹ Cody Roche, "Syrian Opposition Factions in the Syrian Civil War," *Bellingcat*. August 13 2016. Last accessed April 25 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/08/13/syrian-opposition-factions-in-the-syrian-civil-war/>

united in opposition against ISIS. The southern VSO group is the Maghaweir al-Thowra (MaT).²²

16. Organizations and capabilities directed to defeat ISIS in Syria require a degree of coordination with SOJTF-OIR in order to generate effects in the battlespace. Although the extent of these relationships and effects remains classified, the identification of organizational roles and capabilities will generate a framework illustrating how a SOJTF is conducting UW in the current threat environment. In support of operations against ISIS, capacity in cyber, space, and information domains have steadily increased. In 2016, The US State Department established the Global Engagement Centre (GEC) to focus on countering ISIS propaganda and disinformation.²³ The GEC's purpose was "to support DoD counter-ISIS operations, integrating DoD, partner nation, and law enforcement efforts to degrade ISIS media and disseminate content online to discredit ISIS."²⁴ Michael Lumpkin, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, became the GEC's new director.²⁵ The GEC represents an operational (bottom-up) driven initiative to expand the capabilities for SOF in conducting partnered information operations. Concurrently, SOF increased its manning level in Syria from 300 to 500.²⁶

²² Unites States Congress. "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response." Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, (February 12, 2020), 24.

²³ Department of State, "Global Engagement Center," accessed on April 25, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center/>

²⁴ Department of Defense. "Lead Inspector General Reports to The United States Congress: Overseas Contingency Operations – Operation Inherent Resolve / Operation Pacific Eagle Philippines." Washington, DC, (April 1, 2018-June 30, 2018), 53.

²⁵ Department of Defense. "Lead Inspector General Report to The United States Congress: Operation Inherent Resolve." Washington, DC, (October 1, 2015–December 31, 2015), 64.

²⁶ Unites States Congress. "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response." Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, (February 12, 2020), 26.

17. Also, in 2016, the United States Cyber Command established Joint Task Forces ARES to counter ISIS in cyberspace.²⁷ The following year, US Strategic Command restructured the US Joint Functional Component Command for Space (JFCC-Space) to form the Joint Force Space Component Command (JFSCC).²⁸ The JFSCC “coordinates, plans, integrates, synchronizes, executes, and assesses space operations.”²⁹ In the case of CJTF-OIR, assuming doctrinal structures, it is likely that USCYBERCOM delegated the Space Coordinating Authority to the Combined Force Air Component Commander (CFACC) with a supportive relationship to SOJTF-OIR in Syria.³⁰ The integration of these capabilities to include support from the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR) and cross border operations with Combined Joint Force Land Component Command (CJFLCC) demonstrates contemporary joint warfighting in a multi-domain environment.³¹ From 2015-2018, the liberation of Ramadi, Manbij, and Raqqah demonstrate repetitive operational successes within the

²⁷ Department of Defense. USCYBERCOM FRAGORD 02 TASKORD 6-0063 to establish Joint Task Force ARES to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) in Cyberspace. Washington, D.C., May 5, 2016, <https://www.stratcom.mil/Portals/8/Documents/FOIA/FOIA%2017-023,%2017-033,%2017-064%20-%20USCYBERCOM%20Joint%20Task%20Force%20Areas.pdf?ver=2017-04-19-111941-797>

²⁸ Department of Defense. “AFSPC commander becomes JFSCC, joint space forces restructure.” Air Force Space Command Public Affairs. Washington, DC, December 3, 2017, <https://www.afspc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1386530/afspc-commander-becomes-jfsc-joint-space-forces-restructure/>

²⁹ United States. Department of the Air Force. *Counterspace Operations*. Annex 3-14. Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, (2018), 1.

³⁰The Space Coordinating Authority is the authority to plan, integrate, and coordinate space operations involving forces of two or more military departments, functional components, or two or more forces of the same Service.

³¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff. Insights and Best Practices Focus Paper: JTF C2 and Organization. Washington, DC: Deployable Training Division Joint Staff J7, (April 2017), 5; Department of Defense. "U.S. Marines with SPMAGTF-CR-CC practice company size reinforcement, live-fire ranges in Syria." USCENCOM Public Affairs. Washington, DC, September 9, 2018, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/igphoto/2001966424/>;

broader UW campaign. In 2018, approximately 2000 SOF were operating in Syria before the kick-off of Operation Roundup.³²

OPERATION ROUNDUP

18. On May 1, 2018, SOJTF-OIR commenced Operation Roundup: a partnered ground offensive operation, supported by precision strikes, to defeat ISIS in the remaining areas of the MERV and Iraqi-Syrian Border.³³ The tactical objectives of this operation were to clear the final ISIS strongholds in Abu Kamal and the surrounding area on the east side of the MERV and Dashisha along the Iraqi-Syrian border.³⁴ On July 22, 2018, the SDF liberated Dashisha from ISIS, having cleared over 1200 sq km with support from ISF border force, artillery, and air support. Although both objectives for this operation were in Syria, and therefore under the purview of SOJTF-OIR, the operation received direct support from Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).³⁵ ISF established an artillery firing position with U.S Marines to conduct cross border fires using both Iraqi and US artillery. The ISF also supported the Iraqi border guard force in securing the international border to prevent ISIS from escaping during the clearance through Dashisha.³⁶

³² Unites States Congress. "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response." Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, (February 12 2020), 26.

³³ Department of Defense. US Central Command Press Release: Operation Roundup targets ISIS remnants. Washington, DC, October 1, 2018, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1650091/october-1-operation-roundup-targets-isis-remnants/>

³⁴ Department of Defense. Press Briefing by Colonel Dillon Via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, Transcript. Washington, D.C., April 24, 2018.

³⁵ United States. Department of Defense. Press Statement by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo on the Continued Success of Operations to Defeat ISIS in Syria, Transcript. Washington, DC, July 22, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/statement-on-the-continued-success-of-operations-to-defeat-isis-in-syria/>

³⁶ Department of Defense. "Lead Inspector General Reports to The United States Congress: Overseas Contingency Operations – Operation Inherent Resolve / Operation Pacific Eagle Philippines." Washington, DC, (April 1, 2018-June 30, 2018), 49.

19. Before examining specific elements of this operation, it is necessary to understand why USCENTCOM and USSOCOM structured SOJTF-OIR as a joint task force from a capabilities perspective. A SOJTF “is a modular, tailorable, and scalable SOF organization that allows USSOCOM to more efficiently provide integrated, fully capable, and enabled joint SOF [...] based on the strategic, operational, and tactical context.”³⁷ The SOJTF is separate from a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) or Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) in that it comprises of serviced component capabilities from coalition forces (CF) to augment its integral capabilities. The preponderance of unconventional warfare over the past decade forecasts future deployments of SOJTFs rather than CJSOTFs or JOSTFs. What remains unclear is what conventional capabilities should a SOJTF incorporate to ensure it achieves its objectives. Admiral McRaven’s special operations model provides the framework to make recommendations on augmenting SOF structures, doctrine, and capabilities to the threats posed to SOJTF-OIR and their partnered forces in Syria throughout Operation Roundup. Within the model, McRaven suggested that an “overabundance of security hinders effective preparation” and that an operation with ineffective preparation (concealment and rehearsals) will be “nearly impossible to execute with surprise, speed, and purpose.”³⁸ Therefore, recommendations provided throughout this examination will focus on capabilities that address the threats against SOF in the context of UW while

³⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, JP 3-05, Vol. 1. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), 49.

³⁸ William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare – Theory and Practice*, Novato, CA: Presidio Press, (1996): 9-10

ensuring conformity to “special operation characteristics (simplicity, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose)”.³⁹

Command and Control (C2)

20. Operation Roundup required cross border cooperation at multiple echelons predominantly between supported commands in Iraq and Syria. In May 2018, two separate commands existed under SOJTF-OIR, one in Syria and one Iraq. The latter, SOJTF-I (Iraq), was commanded by a Brigadier who had two primary subordinate commands: Special Operations Task Force (SOTF)-West and SOTF-North. These SOTFs collocated with their respective land component equivalent and ISF partnered elements in Iraq.⁴⁰ SOTF-West, for example, operated from west of Baghdad and south of Sinjar to the Saudi Arabian border and coordinated directly with the coalition and partnered forces operating within the Anbar and Jazirah Operations Commands.⁴¹ Typically, the Special Operation Command and Control Element (SOCCE) is the lead organization to synchronize special operations forces and conventional force activities.⁴² However, no doctrinal organization exists when coordinating the efforts between two partnered forces across an international border. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to expect tactical level coordination for this type of operation to occur at the CJTF level. Notwithstanding state approval requirements for cross border fires, a C2 construct must take into consideration whether coordination falls to supported commands at the component level or further

³⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁰ Department of the Army. *Commanders' Perspective CJFLCC-OIR Operations: Insights from MG Robert "Pat" White*. (Washington, DC: Center for Army Lessons Learned, May 2018) 7.

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

⁴² Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, JP 3-05, Vol. 1. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), GL-11.

below. Depending on the relationship, SOF must remain cognizant of their limitations to influence their partnered forces' coordination with another force and should, therefore, synchronize operations, like Operation Roundup, below the component level (i.e. SOJTF-I or a SOTF within Iraq). Doing so would provide an interface to the coalition and all indigenous forces, having the advantage of being directly subordinate to SOJTF-OIR while geo-located adjacent to CF and ISF in Iraq.

Land Domain

21. Syria's integrated air defence system (IADS) poses a significant threat to coalition air assets supporting SOF operations.⁴³ In 2016, USAF Vice Commander of Air Combat Command, Major General Harris, recommended that 4th and 5th generation fighters in Syria should synchronize their effects. Specifically, 5th generation platforms should penetrate and reduce the enemy's integrated air defence system while allowing the 4th generation to continue participating in the other air-to-air or air-ground tasks.⁴⁴ However, he cautioned that in a contested environment, consisting of both aircraft and surface to air missiles (SAMs), the ability to employ 4th generation will be severely limited. This warning materialized in August 2017 when Chief of Staff and Deputy Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces Major-General Sergey Meshcheryakov announced that Russia and Syria would formally link their air defence systems.⁴⁵ The incorporation of a long-

⁴³ Justin Bronk, "Modern Russian and Chinese Integrated Air Defence Systems: The Nature of the Threat, Growth Trajectory and Western Options," *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, (January 2020), 14.

⁴⁴ United States Congress. Committee on Armed Services. Air Dominance and the Critical Role of Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces. HASC. No. 114-127. Washington: US Government Publishing Office, 2016
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg20794/html/CHRG-114hhrg20794.htm>

⁴⁵ "Russia and Syria Create Joint Air Defense System." *Tass: Russian News Agency*. August 25, 2017. Last accessed April 25, 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/962057>

range surface to air systems, like the S-400, changed the calculus for special operations who readily employ 4th generation fighters as close air support (CAS). While Russia and Syria continue to improve their IADS, the employment of 4th generation aircraft in support of SOF will become increasingly limited. In order to offset this loss, SOF must develop redundancies to maintain its ability to maneuver with partnered forces. A new concept for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) provides a potential solution.

22. HIMARS is a wheeled version of the multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) designed to defeat light armoured vehicles, artillery, air defence concentrations, and other concentration of vehicles, personnel, and equipment. Although HIMARS has excellent tactical mobility, its intra-theatre mobility: air mobility across a theatre of operations, is unattractive to SOF elements that require speed and surprise to execute missions with partnered forces. However, the development of the Light HIMARS Package (LHP) has curbed this problem. LHP is rapidly deployable and capable of providing rapid-fire support to SOF and partnered forces. The package consists of “four vehicles: two launchers, a fire direction center vehicle, and a command Humvee with generator trailer.”⁴⁶ LHP is transportable by one C-17, can be airdropped, and ready to fire on a preset target within minutes of landing. In addition to speed, HIMARS technology integrates with other assets as a multi-domain platform. In Oct 2018, The United States Marine Corps Weapons Tactics Instructor course successfully connected an F-35 to a HIMARS, linking the Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System (AFATDS) with

⁴⁶ Brennan Deveraux, Sean Skelly, and Evan Fowler. “Strengthening Light HIMARS for Multi-Domain Operations.” Fires Bulletin (November-December 2018): 22.

LINK-16. The F-35 gathered target data with its advanced sensor package and then relayed the target to the HIMARS, which then destroyed the target.⁴⁷ Within a contested and congested air space environment, SOF can mitigate limited CAS by augmenting their forces with LHP, enhanced by a sensor shooter link (i.e. Link-16 or similar datalinks) between the LHP and 5th generation aircraft.

23. In 2016, the Russian Armed Forces began moving artillery units to Northern Syria⁴⁸, the result of which led the US and Russian governments to establish in theatre deconfliction mechanisms. However, deconfliction measures failed on more than one occasion. For example, in January 2018, US SOF and SDF in Dayr Az Zawr defended themselves from sustained Russian and Syrian tank, artillery, and mortar attacks.⁴⁹ After failed attempts to deconflict, SOF and SDF responded with joint fires resulting in the deaths of several hundred Russian mercenaries and pro-regime forces.⁵⁰ The inability attribute is critical to successful deconfliction. In other words, it is necessary to know who is firing and from where to enable de-escalation. Although man-portable surveillance and target acquisition radars exist, SOF requires a platform that is responsive to the collective capabilities of Russia and the Syrian Regime. This platform should include the ability to conduct counter mortar, rocket, and artillery as well as short-range

⁴⁷ Shawn Snow, "Marines connect F-35 jet to HIMARS rocket shot for the first time," *Marine Corps Times*, October 5, 2018. <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2018/10/05/marines-connect-f-35-jet-to-himars-rocket-shot-for-first-time/>

⁴⁸ Entous, Adam and Gordon Lubold. "US Tracks Russian Artillery in Syria." *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2016. <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2018/10/05/marines-connect-f-35-jet-to-himars-rocket-shot-for-first-time/>

⁴⁹ Richard Engel, "US troops who came under fire from Russian mercenaries prepare for more attacks," *NBC News Exclusive*. March 15, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/u-s-troops-who-came-under-fire-from-russian-mercenaries-prepare-for-more-attacks-1187096131967>

⁵⁰ Andrew S. Weiss, and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: Lessons from US and Russian Operations in Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (March 2019): 6.

air defence and counter-drone. The ability to counter unmanned aerial systems (CUAS) remains critical as multiple state and non-state entities employ UAS in Syria. In April 2018, General Raymon Thomas, Commander USSOCOM, stated that Syria was "the most aggressive electronic warfare environment on the planet."⁵¹ The AN/TPQ-53 Radar System from Lockheed Martin represents the right mixture of required capabilities in a single mobile platform to augment SOF against these threats.⁵² Transportable with a single C-130, the system can be set up in five minutes, and taken down in two, and has operated successfully in deployed operations since 2010.⁵³ The incorporation of conventional capabilities such as LHP and AN/TPQ -53 within a SOJTF will be necessary to conduct unfettered UW in contested, congested, and complex environments. Furthermore, the addition of these two platforms, or others similar, would not compromise the fundamental characteristic of special operations.

Air Domain

24. After the 2003 US-led invasion in Iraq, jihadist fighters from Syria crossed the Iraqi-Syrian border to engage US forces.⁵⁴ The primary crossing point used intersects the Euphrates river at Al Qa'im in Iraq and Al Bukamal in Syria. The unification of these two districts, and their historical use as a transit for fighters, during the height of ISIS'

⁵¹ Department of Defense. "Lead Inspector General Reports to The United States Congress: Overseas Contingency Operations – Operation Inherent Resolve / Operation Pacific Eagle Philippines." Washington, DC, (April 1, 2018-June 30, 2018) 52-53.

⁵² Lockheed Martin, "Multi-Mission Ready: AN/TPQ-53 Radar System," last accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.lockheedmartin.com/en-us/products/tpq-53.html>

⁵³ John Gordon, Igor Mikolic-Torreira, D. Sean Barnett, Katharina Ley Best, Scott Boston, Dan Madden, Danielle C. Tarraf, and Jordan Willcox, "Army Fires Capabilities for 2025 and Beyond," *RAND Corporation* (2019): 139.

⁵⁴ Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour, "The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier," *Carnegie Middle East Center* (March 2020): 7.

power, signifies the geostrategic importance of the border region. ISIS maintained freedom of maneuver in this area transitioning to and from the Jazeera desert in Iraq. Contested borders are generally areas of vulnerability but also represent opportunity space for non-land based components. The air component has a critical role in supporting partnered operations along a border between two forces. In the case of Operation Roundup, US Air Force Central Command (AFCENT) dropped over 170k pounds of equipment and supplies. They also flew over 500 intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) sorties to support targeting and extended the range of aircraft missions by flying over 750 tanker sorties.⁵⁵ Although successful, the CFACC should also maintain the enemy's disposition and potential indicators of individuals and groups crossing the border. In effect, the CFACC could directly support a SOJTF by maintaining the Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operating Environment (JIPOE) and disrupting the enemy in areas where SOF is unable to influence. The Turkish border presented an ideal exfiltration gateway north of Dazirga for ISIS attempting to retrograde to a permissive environment. Thus, not only can the CFACC provide intelligence, situational awareness, and strike capabilities, they can also coordinate containment with bordering nations.⁵⁶ Lastly, support to ground operation during a 'troops in contact' event should incorporate CAS, Air Weapons Teams, or Armed ISR for

⁵⁵ Department of Defense. "June Airpower Highlights: Afghan Ceasefire, Operation Roundup in Iraq and Syria." Air Force Space Command Public Affairs. Washington, DC, July 20, 2018, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/News/Article/1579919/june-airpower-highlights-afghan-ceasefire-op-roundup-in-iraq-and-syria/>

⁵⁶ Brien Alkire, Sherrill Lingel, Caroline Baxter, Christopher M. Carson, Christine Chen, David Gordon, Lawrence M. Hanser, Lance Menthe, and Daniel M. Romano, "Command and Control of Joint Air Operations in the Pacific: Methods for Comparing and Contrasting Alternative Concepts," RAND Corporation (2018): 92

dynamic targets. The coordination of ISR such an operation would have presented another distinctive challenge for SOJTF-OIR to overcome.

25. Operation Roundup, theoretically, had a substantial amount of ISR participate in the operation from the CJTF, CFACC, SOJTF, CJFLCC and tactical units. Therefore, participating assets would need to have executed multiple roles: situational awareness, overwatch, force protection, and interdiction against identified targets. The result yields an overwhelming number of users, assets, and video feeds with limited gateways to achieve situational awareness across all organizations. Potential technological solutions include processing, exploitation, and dissemination (PED) systems. PED solutions provide hosting of full-motion video and data product feeds. The Unified Video Dissemination System (UVDS), for example, can support "simultaneous FMV feeds from nearly 200 sources and then immediately route the video to users through Defense Information System Agency's satellite communication gateways."⁵⁷ Prioritizing ISR will also be critical in support of expanding SOF probable tasks with partnered forces. For example, both force protection and counter-terrorism tasks will require Full Motion Video (FMV), Ground Movement Target Indicator (GMTI), and Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR). The difference is that counter-terrorism will also require Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) to conduct communication of electronic interception, unlike force protection tasks, which will need Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) to support the "detection and identification of camouflaged targets."⁵⁸ The coordination of ISR during

⁵⁷ "Defense Information Systems Agency improves ISR Video Capabilities," *Signal Magazine*, April 10, 2017.

⁵⁸ Deepti Yadav, M.K. Arora, K.C. Tiwari, and J.K. Ghosh, "Detection and Identification of Camouflaged Targets using Hyperspectral and LiDAR data," *Defence Science Journal* 68, no. 6 (November 2018): 540

Operation Roundup was likely extensive but pale in comparison to the synchronization required for Iraqi F-16 cross border strikes.

26. In Feb 2018, USAFCENT launched a Coalition Aviation Advisory and Training Team (CAATT) with the Iraqi Air Force. The CAATT, “provides training, advice, and assistance in addition to building partner capacity for Iraqi Army Aviation Command, Iraqi Air Defense Command, and the Iraqi Air Forces.”⁵⁹ Their ultimate goal is to strengthen capabilities to enable decisive operations focused on current and emerging threats and promote stability through joint exercises. By April 2018, Iraqi F-16s had conducted their first strikes against ISIS targets in Syria. Prime Minister Abadi coordinated with President Bashar Al Assad to receive approval to conduct the strikes, thereby lending to the legitimacy of the Syrian government. The example serves to highlight the strategic implications SOF faced concerning coordinating partnered operations with Iraqi Security Forces.

Space Domain

27. Despite robust coalition and partnered force presence during Operation Roundup, air assets were likely insufficient to cover a 600 sq km border region. JFSCC must support such large scale operations with space-based systems, which could supplement real-time enhanced situational awareness. Space-Based Infrared Systems (SBIR) and Next-Generation Overhead Persistent Infrared (OPIR) provide a spectrum of capabilities from operational to strategic missile warning. As SOF increases access to various data

⁵⁹“USAFCENT establishes a new Coalition Aviation Advisory and Training team in Iraq,” *Air Force Technology*, February 8, 2018. <https://www.airforce-technology.com/news/usafcent-establishes-new-coalition-aviation-advisory-training-team-iraq/>

sources, more opportunities will emerge to execute tipping and cueing: "using a data tip-off from one source to cue a satellite to look at a particular spot, or using information from a satellite to spin up another instrument's collection."⁶⁰ The integration of these capabilities and eventual integration of artificial intelligence, by way of machine learning⁶¹ will support SOF in managing the deluge of data that will accompany complex partnered operations with multiple stakeholders.

Cyber Domain

28. SOF forward commanders must continue to have direct access to the cyber coordinating authority to ensure cyber effects in the battlespace remain relevant, on time, and tempo. The necessity for direct support to tactical ground maneuver was a key lesson for Joint Task Force Ares in support of OIR.⁶² SOF must leverage existing cyber technologies and visualize the virtual battlefield to "conduct real-time cyber reconnaissance and security tasks to detect, record, characterize, analyze, graphically depict, and share cyber-related data from one platform."⁶³ Doing so will enable SOF better to achieve a series of effects in their respective environment to include text and

⁶⁰ Sarah Scoles, "It's Sentient: Meet the Classified Artificial Brain Being Developed by US Intelligence Programs." *The Verge*, July 31, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/31/20746926/sentient-national-reconnaissance-office-spy-satellites-artificial-intelligence-ai>

⁶¹ Cassandra R. Post, "Towards Automation of Tipping and Cueing Between Small Satellites in a Constellation," (master' thesis, Air University, 2017), 116.

⁶² United States. Department of Defense. CYBERCOM Media Roundtable, Transcript. Washington, D.C., May 7 2018, https://www.cybercom.mil/Portals/56/Documents/FOIA%20Reading%20Room%20Docs/2019-05-07_CYBERCOM_Media_Roundtable_Transcript.pdf?ver=2020-01-24-095943-620

⁶³ Department of Defense. "Information Paper: Tactical Awareness Sensor Kit." *National Security Innovation Network*. Last accessed April 25, 2020, <https://innovatedefense.net/StorageFiles/GetFile/6fd939d1-0cfd-42c5-e026-08d7abfa2979>

audio delivery through personal electronic devices, disrupting C2, or denial of internet satellite services.

Information Domain

29. The cross-domain risks inherent to Operation Roundup stem from the involuntary separation between cyber operations and electronic warfare (EW). Both are on the path to convergence in technical capabilities and effects. In other words, EW operations are being used to provide cyber effects and vice versa.⁶⁴ However, it is unclear whether the establishment of JTF Ares has inadvertently led to the use of software and hardware to generate effects rather than controlling information itself. What is clear is a requirement for SOF to merge electromagnetic and cyberspace capabilities to synchronize efforts within the information domain. Planning for information operations must ensure that EW and Cyber are complementary to psychological operations (PsyOps). These activities could include surrender messaging, amplification of partner force success, or messaging in support of deception. Lastly, the lateral alignment between EW, Cyber, PsyOps, and Space in the context of information operations is as critical to mission success as the vertical integration across agencies. Within the US, there is pressure to form an Information Warfare Command to achieve control and integration of all information related effects rather than enhance cooperation through a unity of effort.⁶⁵ Although this

⁶⁴ Unites States Congress. "Convergence of Cyberspace Operations and Electronic Warfare." Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., August 13, 2019

⁶⁵ Conrad Crane, "The United States Needs an Information Warfare Command: A Historical Examination," *Texas National Security Review - War on the Rocks*. June 14, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/06/the-united-states-needs-an-information-warfare-command-a-historical-examination/>

paper will not expand that argument, the persistence of it reveals the fundamental challenge SOF will face to vertically integrate information operations related efforts.

CONCLUSION

30. On October 7, 2019, US Senator Bob Menendez, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relation Committee, responded to President Trump's abandonment of Kurdish Forces in Syria stating:

It was the Kurds who were largely our ground forces. It's the Kurds that lost about 11 to 130,000 of their people. It's the Kurds that were detaining over 10,000 ISIS fighters and families for us [...] when you betray the person who you - the entity who you were fighting on the battlefield with and you basically leave them when you're finished using them and say, you know, you're on your own, it's a hell of a way to send a global message that, in fact, don't fight for the United States because when they're finished with you they'll let you die on the battlefield.⁶⁶

31. Senator Menendez's significant response marks a crescendo of strategic miscalculation that, inexplicably, brought an end to ISIS. It started with an overly successful CIA program that fell victim to political misalignment with the campaign objectives. Next, the government paused the DoD train and equip program because they failed to synchronize it across all agencies and departments. Then, once the program was running well, it would be repeatedly stalled by Turkish offensive operations. However, Turkey suffered no consequences from the US government for prolonging the war against ISIS. Finally, the actions of the Trump administration, starting with 'troop withdrawal' tweets and ending with reduction of SOF from 2000 to 600, sent fury into officials who

⁶⁶ Unites States Congress. "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response." Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, (February 12, 2020), II-9.

believe in the whole of government approach to unconventional warfare.⁶⁷ However, despite all these miscalculations, the physical caliphate of ISIS was defeated.

32. The success of SOJTF-OIR extends across multiple operations from 2015-2020. From the liberation of Ramadi, Manbij, and Raqqah to the clearance of the MERV. Partnered operations with VSOs in northwest Syria were as successful as the MaT retention of An Tanf Garrison in southern Syria. Although Operation Roundup is but one example of the larger UW campaign, it is a significant one. The operation was, first of all, led by a SOJTF integrated with a multi-domain framework. Due to the threat environment, be it overwhelming conventional Russian and Syrian land power, congested airspace, or persistent electronic jamming, SOF maintained relative superiority over ISIS and preserved the trust of their partnered force. Operation Roundup cleared an area equivalent to the size of Okinawa while having to integrate cross border effects from CF and ISF. It was fought across service components at all levels of war and did not compromise the characteristics of special operations. The circumstances of the operation have created a context to make recommendations on future doctrine, structure, and capabilities to assist in the planning of future UW campaigns. As for the remaining SOF in Syria, the information domain will increase in importance as SOF legitimacy is challenged, and maintenance of cohesion and commitment in the relationship between SOF and SDF is tested. Russian, Turkish, and Regime forces in Syria continue to extend their military presence and influence in the east of the country and will seek to expedite coalition departure from Syria.

⁶⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, JP 3-05, Vol. 1. (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), 49.

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