



07/08/2013, 08:00.

It's been two weeks since our alpha strike over Damascus - when almost 40 JSTF aircraft descended on the city to strike a variety of targets. The Red Devils targeted both the Syrian Ministry of the Interior and the HQ of the SAA 4th Armoured Division, with both strikes designed to go after the perpetrators of the violence against civilian demonstrators. Even with the two SA-10 batteries out of commission the defences over Damascus were formidable...there was still a significant number of SAM batteries and AAA around the city, but once again our SEAD and EW escorts did a sterling job of keeping us safe, with some light AAA damage on Poodle's airframe being the only significant issue we encountered.

The last two weeks have seen a more relaxed pace for the squadron, reflecting the shift in JSTF activity back to more routine missions. During this time the Red Devils have been assigned a number of CAP/CAS Patrols, with a few of these resulting in CAS requests over Raqqa as we continue to support the SDF advance through the city. Hopefully this more 'routine' flying will continue for us, I've certainly had my fill of the Damascus SMEZ for this tour. It was with these hopes that I attended the briefing ahead of today's mission.

I settled into Incirlik's small briefing room at 06:00 this morning, alongside Link, E-Boy, Poodle and Woody. Major Daniels kicked things off with our intel brief. Daniels began his briefing by positioning the impact of the Damascus strike, telling us that the aftermath of Operation Dominant Enforcer has been largely positive. The JSTF attacks on Damascus did a lot of damage to Syrian military, paramilitary and intelligence infrastructure and has resulted in a visible decrease in Syrian operations against rebel held areas. However the operation has fallen short in damaging the Syrian resolve to continue to fight in these areas - we are still seeing activity, just greatly reduced. The success of Dominant Enforcer and it's reduction in Syrian capability has emboldened anti government groups and SDF supporters throughout the south of Syria, putting the SAA on the backfoot in a number of areas as they struggle to contain multiple hotspots. The crowning victory in the two weeks since Dominant Enforcer occurred two days ago with a breakthrough by the SDF at Yabrud. Here the SDF finally stemmed the tide of SAA reinforcements and broke out of the town, overrunning the SAA 128th Brigade positions and pushing several miles further south towards Damascus.

Daniels then revealed some startling information, it is estimated that in the last week over 20,000 SAA troops are believed to have either defected to the SDF or abandoned their posts, this collapse in Syrian manpower has undoubtedly helped the SDF gain more ground. The SAA does however still possess many full strength units around Damascus, many of these being the more loyal and better trained formations in the Syrian army. If the defections continue and affect these units is something that Daniels was unwilling to speculate on any further, but what he could say was that the SDF were likely to face a very tough fight trying to break through to Damascus.

Syrian air activity has remained subdued in recent weeks. The Syrians have been carrying out air strikes against SDF positions, albeit with limited success, and these have been in limited numbers. Discussing this Daniels said two factors appear to be in play here, first the SyAAF are reluctant to come out if JSTF aircraft are nearby - and given the coverage we are achieving with our CAPs this is dissuading the Syrians from a lot of potential strikes. Second there is some indication from intel sources that the SyAAF is short on fuel. Whatever the reason, the lack of Syrian air to air threats is welcome news to us all.

Daniels then changed to the subject of the Russians. The Russians are continuing to ramp up their air operations in Syria, with aggressive policing of the 'Russian Quarter' and a continuation of their aggressive stance over the Mediterranean. The Russians are also continuing to support the Syrian ground forces through airstrikes, although these are sporadic and given the amount of CAP sorties the Russians are generating it is thought that they will be struggling to make enough aircraft available to have a profound impact on the battlefield. Daniels also revealed that there are reports that several additional Russian warships are in the Mediterranean and approaching the Syrian coastline. Russian intentions at this point remain ambiguous, they are certainly reinforcing their position in Syria and projecting themselves strongly into their operating areas, this however has limited impact on the Syrian situation on the ground.

Daniels next turned his attention to the situation in Raqqa. The battle for Raqqa is almost over, with just two enclaves of SIA fighters remaining in the city. The fight for the city has been intense and vicious, but with the help of JSTF air support the SDF have made excellent progress. However, the fighting in Raqqa and the surrounding area has had a huge impact on the population. Refugees continue to pour out of the area and head north towards Turkey, with several refugee camps springing up in recent weeks at the Turkish border.

Addressing Lebanon next, Daniels discussed evidence of increased Hezbollah activity in the mountains bordering Syria and in the Bekaa valley, so far this activity has remained confined to Lebanon. However Hezbollah drones continue to operate in the border region.

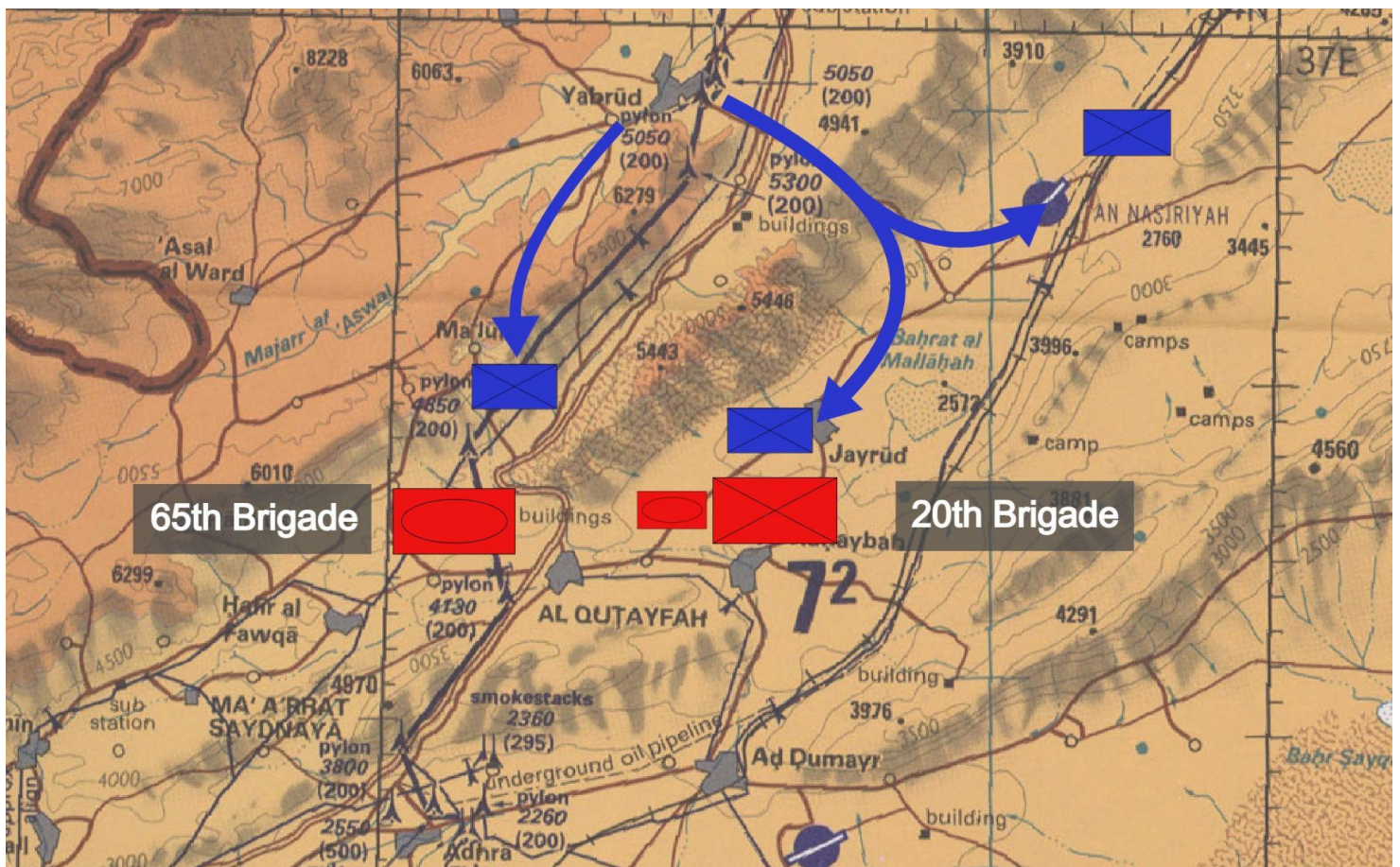
Finally, Daniels discussed the situation at the Jordanian border. Here, much like at the Turkish border, a refugee problem has been building. The fighting and subsequent reprisals in what are predominantly Sunni neighbourhoods in the south of Syria has resulted in the displacement of whole communities, who, seeking safety have begun to trickle through to the border with Jordan. Jordan has moved swiftly to care for these new arrivals but have also been very clear to voice their dismay at the treatment of these Syrians to the international community.

Concluding his briefing Major Daniels stepped aside, making way for Captain Edwards to deliver his weather briefing. Today we're looking at scattered clouds at 13-14,000 feet and relatively light winds.

Link then stepped up and began to brief today's mission. The SDF forces that have broken through at Yabrud have progressed 10 miles south and are currently engaged with Syrian formations some 25 miles northeast of Damascus. After an initially rapid advance the SDF attack has stalled and following the deployment of Syrian armour the SDF has found themselves pinned down and outgunned in several locations. Keen to maintain the SDF momentum, JSTF command has begun to assign CAS missions in support of the SDF.

This information certainly caused me to raise an eyebrow, and I was still processing it when Woody asked the question. "Is this not..." he said, "...a classic case of mission creep?". And he had a point, the SIA are all but defeated and the northern SDF areas now secure from Syrian attacks. Up to now any attacks on Syrian targets have been in support of the mission to protect the SDF and to deter and retaliate against attacks on civilians. This however is a switch to a more aggressive posture. Link conceded the point, it probably is mission creep, but without our support the Syrians will most likely roll the SDF forces back up north. The Syrians are not backing down and unless we want to be operating no fly zones out here for the next 10 years then a little assistance may be in order to help the SDF solidify its position. "Does this include solidifying their position in Damascus?" asked Woody. Link simply replied that he's not in a position to answer that yet.

Returning to the briefing, Link continued to describe our mission. Today the Red Devils are tasked with providing two flights of Hornets to the CAS effort. The fighting is currently taking place in two main positions, the first is southwest of Yabrud on the road leading towards the SAA 65th Brigade (T-55s). The second is on the valley floor 10 miles south of Yabrud, centred around the town of Jayrud and in close proximity to the 20th Brigade's (Infantry) positions. T-55s from the 65th are also believed to be supporting the 20th.

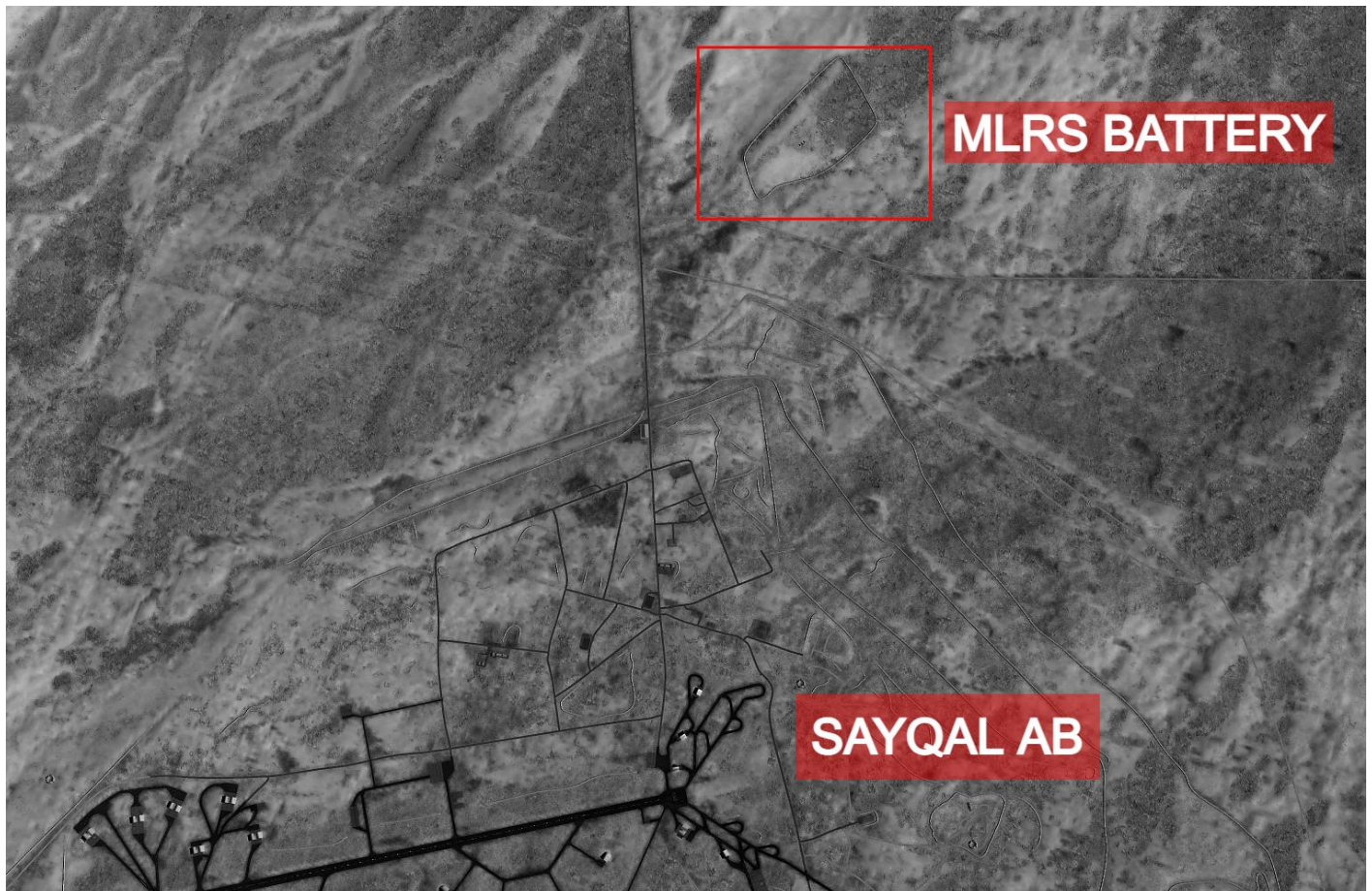


The first flight will consist of myself and E-Boy, with Poodle and Woody tasked later in the day. We will follow a standard departure out of Incirlik and proceed into Syria through the Gold Corridor.

Once we clear Aleppo we will then turn south for waypoint 3 and then proceed to and hold at the marshall point (WP4), 30 miles northeast of the SDF frontline. There will be a number of CAS missions operating in the area so it is important we follow Sentinel's instructions to ensure deconfliction. Once holding at the marshall point we will make contact with a FAC on the ground and follow their targeting assignment. Sentinel will coordinate this contact via the Air Support Operations Centre (Watchdog). At this point E-Boy asked about who will be controlling the attacks, given the likely lack of trained FACs in the SDF. Link responded that he believed there would be JSTF special forces embedded with SDF units for this purpose. The town of Jayrud is at the centre of the fighting and has been designated as waypoint 5 on our flight plan.

Should the FAC have no targets for us, or if we have spare fuel and ammo after providing CAS, we will have the option of hitting our assigned secondary target.

Today this target is a Syrian MLRS position believed to consist of 2-4 Uragan rocket systems. This rocket position has been attacking SDF forces around Yabrud. It is located just under 1 mile north of Sayqal airbase (WP6). This position will likely have short range air defences embedded with it and will also fall within the protection of the SA-8 located at Sayqal airbase.

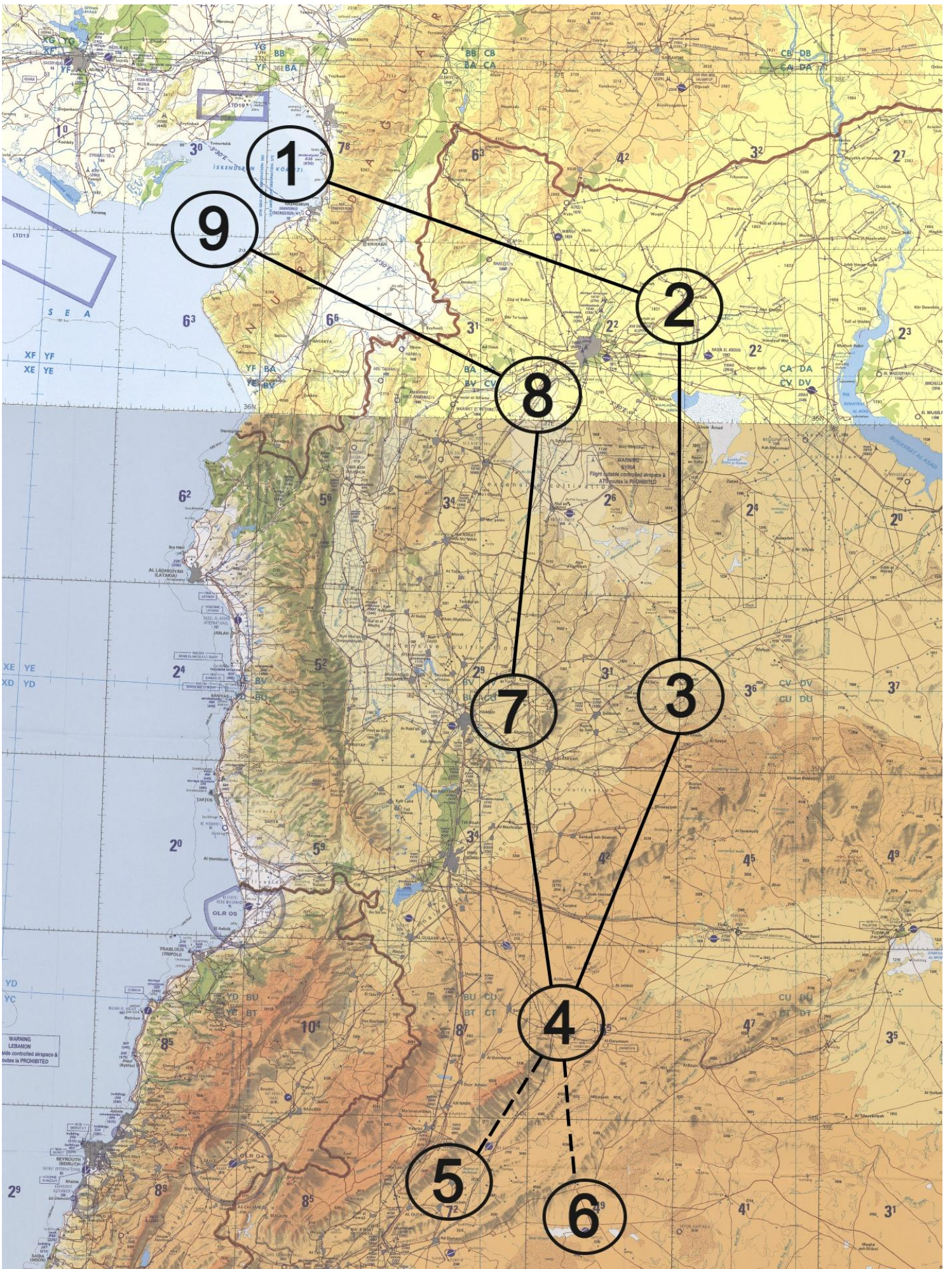


MLRS BATTERY



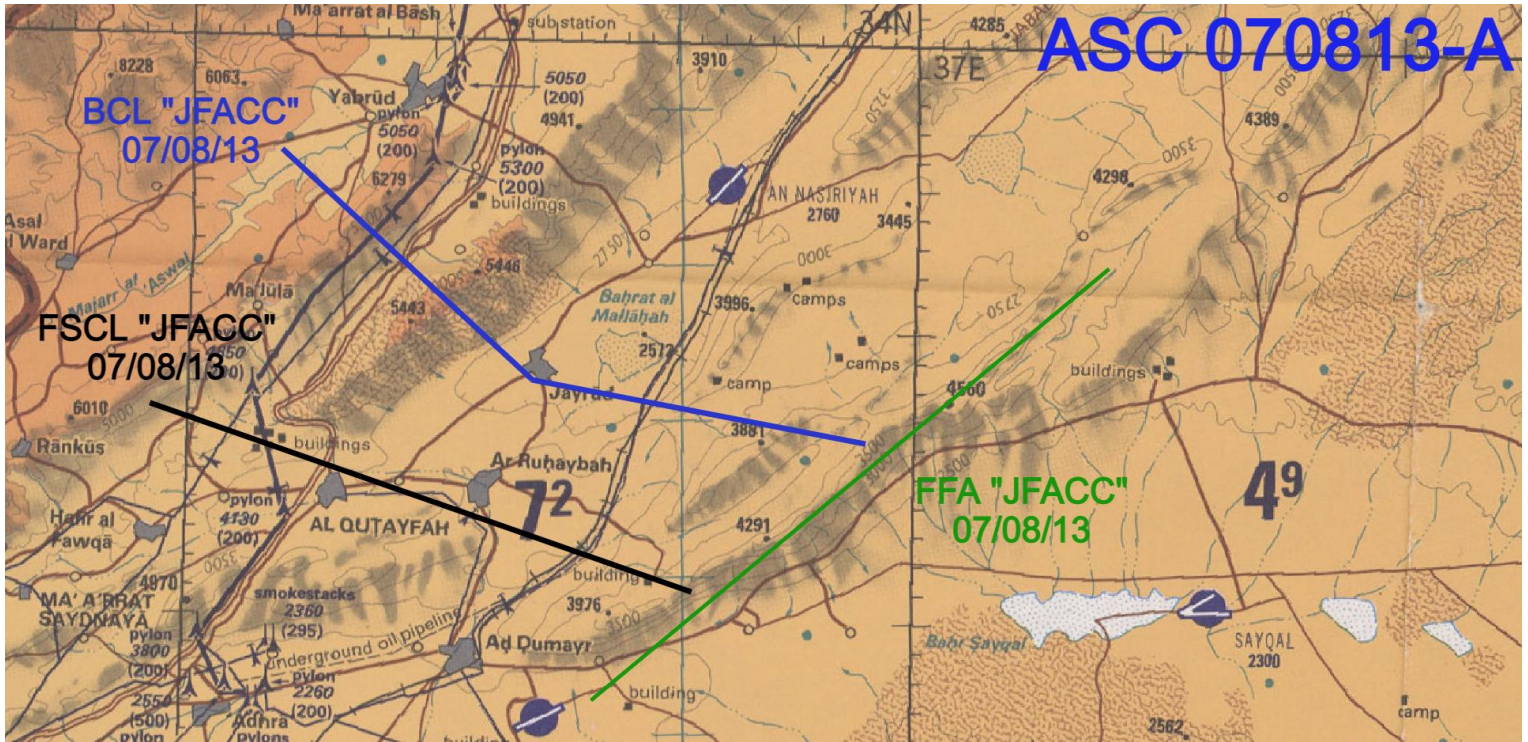
9K57 Uragan MLRS





Link next went over the air support charts for today's AO. SDF forces currently occupy An Nasiriyah AB and the town of Jayrud, they are also pushing southwest from Yabrud along the high road. As a result the BCL has been set on the southern side of Jayrud, with the FSCL marking the limits of the SDF push - the town of Al Qutayfah. All strikes between these two lines must be under the control of a FAC.

There are no friendly forces east of the ridge line located east of Jayrud and this area has been designated a free fire area.



Our loadout today will consist of two AGM-65 Mavericks and two MK-20 Rockeyes, bingo fuel is set at 6,120 lb.

As ever, we finished up by going over the threats we may face and the relevant threat reduction measures. The SA-10s at Damascus have not been replaced and so the SAM coverage this far north of Damascus is greatly reduced. The two SA-2s that covered this area have also been targeted by our SEAD/DEAD assets and as a result we have a little more room to operate in. Once again our positioning is critical, and getting too close to Damascus remains as dangerous as ever. A SEAD CAP is being maintained north of the AO and will be tasked to support should any Syrian SAMs threaten the target area.

The area around the 20th and 65th Brigades contains numerous SHORAD systems. SA-9, ZU-23, S-60, and ZSU-23-4 have all been sighted by previous missions and there are electronic indications of SA-8 active in the area as well. The air to air threat is expected to be low given the reasons explained earlier by Major Daniels, however a constant CAP is being maintained over the area.

And with that the briefing concluded, takeoff time is 12:38.