

The Weirdest War

Lessons from US-Russian “Deconfliction” in Syria

Robert Hamilton | October 2022

We called it the “talk or fight call,” and it was a major reason I found myself deploying to the Middle East on short notice in summer 2017.

A few weeks earlier, the commander of the Russian military contingent in Syria, Colonel General Vladimir Zarudnitsky, notified the commander of the US-led counter-ISIS coalition, Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, that American forces must evacuate their small base at al-Tanf, Syria, within 48 hours. If US forces did not do so, Zarudnitsky said, Russian forces would attack them.

Townsend’s response was curt and direct. “Are we going to talk or are we going to fight? Because if we are going to fight, this conversation is over. I’m going to call my commander at al-Tanf and tell him to prepare to defend himself.” Zarudnitsky quickly backtracked, saying he preferred to talk. Russian forces did not attack al-Tanf. The American garrison remains there today.

But the call convinced Townsend that he needed a better way to communicate with the Russian military headquarters in Syria. At the time, direct communication between US and Russian commanders was routed through the US air component headquarters at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, where there was a small cell designed to handle what the US military called “deconfliction” of air operations over Syria. Since Zarudnitsky had called Townsend at night and without prior coordination, a young, Russian-speaking airman who was on night duty in the deconfliction cell at Al Udeid had interpreted the call. The airman did

an admirable job in what was certainly the most stressful few minutes of his young career.



The call convinced Townsend he needed his own deconfliction cell to handle ground operations.

There were two main reasons for this. First, having an interpreter in the room instead of at the other end of a phone line allowed for nonverbal communication between the commander and the interpreter, and it allowed sidebar discussions with the phone muted—both critical to better understanding. Second, deconfliction of air and ground operations are different tasks. While air deconfliction is faster paced due to the speed at which military aircraft fly, it has a predictability ground deconfliction lacks. Both the United States and Russia had good radar coverage of most of Syria, meaning each had visibility of their own aircraft and those of the other air forces in the theater of operations. And the only players in the air war over Syria were the US-led coalition, Russia, Syria, and occasionally Israel.

The ground picture was messier, to put it mildly. Not only did no one have a comprehensive picture of which ground forces were where, but the number of players in the ground war dwarfed those in the air war. In addition to the United States, Russia, and the Syrian government, there were forces from Hezbollah, various Shia militias, ISIS, the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front, Turkish-backed



militias, and the Western-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighting in Syria, to name only the major players. To further complicate matters, loyalties among the smaller groups were fluid, changing with little warning in response to local conditions. Finally, as the United States and Russia both pursued the destruction of ISIS in Syria, their ground forces came ever closer to one another, increasing the chance of an inadvertent clash.

Shortly after he hung up from the “talk or fight” call, Townsend dashed off an email to Lieutenant General Joe Anderson, the director of operations on the US Army Staff in the Pentagon. Townsend explained the need for his own deconfliction cell and described the officer he had in mind to lead it: a colonel with Russian-language skills and prior service in Moscow, Kyiv, or Tbilisi. I was not the only army officer who fit that bill, but as a faculty member at the US Army War College, which was currently in its summer hiatus, I was immediately available. A few weeks after Townsend sent his email, I found myself on a plane bound for Kuwait to take charge of the nascent Russian ground deconfliction cell for Combined-Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR).



Aside from me, the cell eventually consisted of four interpreters, one of whom was an army lieutenant and three of whom were enlisted—one each from the army, the navy, and the air force. The interpreters were all highly skilled in Russian. Two had grown up speaking the language, one was a native Ukrainian who spoke Russian and Ukrainian, and one was a native English speaker who had learned Russian at the Defense Language Institute. My Russian skills were adequate for normal conversation and translation of correspondence between CJTF-OIR and the Russian military headquarters in Syria, but only the interpreters were qualified for the high-stakes, highly technical conversations that occurred regularly between US and Russian military commanders.

My role was to serve as a Russia adviser to the leadership of CJTF-OIR. I and the officers who followed me as directors of the ground deconfliction cell were army foreign area officers (FAOs). FAOs are supposed to have a broad understanding of Russian national security policy and military strategy. This was important because after Russia’s intervention in Syria in September 2015, the United States and Russia found themselves operating in the same country, something neither was accustomed to. To further complicate matters, although both Washington and Moscow wanted ISIS destroyed, they agreed on little else about Syria. American diplomats and military officers routinely found themselves flummoxed by the threats, lies, and other tactics the Russian military deployed in its interactions with the United States there.

A year prior to my deployment to CJTF-OIR, I was one of a handful of FAOs who served one-month assignments in Geneva, where the United States and Russia were working together to monitor a cease-fire in Syria, which had been concluded in late 2015. Originally, the US delegation consisted of military technical experts and Middle East specialists, but it was soon apparent that

expertise on Russia was a critical gap. As one of my colleagues put it when I arrived in Geneva in early July 2016, “We go to meet the Russians at the UN building every day, and we come back here (to the US Mission) wondering why they are always lying to us.” My response was that disinformation was a standard instrument in Russian policy and strategy, and they were deploying it here because they understood that their objectives and ours were misaligned. Although we were both nominally in charge of monitoring a cease-fire, I told him the difference was that “we are trying to end a war and they are trying to win a war.”



A year later, I carried that same assessment forward with me to CJTF-OIR, and Russian actions soon strengthened my conviction that they saw us as competitors—not counterparts—in Syria. The job at CJTF-OIR entailed not only handling communication between the US and Russian headquarters responsible for Syria but also explaining Russian actions and objectives to US military leaders. This was not an easy task: senior American commanders were routinely—and understandably—flummoxed and frustrated when Russian assurances that we were partners in the fight against ISIS were followed by Russian efforts to undermine US operations against the terrorist group. More than once my phone rang in the middle of the night and the night shift interpreter in the deconfliction cell said, “Sir, you need to get up here, the Russians are threatening to strike the SDF”—the US partner force in Syria. The unpredictability of Russian actions combined with the sheer number and diversity of armed groups in Syria made the battlespace incredibly volatile. This was no “normal” war, where two sides faced off against each other, with each trying to compel the other to do its will. Instead, it was part war, part violent circus that pitted dozens of combatant groups and their state sponsors against each other in coalitions that seemed to shift by the day. More than once I summed it up by saying, “This is the weirdest war I’ve ever been a part of.”

Soon after we established the ground deconfliction cell, the Assad regime, with Russian support, began an offensive across the central Syrian desert to liberate the city of Deir ez-Zor. At the time, the city had been under ISIS control for three years, save two Syrian Army garrisons that had held out. In a call between Lieutenant General Townsend and the new Russian commander, Colonel General Sergey Surovikin, the Russian informed Townsend about their operation to liberate Deir ez-Zor, which lay on the west bank of the Euphrates River.

At the time, the Euphrates served as the “deconfliction line” between Russian and US forces. By prior agreement, Russian forces would remain west of the Euphrates and US forces would remain east of it, aside from al-Tanf and al-Tabqah, two areas where US forces had been west of the river prior to the Russian intervention in September 2015. In his call with Townsend, Surovikin informed the US commander that to liberate Deir ez-Zor from ISIS control, Russia required a 30 km deep by 130 km wide “zone of exclusive operations” on the east side of the Euphrates. Surovikin also claimed that Russian special forces were already east of the river and warned that



the United States and the SDF should stay out of the area where they were operating. Townsend refused to take the bait, acknowledging the operation to liberate Deir ez-Zor but ignoring the request for a Russian zone of exclusive operations east of the Euphrates.

There was a good reason for the United States not to agree to Surovikin's request. At the time of the call, the SDF, the main US partner force in Syria, was engaged in a tough urban fight to liberate ISIS's self-proclaimed "capital," Raqqa. After Raqqa fell, the plan agreed to by the United States and the SDF called for the SDF, with US support, to fight its way down the east bank of the Euphrates, liberating it from ISIS all the way to the town of Abu Kamal on the Syria-Iraq border. Having the Russians and the Assad regime on the east bank of the Euphrates would complicate that. There was also little trust in the US headquarters that Russia and the Assad regime would fight ISIS in their requested zone of exclusive operations: they had a habit of brokering deals that allowed ISIS to leave an area instead of attacking them. In some cases, those ISIS forces later turned up in areas under the control of the United States and SDF, requiring our forces to fight them since the Russians and Syrian Army preferred not to.

The United States and Russia agreed to disagree on Surovikin's proposed 30 km by 130 km zone east of the Euphrates. They would regularly bring it up in calls, and we would regularly remind them that by prior agreement the river was the deconfliction line. In the meantime, the liberation of Raqqa had progressed to the point that the joint SDF-US operation to clear the east bank of the Euphrates could begin. In early September, SDF forces and their US advisers began the long march down the Euphrates, destroying ISIS and liberating towns and villages along the way. The Russians were none too pleased with this operation. They sent map after map and message after message demanding that the SDF end the operation and withdraw to a corner of northeastern Syria, leaving the rest of the country east of the Euphrates to them.

The United States and SDF refused to withdraw, pointing out that we were supporting Russia's stated goal of eliminating ISIS from all of Syria, something it lacked the capability to do. So the Russians switched tactics, resorting to what we called "dirt strikes," dropping artillery or missiles directly in front of advancing SDF forces. At times, these strikes were close enough to wound SDF soldiers. The Russian headquarters in Syria would call or email, claiming they believed ISIS was in the area they proposed to strike. We would respond that SDF and US forces were in the area and request they cancel the strikes. In most cases, the strikes, which were aimed not at ISIS but at deterring SDF and US progress, went ahead.

By mid-September, the situation was volatile and dangerous enough that the United States and Russia agreed to an in-person deconfliction meeting. The Jordanian military agreed to host it, so both sides sent small delegations to Amman, where we met in Jordanian Army headquarters. The night before the meeting, Russian and regime forces crossed the Euphrates just south of Deir ez-Zor. This was their way of ensuring the new deconfliction line allowed them to be east of the Euphrates.

After a long and often contentious day of negotiations, the two sides agreed to new air and ground deconfliction lines around Deir ez-Zor. The agreement allowed Russian and regime forces to remain east of the Euphrates but confined them to a box of only several square kilometers along the river. We also agreed to meet again in several weeks to discuss deconfliction lines from Deir ez-Zor all the way to the Syria-Iraq border. At the meeting, in a move I suppose he thought would lighten the mood, the Russian delegation leader told an ethnic joke. As he was telling it in Russian, I realized what was happening and glanced over at the US delegation, waiting with morbid curiosity to see how they would react when our interpreter translated the joke. Since the joke was both offensive and not very funny, the US delegation responded with a little forced laughter, and we called it a day.

A few weeks later, we were back in Amman to negotiate the deconfliction line from Deir ez-Zor to the Syria-Iraq border. The city of al-Mayadin, an ISIS stronghold, was a main point of negotiation in this series of meetings. The city lay primarily on the west side of the Euphrates, and we believed key ISIS leadership was located there. But there was little trust on the US side that Russia and the Assad regime had the will or capability to kill or capture this leadership. So there was a desire on the US side to allow aircraft and drones from the US-led coalition to operate west of the river in that area. For their part, the Russians wanted to fly east of the river around Deir ez-Zor to protect the newly liberated city and their own small contingent on the east bank of the river from ISIS counterattacks. The two sides agreed to use the Euphrates as the deconfliction line all the way to the Syria-Iraq border but to allow the Russians and the Assad regime to retain their small foothold east of the river and to allow aircraft to operate on the "other's" side of the river with prior deconfliction.

As we broke up on the final day of the negotiations, the Russian delegation requested that our interpreters translate the deconfliction agreement into Russian so they could send it to Moscow for approval. Although each side had been negotiating in its native language, the US side had the pen for the official copy of the agreement, which was in English. The Russian side had interpreters with them, but the talks had made clear that the US linguists were more skilled. We agreed to their request and headed back to the US Embassy. As our linguists were translating the agreement, the rest of the US delegation was on phones and computers, briefing our leadership on its details. The next day we learned the Russian delegation had another reason for asking us to do their staff work: they wanted to blow off some steam. We worked until late that night, and when we arrived for what we thought would be a close review of the English and Russian versions of the agreement we found the Russian delegation rumped, exhausted, and clearly hungover. They barely looked at the Russian version of the agreement before they pronounced it acceptable and left.

Both sides then submitted the draft agreement to their capitals. In Washington, government lawyers took issue with a few words in the agreement, delaying its approval. What happened to it in Moscow is unclear because the Russian headquarters in Syria never



brought it up again while I was there. Even though the capitals had not approved it, both sides generally respected the agreement as they fought their way down the Euphrates to the Iraqi border. The second round of talks in Amman was the last major event of my time running the deconfliction cell. A few weeks after we returned from Amman, my tour ended, and I headed home.



My periods of direct, daily contact with the Russian military in Geneva and the Middle East were short but intense. It is the type of experience that sears impressions and lessons in your mind. These are some of mine.

First, the Russian military is more tolerant of risk than Western militaries are. In Syria they used this to their advantage by intentionally escalating with the United States to either stop us from doing something they did not want us to do or to force a conversation on a topic. The dirt strikes in front of advancing SDF forces and the fording of the Euphrates the night before the first meeting in Amman are examples here. Both were actions that carried substantial risk of escalation, but the Russian headquarters in Syria determined that risk was worth the possible payoff. My experience in the US military leads me to believe we would be more hesitant to take actions like these.

Second, although it will probe red lines set by its adversaries, the Russian military will stop when it finds those red lines tied to clear US interests, backed by a will to enforce them. One example here is the “talk or fight” call: when Zarudnitsky understood clearly that the United States would fight to protect its presence at al-Tanf, he backed down. Similarly, in February 2018, the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group and Syrian forces left their small zone east of the Euphrates and attacked toward a base where the SDF and their US advisers were located. After warning the Russian headquarters in Syria that the United States would defend this garrison, it did so, killing hundreds of the attackers. The Russian military disavowed the attack and did not respond.

Third, the human element is critical. I had several conversations with US pilots in which they expressed concern over the capabilities of some of the Russian aircraft and air defense systems operating in Syria. My response was always that while we should respect the capabilities of these systems, we should not forget that the people operating the systems were also important. My

experience has been that Western militaries devote far more resources to training, educating, and caring for their people than the Russian military does. We also allow our people far more freedom of action and initiative. As a rule, this makes Western militaries more agile and adaptive than the Russian military, even when the Russian side is operating its most-capable equipment.

Finally, I hope that my service and that of the officers who followed me leading the deconfliction cell proved the value of language and regional expertise. The US Army invests a lot in educating and training its FAOs, and the opportunity to put that training and education to use in a high-stakes mission was an honor. Having experienced FAOs in the mix hopefully contributed to the US success against ISIS by ensuring that escalation with Russia did not derail our campaign. Similarly, I believe the deep Russian knowledge of the cell’s interpreters was a major strength. They were routinely able to go beyond the words spoken in a phone call or written on a page and interpret the true meaning the words were intended to convey. Having this level of understanding was a significant advantage for US military leaders.

These observations, although based on experiences five or more years in the past, will hopefully be helpful in dealing with the Russian military in different times and different contexts, including in the current war in Ukraine. Although the US military is not directly involved in that war, the United States and Russia are clearly on different sides. Understanding Russian tactics in this type of competition can hopefully help us achieve our objectives while minimizing the risk of a direct clash, an outcome neither side wants.

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