DEFEATING THE ISLAMIC STATE

Special Operations Forces in Syria

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In March 2018, Charlie Company from the 1st Battalion of the 5th Special Forces Group deployed to northeastern Syria to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as part of Operation Inherent Resolve.¹ The SDF was an alliance composed primarily of Kurdish and Arab militias who shared a goal of creating a secular, democratic, and decentralized Syria. The company's mission was to assist the SDF to defeat the Islamic State. The Islamic State controlled about one-third of Syria at its peak. By the time Charlie Company assumed the mission in March 2018, however, the SDF and pro-regime forces (PRF) aligned with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had liberated much of the formerly Islamic State-controlled areas, relegating the group to a handful of small pockets.²

When Charlie Company deployed, the SDF had paused offensive operations against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria. Turkey had launched Operation Olive Branch into northwestern Syria, and the predominantly Kurdish SDF considered the defense of Afrin a higher priority than its anti-Islamic State operations. With the SDF moving forces to Afrin, they could only conduct defensive operations against the Islamic State. At the same time, four major external powers—Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States—competed for influence through their support to different Syrian forces, bringing additional complexity.

This chapter provides multiple first-hand accounts of Charlie Company's mission against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria. It begins with an overview at the company level by its commander, Major Anthony Messenger. The chapter then offers operational vignettes written from the perspectives of the three Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA)³ commanders and a civil affairs team (CAT) commander. The chapter concludes with a series of lessons learned from Charlie Company's deployment.

Company-level overview

Major Anthony Messenger, commander of Charlie Company

When Charlie Company deployed to northeastern Syria in March 2018, the Islamic State maintained two pockets: the “Hajin Pocket” and “Dashisha” (see Figure 24.1). The Hajin Pocket, named for the largest town in the pocket, contained an estimated 60,000 people and 1,000–3,000 Islamic State fighters.⁴ The roughly 435-square-kilometer area spanned the last 45 kilometers of the north bank of the Euphrates River

Figure 24.1 Initial disposition of forces in Syria, March 2018.⁵

Source: Map created using Google Maps.

to the Iraqi border. Hajin remained an Islamic State stronghold, where its fighters and supporters prominently displayed the extremist group's flags and enforced *Sharia* (Islamic law). Dashisha was a much larger 7,800-square-kilometer area, spanning east of the Khabur River to the Iraqi border.

The Islamic State still influenced populations in the recently liberated areas, including the major towns of Markadah and Suwar, which sat along the primary route between Charlie Company's headquarters and its detachments. Markadah was also a primary crossing point along the Khabur River for commerce from Islamic State-controlled territory to the recently liberated SDF-controlled areas. The population worried that the Islamic State might return, and the majority of the population had conservative (although not extremist) religious beliefs.

The SDF established a significant front line with fighting positions every kilometer along the Shaddadi front, the northernmost 100-plus kilometers of the Dashisha pocket. In some sections, the line was heavily fortified, while in others, it was largely void of troops. The SDF had also seized control of several oil fields north of the Shaddadi front line and infrastructure to the south, including the Conoco oil field near the city of Deir ez Zor.

There were additional strategic and operational complexities. Russia and Iran provided direct support to the embattled Bashar al-Assad government and its military operations against two different Syrian opposition forces: the Islamic State and the Free Syrian Army. The United States, Turkey, and other coalition partners supported various factions of the Free Syrian Army in different parts of Syria, but not all partners supported the same groups. All, with the exception of Turkey, supported the SDF.

American support to the SDF complicated relations with Turkey, since Ankara viewed the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units—components of the SDF—as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a designated terrorist organization that has conducted attacks inside Turkey for decades.

These geopolitical factors created a multifaceted strategic environment that resulted in significant challenges at the tactical level.

Pre-deployment planning

I assumed command of Charlie Company in October 2017, shortly after the company returned from its first deployment to Syria. At the time, I knew the company would return to Syria six months later for another six-month deployment. In those months, we had to recover from deployment, take post-deployment leave (vacation), and prepare for the next deployment. I was concerned six months would not be enough time, especially considering the repeated deployments over many years for some of my seasoned Special Forces soldiers. Ultimately, we were able to accomplish all of the critical pre-mission training.

After taking command, Charlie Company conducted a four-day operational planning process for its upcoming deployment. I broke the team leadership into planning teams with the goal of encouraging organizational teamwork and creating a shared understanding of the company's mission, commander's intent, and desired end state.

The detachment commanders studied all of the operations orders, from the combatant command to battalion level, and conducted detailed mission analysis for the advanced operations base (AOB)—the name of a Special Forces company when it deploys—mission. The detachments' assistant operations and intelligence sergeants conducted a thorough intelligence preparation of the battlefield and the warrant officers developed a strategic-level stakeholder analysis to understand the environment. Each planning team briefed the entire company on their outcomes, creating a shared understanding at the lowest level.

The planning teams then briefed my superior, the battalion commander, for approval. During planning, we identified pre-mission training tasks, helped the AOB visualize what we needed to resource, and focused our detachments on the pending deployment. At the end of the four-day process, I assigned missions to the detachments, and they initiated detailed planning. I could not, however, assign them specific areas of operations, or geographical sectors, since ongoing operations were fluid and the physical locations of the SDF and the company we would replace changed daily.

Preparing for deployment

Pre-mission training consisted of two AOB-run events: external evaluations (EXEVALs) and strike operations. The EXEVALs consisted of deployment-specific tasks derived from our consolidated planning. The company rotated each of the four detachments that would be deploying through a 36-hour EXEVAL. The tasks included employing 120-mm mortars, reacting to an improvised explosive device, conducting casualty evacuation, reacting to a chemical event, setting up a communications suite, and communicating using multiple modes.

At the end of EXEVALs, I assigned each detachment a sector within the AOB's area of operations, known as AOB East, to facilitate more detailed planning and coordination with the detachment they would replace. ODA 5136's mission, however, changed only three weeks prior to deployment when hundreds of PRF, including Russian private military contractors, attacked the U.S. position near the Conoco oil field on February 7.

Initially, ODA 5136 was to assume primacy on building partner capacity in support of stability operations, but after the attack, they were reassigned to assume control of the "strategic corner," build a partner force, and conduct a combined arms defense against a battalion plus of PRF with an overwhelming number of artillery tubes, tanks, and armored vehicles in support. The "strategic corner" earned its name because it was a physical location where risk to mission and men was highest, and loss of the location threatened the mission to defeat the Islamic State.

The second part of pre-mission training focused on the AOB and detachment leadership. It was designed to train the AOB on sensor management, strike operations, and asset management. The leaders and critical enablers⁶ were all brought together to a simulations operation center to conduct strike operations. We conducted a detailed after action review following each iteration. This was the most beneficial training I received as the company commander. It trained me on the most critical aspect of my job: trust and patience. Trust and patience are essential when conducting complex operations with partners and allowing the detachment commanders time and space to problem-solve the challenges they face.

When we deployed, we would be working for a Special Operations Forces (SOF) headquarters element we did not typically work under. To build trust with our new headquarters, we invited them to train with us and validate our ability to conduct strike operations from the detachment and company level. The exercise built the trust necessary to enable quick execution, empowering leaders at the lowest level.

I knew the detachments would be ready. The biggest risk, from my perspective, would be the strategic situation. It was complex and constantly changing. I believed we needed to have a comprehensive understanding of the numerous actors and their equities.

Strategic context

Northeastern Syria represented a challenging strategic environment. In October 2017, the U.S.-backed SDF liberated Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate, and subsequently raced the Russian and Iranian-backed PRF down the Middle Euphrates River Valley toward the border with Iraq, each side advancing against Islamic State elements toward the city of Deir ez Zor.⁷ The PRF remained on the south side of the Euphrates River, while the SDF remained on the north, leaving the river between them. The PRF, however, soon crossed to the north side of the river at Deir ez Zor, increasing the complexity of the tactical situation.⁸

To maintain momentum, the SDF bypassed the PRF position and continued its advance, leaving a PRF foothold on the north side of the river. Over time, the situation settled into an unsteady containment of the PRF, with minor skirmishes between the two forces. The containment remained effective largely due to the threat of coalition airstrikes. The United States would not support offensive operations against the PRF but maintained the right of self-defense and the defense of American partners against all combatants. Yet the risk of escalation was always present.

In mid-January 2018, the Turkish military and Turkish-supported elements of the Free Syrian Army initiated Operation Olive Branch, an air and ground campaign on the Kurdish-majority Afrin District in Syria.⁹ As a result, the Kurdish forces within the SDF halted offensive operations against the Islamic State and repositioned forces to defend Afrin, which it considered more important to Syrian Kurdish national identity.¹⁰

In February 2018, shortly before my arrival, a force of nearly 500 PRF—coupled with Iranian paramilitary and Russian private military contractors—conducted an attack from their position north of the Euphrates River near Deir ez Zor to seize the Conoco oil and gas facility in the SDF-controlled zone. The U.S. position was clearly marked, and U.S. SOF acted in self-defense to protect itself. The much smaller U.S. SOF element—supported by American airpower—defeated the PRF and Russian private military contractor attack, inflicting hundreds of PRF and private military contractor casualties.¹¹

The situation left a capable adversary on the north side of the river. The PRF—with Russian and Iranian support—actively worked to undermine the SDF in the area and demonstrated a desire to seize critical oil and gas infrastructure. If the PRF conducted a successful breakout from this foothold and moved to the north or east, they could isolate U.S. SOF elements in the river valley to the southeast. This PRF location increased risk from the tactical through strategic levels and became the AOB's strategic corner.

We assumed our mission two weeks earlier than initially planned based on a tactical need to get our detachments in place quickly. But the flow of equipment into northeastern Syria was slow, even at the

best of times. By conducting an early relief in place, the detachments lacked their organic equipment. We improvised in numerous ways and borrowed equipment from our partner force until our equipment arrived. I assumed a higher risk for the soldiers at the tactical level, but overall I thought I was reducing operational risk by displaying our resolve to support our partner and share the risk.

Company deployment and mission overview

In late February 2018, the company deployed and started occupying mission support sites (MSSs), or firebases, along the river valley and SDF front. We assumed primarily a defensive posture due to the tactical pause created by the SDF repositioning forces to Afrin but planned to resume offensive operations once conditions allowed. Ultimately, we re-established a complete cordon of the Hajin Pocket from May to June and cleared Dashiha from June to July. Additionally, the defense of the strategic corner was a constant concern and one that required me to surge other detachments to the area on occasion.

Within the first few weeks, the detachments occupied their MSSs, collocated with their SDF partners along the Islamic State front. This was intended to reassure our partners that while we would not provide combat support to their Afrin operation, we would remain committed to their fight against the Islamic State. One of my priorities was maintaining our partners' trust while urging them to resume offensive operations.

ODA 5131 was co-located at MSS Green Village with the forward SDF regional headquarters. ODA 5132 assumed responsibility of our northernmost sector along the Shaddadi front, which was the longest section of the SDF defense. ODA 5133 occupied a position near Tanak oil field, near the Hajin pocket, while ODA 5136 established a combined arms defense against the Russian and Iranian backed PRF threat at the strategic corner. We shared tactical operations centers with our SDF partners at each location to ensure clarity for operations and support.

I collocated the AOB with the SDF main regional headquarters near Shaddadi. I often met with my partner, the SDF regional commander, who commanded a division-sized force, to discuss our situation and influence his actions. The SDF's ultimate goal was to have an autonomous area within the Syrian government structure much like the Iraqi Kurds, yet no other actor had the desire to entertain this outcome. The SDF hoped that by partnering with the United States to defeat the Islamic State, the U.S. government would in turn help the SDF achieve its goal of an autonomous region within Syria.

The detachments had been in their MSSs for only a single week before I had to surge most of my forces to support the defense of the Conoco oil field due to PRF aggression. During this initial defense of the strategic corner, I requested additional support from our headquarters. In response, the headquarters sent another special operations element, with its supporting SDF, to assume responsibility for the defense.

As a result, I gave up tactical control of 50% of the AOB's combat power and moved into a supporting role as tensions ebbed and flowed. It was humbling to admit that I did not have the requisite combat power to conduct a full-scale deterrence of Russian-supported PRF while continuing with operations to defeat the Islamic State, and even more humbling to turn over the responsibility to another unit. But it was the correct call.

The defense of the strategic corner—albeit critical to the AOB's success—was a supporting effort to the AOB's primary mission: the destruction of the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate. Nevertheless, if the threat in the strategic corner increased enough, operations to defeat the Islamic State would have to be halted to secure the corner, given the Conoco site protected the AOB's flank, ODAs 5133 and 5131's rear area, and the company's supply routes.

After successfully deterring the PRF forces, the SOF unit that had surged to take tactical control of the area returned to its primary mission elsewhere in Syria, and ODA 5136, with some technical assistance

from a U.S. Army engineer officer, started to build a combined arms defense at the strategic corner to deter future incursions. We ultimately succeeded in deterring aggression along the strategic corner because of ODA 5136's efforts.

In late April 2018, as SDF troops repositioned from Afrin, we prepared for offensive operations along the desert and border axis (the strip of land between the Hajin and Dashisha pockets) led by ODA 5131 as the main effort. The operation kicked off beginning in May, and the SDF subsequently re-seized the desert and border axis they had lost earlier in the year. The axis separated the last two Islamic State strongholds and closed the Hajin Pocket.

Once complete, the AOB shifted its focus north. In July, we initiated the clearing of Dashisha with a series of airstrikes. ODA 5132 was the main effort, supported by ODA 5131, 5213, and a coalition SOF team. The operation took about one month, leaving the Hajin Pocket as the only Islamic State-controlled territory in our sector.

Logistics were a constant challenge. The SDF's defense of Afrin significantly decreased their logistics capability that the previous AOB had depended on for resupply and sustainment. This meant the AOB would need to assume a greater logistics responsibility than it had initially planned, which required a reallocation of its assets to supply the geographically dispersed elements.

The detachments relied on multiple methods of procurement that ranged from local sourcing to having food delivered to the AOB by Amazon and then delivered to them on resupply runs. The furthest MSS was a six-hour drive from the AOB. Some of these challenges were anticipated during mission analysis, and detachments filled boxes with mountain meals, protein bars, various forms of shelf-stable food, and MREs.¹² Still, many of the soldiers lost significant weight during the first three months of the deployment.

Task organization for combat operations

The AOB's mission was to conduct partnered operations to destroy the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria, an area of operations the size of Maryland. To do this, the company was heavily resourced. Beyond its organic detachments, the AOB also controlled CATs, psychological operations teams, coalition SOF, Army and civilian mechanics, cooks, a signal section, a robust intelligence section, Marine Corps Information Operations planners, Air Force Joint Terminal Attack Controllers, a Marine Corps heavy weapons company, an Army field surgical team, an Air Force Special Operations Surgical Team, a forward support company, 155-mm howitzers, multi-service engineers, and multi-service explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams.

Additionally, elements in direct support of the AOB included rocket artillery, counterfire radar systems, air weapons teams, fuelers, medevac aircraft, and a forward logistics element. The AOB also managed assigned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms and close air support assets.

I assigned most of the non-organic elements to the detachments based on tactical requirements. The detachments integrated them into their joint (multi-service) and combined (multinational) teams. For example, when ODA 5136 built the defense at the strategic corner, they identified a need for responsive all-weather fires. The AOB requested and received howitzers from our headquarters and pushed them down to the detachment for employment.

Detachments rarely manage this level of fire support at their level, but they quickly learned the artillery drills and employment considerations. The detachment commander placed the howitzers north of the main defensive position, just out of range of the PRF artillery but within range to support the detachment and company fires plan.¹³

To ensure medical coverage across the sector, I split the field surgical team into two sections and positioned them with detachments to best support operations and "golden hour" requirements.¹⁴ The AOB maintained medevac aircraft for golden-hour coverage for three detachments, but ODA 5133, and later ODA 5131, maintained a surgical capability at their locations due to their distance from the AOB.

Over the course of the deployment, the AOB supported up to seven sites at once. I transferred enablers, such as howitzers or surgical teams, from one detachment to another based on operational requirements. Generally, the detachments were expected to manage their own MSS and were provided Marine Corps infantry to assist with security.

The Marine Corps heavy weapons company attached to the AOB included organic armored vehicles, heavy mortars, and anti-tank guided missiles. This company was critical to building the combined arms defense, but it also reinforced the defense of the detachment MSSs.

We treated the Marine Corps company commander as a part of the team, and he was consulted on the employment of his forces to best support the detachment missions. Their integration was critical to mission success. They were able to provide timely support—such as additional anti-armor capability—and integrated seamlessly at all levels. Two detachments had Marine Corps mortar crews that were integral to operations. They brought the combat capability necessary to secure the MSSs and allowed the detachments to focus on their partner force.

ODA 5133: the “Tip of the Spear” in the Middle Euphrates river valley

Major Nick Lewis-Walls, commander of ODA 5133

In February 2018, ODA 5133 arrived to the AOB’s most remote outpost, 130 kilometers from the AOB headquarters, with the mission of containing the Islamic State in the Hajin Pocket. The administrative structures of a non-functioning Tanak oil field served as the detachment’s MSS (see Figure 24.2). The

Figure 24.2 ODA 5133 containing the Islamic State in the Hajin Pocket, March 2018.¹⁵

Source: Map created using Google Maps.

detachment's partner force consisted of 1,500 SDF fighters arrayed in 80 defensive fighting positions along a 65-kilometer front. An additional 1,300 SDF fighters provided wide-area security in the areas of the river valley that had been cleared from November 2017 to January 2018.

Islamic State elements in the river valley responded to the SDF's halt by consolidating and layering defensive positions in the Hajin Pocket, employing observation on static SDF positions, and conducting limited attacks during degraded weather conditions.

The detachment's initial position at the Tanak oil field MSS was not sufficient to support the SDF positions. Located 18 kilometers from the nearest point along the front, the detachment lacked organic unmanned aerial systems and weapon systems that could directly support SDF elements during times of degraded weather. Spring in northeast Syria generally brings several stretches of low clouds and poor weather, and the detachment could not rely solely on allocated ISR platforms to provide persistent coverage along the 65-kilometer front.

The detachment distributed its assigned ISR and close air support to the SDF defense along the front. The detachment also conducted multiple ground reconnaissance missions, ensuring familiarity with as many of the 80 positions as possible, timing routes, and designating suitable locations for mortar firing points.

In some cases, the detachment discovered that the SDF did not occupy positions reported by their commander. This initial reconnaissance paid dividends in gaining a more accurate understanding of the friendly situation. The detachment generated a refined common operational picture using off-the-shelf tactical applications to disseminate, synchronize, and update SDF disposition and operations.

The common operational picture was a living product, adjusted almost daily as new observations regarding enemy movement patterns, enemy activity, local patterns of life, and friendly disposition changed. While the detachment maintained a 24-hour strike cell with near-continuous close air support and ISR assets, the most useful characterization efforts came from the layering of ISR collection with long hours of direct ground observation.

During reconnaissance missions, small teams of Special Forces soldiers moved between the SDF positions during two- to three-day patrols, conversed with front-line SDF fighters, and spent "time on glass" (using optics for direct observation) to build a more complete picture of the enemy situation. Using these reports, the detachment generated an assessment of the enemy's concept of operations in the river valley, creating a geospatially arrayed product that tracked observed activity, intelligence reporting, and operational zones.

The detachment identified three types of Islamic State zones: employment zones, transition zones, and support zones. Employment zones were areas void of civilians in which Islamic State elements actively conducted visual observation of SDF positions, launched unmanned aerial systems, and conducted small-scale harassing attacks.

Transition zones were areas where Islamic State fighters transitioned between their support and employment zones.

Support zones were areas with high levels of civilian activity where Islamic State members could openly carry arms, fly flags, and enjoy relative freedom of movement by using the population as a shield against coalition airstrikes.

Occupying Firebase "H"

From its first reconnaissance mission, the detachment searched for suitable locations for a new firebase. The most important operational considerations were proximity to SDF leaders and the enemy. Tactically, the prime considerations were adequate ranging to cover a significant portion of the front with 120-mm mortar fire, employment of the detachment's unmanned aerial systems, and improved intelligence collection capabilities. The firebase's more proximate location to the front, however, would increase risk-to-force.

The detachment narrowed down promising locations, staying at sites over extended periods and conducting 120-mm fire missions to gauge enemy reactions.

In the end, the detachment selected a location only 950 meters behind the front and approximately 2 to 3 kilometers from the nearest enemy position. From the firebase, the detachment could range 25% of the 65-kilometer Hajin front with its 120-mm mortars to include the most active section. Additionally, it could cover 50% of the front when employing mobile elements in pre-established mortar firing positions.

The detachment benefited from a number of attachments: an intelligence element, an Air Force Special Operations Surgical Team, a Navy EOD team, three Air Force Joint Terminal Attack Controllers, a 12-man Marine Corps security force, and a coalition SOF team. The attachments rotated in and out of theater on their own schedule, but they consistently accounted for roughly half of the combined 75-person force at the firebase.

The surgical team allowed the detachment to meet golden-hour evacuation requirements, since the farthest positions along the front were a 54-minute ground movement from the new firebase. After receiving approval to relocate, the detachment began a deliberate occupation. Upon occupation, the detachment chose to name its new position Firebase Hajin (Firebase “H”).

The defense

As the detachment settled into the firebase and adjusted to its new operational tempo, the detachment devoted greater effort to understanding our partners so that we could become more effective combat advisors. While the Kurdish People’s Protection Units and Women’s Protection Units factions made up the bulk of the SDF in our sector, the SDF instead consisted primarily of Arab-majority fighting units arrayed under the Deir ez Zor Military Council. Many of the fighters were from the nearby area and possessed a wealth of knowledge about local observations, local history, and tribal dynamics.

The SDF organized the front into three sectors. The sector commanders rotated their fighters out of their positions every two to three weeks, resulting in 100–300 fighters manning the positions in each sector at any given time. Additional SDF forces provided internal security in liberated areas to the rear of the front.

The front commander remained co-located with the detachment headquarters at Firebase “H” to synchronize operations. The assistant detachment commander maintained the prime relationship with the front commander, devoting considerable time to developing the relationship over lengthy discussions on politics, life, history, and the military situation in Syria.

This arrangement worked well. It allowed me, as detachment commander, to maintain a working relationship with the SDF commander while enabling broader visibility on external relationships, external assets, and higher-echelon reporting requirements. I could always step in to play the “bad cop” to provide leverage on critical issues and allow the assistant detachment commander to remain the “good cop” and maintain a high level of personal rapport. The detachment operations sergeant managed the day-to-day mission cycles, training cycles, and tactical employment of organic assets and systems.

With a firm relationship at the command level, the detachment worked to cement relationships at lower echelons. I assigned two to three Special Forces soldiers responsibility for each sector, enabling them to form relationships and become experts within their sector. With the SDF rotating every two to three weeks, the Special Forces advisors soon became the continuity on the defensive front, which improved SDF internal rotations.

Essential skills for these small advisory teams included both tactical skills—such as the ability to call for and adjust mortar fire, employ close air support, or engage targets with anti-tank weapons systems—and Arabic-language skills. The single linguist remained with the detachment headquarters at Firebase “H,” so the Special Forces advisors employed their language training with the assistance of Google Translate and picture sketches to communicate with their partner force. Although the majority of the Special Forces

soldiers had received Modern Standard Arabic or Levantine language training, a few of them spoke only French or Farsi and had to learn what they needed on the job.

The detachment also worked to build relationships between the SDF and their nearest adjacent unit: the Iraqi Security Forces. The detachment deemed improved Iraqi Security Forces–SDF coordination essential for both tactical and operational success in the river valley, particularly along the international border. By leveraging previous personal relationships with Iraqi officers and U.S. Army units across the border at Tactical Assembly Area al-Qaim, the detachment facilitated the first physical link-up between the SDF and Iraqi forces.

On the day of the meeting in May 2018, the detachment and its SDF counterparts drove to the international border and then walked across on foot to meet the Iraqi officers at a temporary collection of tables and chairs. As detachment members watched, the SDF commander, the Iraqi commander, and their staffs discussed operational plans, methods of coordination, and a desire to continue developing the relationship. The detachment paralleled this line of communication with the Iraqi Army and the coalition forces at Tactical Assembly Area al-Qaim.

I found credibility, rapport, and overall value to be the key characteristics for a successful advisory effort. The Special Forces soldiers shared long days and nights, meals, and stories with their counterparts but were quick to support the defense of the front with effective indirect fire, timely battlefield intelligence, and close air support.

The cross-functional team

The detachment became increasingly concerned about security and stabilization in the recently liberated areas of what we referred to as the “Green Blob” (the AOB’s sector), 400 square kilometers of which fell within the detachment’s sector. As early as April 2018, the detachment conducted limited civil reconnaissance and tribal engagement missions in the liberated area. Unfortunately, the limited civil affairs and psychological operations assets were not able to access the area as frequently as desired, but access improved over time.

The detachment worked through tribal connections to identify tribal influencers and power brokers for future relationships with the Deir ez Zor Civil Council. This process required a significant time commitment, but the detachment prided itself on talking to people. The detachment attempted conversations with anyone and everyone to find promising leads for tribal connections, from talking with Arab SDF/Military Council members on the front with local connections, to conducting street-level engagements with merchants, to working through SDF commanders to arrange meetings.

The Deir ez Zor Civil Council had a tribal and local issue outreach center that the detachment frequently visited to meet with representatives from local groups. The detachment established and maintained contact with promising individuals—especially those with influence—using secure messaging applications. The detachment routinely vetted names of reliable contacts to gauge reactions and receive any additional or alternative views.

For the most part, the Arab tribal representatives were not evasive, nor did they seem insincere during engagements. They represented people trying to recover from a significant social and physical trauma over the past six years and sought to work with the coalition, SDF, and the Civil Council to build a “new normal.” The detachment worked with its temporarily assigned CAT to connect recommended tribal interlocutors to the Civil Council and began facilitating Civil Council and SDF-led tribal engagements to build local cooperation for the liberation force and provide a pseudo-political outlet to air grievances and requests. The detachment moderated these engagements that rotated between local tribal leadership residences and the SDF headquarters.

Prior preparations were critical to productive meetings. The detachment rehearsed talking points with the SDF, while the CAT similarly advised the Civil Council participants. U.S. personnel served as the “honest brokers” in the room, and tribal leadership routinely commented that the American presence gave

them the best opportunity for a better future, leading to their increased willingness to work with the SDF and the Civil Council.

After incorporating the CAT and tactical psychological operations team into the detachment's civic engagement in the Green Blob, the detachment's lobbying for the assets paid off. By late July 2018, the AOB moved a CAT and a tactical psychological operations team to Firebase "H," and the detachment fully integrated them into the mission. Eventually, this arrangement led to re-labeling the ODA a cross-functional team, with the detachment commander serving as the cross-functional team commander and formalizing the relationship that had developed over the course of the deployment.

ODA 5131: MSS occupation, desert operations, and containment

Major Mike Parker, commander of ODA 5131

ODA 5131 spent six months training and preparing to partner with the SDF to conduct offensive operations against the Islamic State along the Middle Euphrates River Valley. During pre-deployment training, ODA 5131 was designated to replace the detachment that had recently established an MSS at the Omar oil field. Due to ongoing offensive operations in January and February, the previous detachment hastily established the MSS. The operational environment shifted nearly instantaneously as the SDF pivoted toward Afrin. Though frustrating in the moment, this pivot provided an opportunity to consolidate and reorganize for the final push to defeat the Islamic State in eastern Syria.

To prepare for offensive operations, the detachment needed a more suitable MSS—a scalable location that could serve as a logistics hub and support all of the company's detachments across the final 75 kilometers of desert to the Iraqi border. The MSS at Omar oil field was easily defensible, but the limited space provided no room for growth.

The SDF had already begun to occupy "Green Village," a community of abandoned apartment buildings adjacent to a field suitable for a helicopter landing zone. Green Village met all the requirements to serve as a logistics hub and facilitate the final offensive. It was scalable in size; could easily accommodate more than 250 personnel; adjacent to a helicopter landing zone and drop zone (a designated area into which troops or supplies are dropped by air); well defensible; and central in location to support AOB operations along the river valley.

Over the course of one week, two EOD technicians and one dog handler accompanied the SDF to clear the helicopter landing zone and approximately 20 three-story apartment buildings. Once clear, the detachment conducted a phased movement from the Omar oil field to Green Village. Although only a short five-minute drive, the detachment needed to move a field surgical team, counterfire radar, and rocket artillery assets that supported other detachments in the river valley.

The detachment occupied Green Village in March with approximately 50 personnel: ODA 5131, a marine infantry platoon, a rocket artillery platoon, a field surgical team, two EOD techs, and a military working dog. By the end of June, the MSS had grown to 220 personnel, including CATs, tactical psychological operations teams, forward arming and refueling point personnel (for aircraft), a second counterfire radar, a Special Operations Surgical Team, a howitzer platoon, other members of the international coalition, and transient visitors.

Containment

ODA 5131 was directed to contain the Islamic State within the Hajin pocket.¹⁷ The detachment's first task was to understand the nuances and challenges of the operational environment and then to

Figure 24.3 Green Village and the desert axis, April/May 2018.¹⁶

Source: Map created using Google Maps.

task-organize in a manner that would allow the detachment to partner most effectively with the SDF's chain of command.

The detachment began by validating its assessment of SDF positions along the desert axis (see Figure 24.3)—the stretch of desert with approximately 80 defensive fighting positions spaced nearly 1 kilometer apart. Fighting positions were constructed with dirt berms, sandbags, and small trenches to protect against vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. The SDF positions included fighters armed with assault rifles (AK-47s), one to two machine guns (PKMs or variants), and occasionally rocket-propelled grenades. The SDF manned each fighting position with 8 to 12 SDF soldiers, who rotated every two weeks.

Defying traditional military tactics, the SDF frequently waited until 24–48 hours prior to an operation to establish the chain of command for tactical maneuver units. The SDF utilized a unique system of rotating field commanders (company to battalion equivalents) who were selected by senior SDF leadership based on considerations unknown to and with little influence from our detachment. The lack of unity of command at the lowest levels made it impossible for the detachment to conduct specific pre-mission training or rehearsals with the SDF prior to Operation Jazeera Storm (the SDF operation name for the final defeat of the Islamic State) or other operations. Flexibility in the time, location, and organic task organization were keys to success for operations with the SDF.

Task organization

Task organizing for Operation Jazeera Storm proved difficult, as the mission required the detachment to operate from three separate locations to effectively partner with the SDF. The detachment commander remained at Green Village to advise the operational commander, coordinate fires, and control ISR. The team sergeant also remained at Green Village to oversee logistics, run day-to-day operations, and oversee the MSS build-up.

Due to the distance from Green Village to ODA 5131's new area of operations, the detachment required a second MSS, so the assistant detachment commander led the rest of the detachment to establish MSS

Munson near the Iraqi border. During offensive operations, the element at MSS Munson would split again. The assistant detachment commander remained at MSS Munson to advise the local SDF commander on operations and to de-conflict fires, while the senior weapons sergeant or senior engineer sergeant advised the SDF ground tactical commander on movement and maneuver, the de-confliction of local fires, and to provide updates on SDF locations as they inched toward Islamic State territory.

The detachment split operations into two primary categories: the “deep fight” and the “close fight.” The “deep fight” was primarily a reconnaissance and artillery mission: to support the SDF using ISR capabilities controlled at Green Village to scan for threats, obstacles, or civilian activity ahead of SDF movement. ISR specifically conducted scans across *wadis* (river valleys), dead space (areas that cannot be covered with direct fire weapons), trench systems, and tunnel systems (by identifying tunnel entrances) and assessed Islamic State fighting positions.

The “close fight” was designed to provide the SDF with immediate tactical support using mortars and observation (small unmanned aerial systems and direct observation). Standing side by side with the SDF ground commander, the Special Forces soldier could observe the forward-most SDF element as they maneuvered from one position to another, reducing risk by quickly identifying Islamic State fighters and de-conflicting fires.

Technology proved invaluable during the initial phase of Operation Jazeera Storm. Rather than dedicating an ISR platform to track the SDF as they maneuvered toward Islamic State-controlled territory, the detachment tracked their position using direct observation and tracking devices. This technique allowed the detachment to dedicate all ISR platforms to actively scan for enemy threats.

Supporting Operation Jazeera Storm from Iraq

Given the proximity of Operation Jazeera Storm to the Iraqi border, the detachment requested to leverage assets located in Iraq. The detachment coordinated for ISR support from a Navy SEAL element located at Tactical Assembly Area al-Qaim. The SEALs maintained control of the ISR platform but provided scans in support of ODA 5131 priorities.

Relations with the SEAL element also led to tactical support from Task Force Thunder, the French field artillery task force also located at Tactical Assembly Area al-Qaim. Aside from language barriers, two challenges arose during fires planning. First, cross-border fires from Iraq into Syria had never been requested before and required approval. Second, the employment of French 155-mm howitzers required both French and U.S. rules of engagement.

To deny the Islamic State the use of the extensive *wadi* system that paralleled the Syria-Iraq border, the detachment provided the French officer a series of linear targets to cover the dead space between the SDF’s axis of approach and the Islamic State’s employment zone. French rules of engagement required a French “red card holder” to approve the release of fires. A red card holder was required to clear (approve) all coalition fires to ensure adherence to country-specific rules of engagement.

In this case, the U.S. and coalition rules of engagement were different. The Joint Terminal Attack Controller, or whoever else was controlling the fires, had to work through the red card holder—who was located in a headquarters and watching the ISR feed—to gain permission prior to using fires against any target. French rules of engagement mandated a 30-minute ISR “soak” of the target area to verify that no civilians were present prior to approving any fire mission. Eventually, the French reduced the requirement to five minutes, a duration that can still feel like an eternity for troops in contact.

Throughout the build-up and execution of Operation Jazeera Storm, the detachment assessed the priorities and level of investment of the SDF by reviewing the manning and equipping of fighters. When the SDF prioritized a mission, they employed experienced, primarily Kurdish fighters. These fighters were well equipped with several magazines for small arms and “technicals” (non-standard tactical vehicles mounted with heavy machine guns). The SDF also employed armored vehicles and mine rollers to clear

roads from improvised explosive devices. In areas of lower priority, the detachment noted younger, primarily Arab fighters who were only lightly equipped with one or two magazines and lacked heavy machine guns.

Operation Jazeera Storm: containment

After securing the border axis, ODA 5131 transferred operations along the desert and border axis to ODA 5133. The detachment briefly consolidated and reorganized before splitting again to travel north to assist ODA 5132 and other coalition partners to clear Dashisha. Once the coalition secured Dashisha, ODA 5131 transitioned back to the desert and border axis. After a four-week absence, the detachment returned to MSS Munson and re-evaluated the SDF posture along the axis. The detachment noted that the SDF had not improved their defensive fighting positions. The most remote and vulnerable positions were not easily defendable, sand berms were small with few sandbags, no trench system existed to protect against vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, and, most concerning, many positions lacked the ability to communicate with their sector commanders.

The detachment advised the SDF on how to improve their security posture, but the sector commanders showed little interest. Instead, they focused intently on radios and installation of radio repeaters. Although ODA 5131 quickly distributed radios, the additional equipment did little to improve communications, since the radios were nearly worthless without repeaters to amplify the signal. Unfortunately, due to competing requirements elsewhere in Syria, the repeaters could not be installed. To improve defensive posture in the short term, the detachment worked with the SDF to increase the number of roving mounted patrols.

Another challenge arose when the detachment established a mortar firing position to contain and deter the Islamic State. While observing an Islamic State engagement zone and scanning for movement in the *wadi* system, the mortar firing position received mortar fire from a concealed enemy position. Two Special Forces soldiers and one Marine suffered injuries, ultimately requiring medevac and treatment by the Special Operations Surgical Team.

A counterfire radar identified the location of the enemy position, which was confirmed by direct observation. But with the detachment focused on escaping the impact area and treating casualties, it was incapable of returning mortar fire. The detachment requested an immediate fire suppression mission from Task Force Thunder, but the French red card holder denied the request. Without the 30-minute ISR scan to ensure no civilians were present, the French red card holder would not approve the fires.

Eventually, an AC-130 gunship arrived and eliminated the Islamic State fighters. But given the unreliability of the French artillery, the AOB repositioned a platoon of U.S. 155-mm howitzers to the border MSS, which proved invaluable to containing the Islamic State along the desert and border axis.

Throughout the planning process, one of the greatest risks to the mission was the death of a U.S. service member. This was an “advise, assist, and enable” mission, so everyone recognized that American fatalities could lead to a U.S. withdrawal.¹⁸ This influenced all planning and operations. During operations, the SDF were always in the lead.

Nevertheless, it was an active combat environment, so the risk could never be completely eliminated. Two weeks after the mortar attack, the Islamic State successfully destroyed an RG-33 (a mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle) belonging to one of our multinational partners with an anti-tank guided missile. Luckily, no one was killed.

To mitigate risk, the detachment practiced good tradecraft by varying its departure time, mission duration, observation locations, and mortar firing positions. During the war in Iraq, some American units became too predictable, as they reportedly conducted patrols based on the hours of the dining facility.¹⁹ We sought to avoid that.

By the summer, the SDF had surrounded the Hajin Pocket. But the Islamic State still managed to communicate with the outside world, receive supplies, and smuggle people through the gaps in the

encirclement. Slowly, with effective intelligence analysis, the detachment began to identify locations where the Islamic State managed to slip through. One evening, prior to nightfall, the SDF reported significant vehicular movement at a suspected front crossing point. The detachment responded, establishing a mortar firing position and two observation positions and employing ISR to observe the area. As the detachment established its positions, the SDF engaged a large group of dismounted Islamic State fighters. ODA 5131 maneuvered quickly to support the SDF with direct and indirect fires.

Timely and accurate SDF reporting resulted in a direct engagement, with the U.S.-supported SDF killing approximately 30 Islamic State fighters who were actively trafficking across the front. After a similar incident two days later, the detachment provided the SDF with hundreds of meters of concertina wire to create obstacles along known crossing points and hinder Islamic State access to dead space.

ODA 5132: reconnaissance, wide area disruption, defense, and clearing operations

Captain Bert Pedrigi, commander of ODA 5132

ODA 5132 was tasked to contain the Islamic State within the Dashisha pocket until clearing operations commenced. The detachment was responsible for the northernmost portion of the AOB's sector, basing from MSS Phenix, northeast of the town of Shaddadi. The detachment spent the first few weeks validating its assessment of the front and meeting with SDF commanders. It was crucial to gather this information to ensure the detachment's efforts and future operations were nested within the overall campaign plan. As the detachment completed its validation, it started to develop courses of action on how to efficiently and effectively accomplish its mission.

Known Islamic State positions were approximately 7 to 10 kilometers from the SDF positions along the front, yet the SDF lacked permission to conduct offensive operations until forces had repositioned from Afrin. As a result, the detachment could not consistently pressure, actively target, or disrupt Islamic State activities. Depending on the allocation of assets, the detachment maintained a 24-hour ISR tactical controller at a strike desk to maintain surveillance, target acquisition, characterize villages within the Dashisha pocket, and sustain situational awareness on Islamic State activity. The detachment conducted limited airstrikes, but without ground operations, the airstrikes alone could not disrupt the enemy.

Lacking the ability to conduct offensive operations, the detachment planned and conducted disruption operations: "a tactical mission task in which a commander integrates direct and indirect fires, terrain, and obstacles to upset an enemy's formation or tempo, interrupt his timetable, or cause enemy forces to commit prematurely or attack in a piecemeal fashion."²⁰ This involved crossing the front and getting within direct fire range of known Islamic State locations.

The cross-front movement and destruction of cache sites and defensive battle positions were designed to disrupt the Islamic State. During planning, it was important to understand, in detail, areas within Islamic State-controlled territory where civilians lived so that civilian casualties could be minimized. This was achieved by requesting additional ISR assets and maintaining a detachment member on the strike desk to identify and record all observed activity.

The SDF commanders wanted to clear the pocket and discussed the situation with the detachment. Using intelligence assessments, targeting locations were prioritized prior to resuming offensive operations. The detachment also attempted limited deception by employing attack helicopters to clear known and suspected Islamic State improvised explosive device locations in areas where we planned to launch the offensive as well in other areas, to confuse Islamic State fighters as to where the primary attack would

originate. The deception worked, as they repositioned high-value weapons systems to the areas where the deception operations occurred.

As deliberate planning continued for cross-front operations—consisting of mortar “raids” and reconnaissance missions—the detachment integrated its newly assigned Marine Corps mortar men by conducting battle drills and rehearsals to ensure the combined element was synchronized. Integration began as soon as the attachment arrived and was maintained throughout the entire deployment. Rehearsals and standard operating procedures would ultimately save lives.

Disruption vignette

In May 2018, after developing a plan and conducting rehearsals, our detachment conducted a cross-front operation. The plan was to establish a 120-mm mortar firing point at the edge of the front, followed by the employment of a forward mortar firing point with an 81-mm mortar tube approximately 3 kilometers in Islamic State territory and a forward observer element that was 1 kilometer deeper. The forward observer element, operating from two vehicles, would consist of me, my Joint Terminal Attack Controller, some other American soldiers, and our SDF partners.

The operation started as planned. We established both mortar firing positions without incident. Soon, we received intelligence that the Islamic State was monitoring the movement of our forward observer element. We subsequently identified Islamic State fighters, vehicles, and weapons in locations corroborated through multiple reports and ISR platforms. We started to engage the Islamic State targets with both direct and mortar fire, while I worked with the Joint Terminal Attack Controller to integrate close air support.

As we were working with a red card holder to approve an airstrike, Islamic State fighters struck the other vehicle with an anti-tank guided missile, injuring the U.S. driver, gunner, and two passengers. The gunner and two passengers suffered only minor injuries, and they continued fighting, but the driver was seriously wounded.

The gunner continued to engage Islamic State positions, while the passengers immediately started treating the driver. I moved our vehicle closer to theirs and tasked the Joint Terminal Attack Controller to utilize the fixed-wing aircraft overhead to do a “show of force” to intimidate our enemy. I also began to call in a 9-line medevac to evacuate the driver.²¹ Rather than dropping bombs, we had to settle for having the aircraft drop altitude and overfly the enemy positions as a “show of force” until the red card holder could approve the strike mission. The Islamic State also fired mortars at our location, with some landing as close as 20 meters away but none inflicting any injuries.

As the commander, I had to resist the urge to directly help with the care of the driver, as it was far more important for me to maintain command and control and get the medevac helicopter to our location. But I had unwavering trust in the individuals with me, and I knew the driver was getting the care he desperately needed.

After a few minutes, we abandoned the destroyed vehicle, loaded everyone on the remaining vehicle, and evacuated the driver to a secure location behind the SDF front. The driver was then transported by helicopter to the forward surgical team located with the AOB.²² I have no doubt that the rehearsals and shared understanding of standard operating procedures saved the life of the driver. Everyone reacted immediately, knew how to help, and knew what to do next to ensure he was transported as fast as possible. No matter the attachment, enabler, or partner, early integration into the team is vital to the mission success and soldiers’ lives.

The strategic corner vignette

During disruption operations, there were three instances when the detachment had to respond to PRF aggression at the strategic corner. On each occasion, the detachment rapidly moved from our MSS to the strategic corner, two hours to our south, to reinforce SDF and coalition positions.

In one particular case, the SDF reported PRF units engaging their positions, but due to chaotic partner force reporting and lack of clarity from unorganized ground forces, U.S. forces could not immediately assist with lethal strikes, as coalition commanders were unable to distinguish PRF from SDF. Within minutes, the detachment was tasked to identify and occupy a position near the SDF battle positions, link up with SDF commanders, delineate and accurately portray where PRF units and SDF units were located, and immediately report to the AOB to facilitate a potential strike on PRF units to deter further movement into SDF-controlled territory.

Within 30 minutes, the detachment started movement. Once in the general area, we confirmed their position and coordinated with SDF liaisons to facilitate the linkup with the local SDF commander. Within 15 minutes of arrival, the commander was at our location. Since the detachment was operating in the northeast, I had never met the commander. He was visibly upset and overwhelmed and immediately started yelling at me. I was instantly thrust into a heated conversation about why the United States was not assisting the SDF and how SDF soldiers were dying because of our lack of action. I was able to calm tensions and explain that I recently arrived to provide support but that support required detailed information on the location of his forces so that coalition forces would not strike the wrong target.

As soon as he realized I needed information to support him and his soldiers, he immediately called his front commanders to get reports and provide us an accurate picture of SDF locations. I also informed him to have all SDF soldiers remain in their confirmed locations, as that would assist us in distinguishing forces through ISR. While maintaining a calm demeanor, explaining my intentions and requirements clearly, we were able to develop a shared understanding as to why this information was so crucial. Once we obtained the requisite information and I was confident in it, I relayed the information to our AOB, which coordinated an airstrike that ultimately stopped the PRF attack.

After this incident, four more battalion-level SDF commanders, along with the regional SDF commander, arrived to question our interests. The SDF commanders were upset due to the length of time required to strike the PRF, as they believed this delay led to the deaths of multiple SDF soldiers. While I could not refute the claim, I had to convince them that protecting the SDF was in U.S. interests and explained that we did not want to strike the wrong positions and inadvertently kill SDF soldiers, which had happened in the past. This conversation lasted for over an hour and became tense at times.

I made several efforts to maintain rapport and credibility. This included demonstrating empathy toward their loss, acknowledging the delay of action, and continuing to explain that the SDF had the full support of the United States. Had I insisted on making excuses, it likely would have negatively impacted our relationship and U.S. interests in the region. In the end, we maintained a positive relationship with the SDF and came to understand the requisite information to receive more timely support.

Offensive operations

As offensive operations to clear Dashiha neared, the detachment continued to develop the plan with SDF commanders. The plan constantly changed based on available assets and Islamic State activity. The SDF regularly repositioned forces in anticipation of the operation. Despite our recommendations, the SDF commanders decided to clear from north to south. We had conducted multiple operations in the north to deceive the Islamic State into thinking the attack would commence from the north, so we had recommend attacking from the south.

The SDF also decided to establish a second command and control node, which we assessed as unnecessary. This entire process was frustrating, but at the end of the day, the detachment positioned itself in the best locations to support the partner force. We provided a forward element to control the 120-mm mortars and close air support, and we co-located an element with the senior SDF commander to refine their plan and provide a 24-hour strike desk to conduct strikes in support of the clearing operations.

In addition to concurrent planning with the SDF, the detachment also worked with other coalition partners. They brought capabilities that proved vital for intelligence collection and linguistic capability: one team leader was fluent in French, English, and Arabic. Nevertheless, working with coalition partners also brought challenges: the most significant was incompatible technology. Our coalition partners used a different system to battle-track and report to the AOB, despite being required to report the exact same way. To fix this, the AOB resourced them with commercial off-the-shelf equipment.

During clearing operations, I spent a majority of my time at the SDF headquarters, talking with the SDF commander and the forward element. I also prioritized reporting to the AOB to ensure they had an accurate picture of the battle. Prior to conducting operations, I emphasized three priorities to the detachment: efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency. Transparency proved to be essential, as many requests for information came from a multitude of coalition units. Having the information up front was key to ensuring the forward element could focus on the fight.

When I was with the forward element, I spent a majority of my time with the front commander who controlled the maneuver elements. I advised him on how to conduct his operations and lethal strikes in support of the operations and ensured proper battle tracking. All lethal activities had to be deconflicted to avoid any friendly fire incidents. This required a great deal of tactical patience, but it paid dividends. As the SDF cleared the Islamic State from the Dasheda area, we did not inflict any friendly fire casualties on our SDF partners.

CAT 613: governance and influence in irregular warfare

Captain David P. Kearns, commander of CAT 613

CATs are a critical part of the Army SOF enterprise and are responsible for conducting civil affairs operations:

Actions planned, executed, and assessed by civil affairs forces that enhance awareness of and manage the interaction with the civil component of the operational environment; identify and mitigate underlying causes of instability within civil society; or involve the application of functional specialty skills normally the responsibility of civil government.²³

The teams are often charged with supporting a breadth of operations, including shaping, combat, and stability operations. Given the small size of civil affairs elements in a given area of operations—in this case, two to three teams consisting of four soldiers each—a CAT must be prepared to support these various operations across a large geographical space, often simultaneously.

This section provides an example of how CATs wield influence and utilize civil affairs operations to support broader military objectives. Specifically, it will cover the use of civil affairs operations during offensive and stability operations. Moreover, it will discuss the importance of consolidating gains, which is critical to turning tactical success into victory at the operational and strategic levels.

Task organization

When CAT 613 arrived in Syria, the team was immediately paired with a tactical psychological operations team. In addition to allowing the team to meet the minimum force requirement of six U.S. personnel for operations outside of a firebase, this pairing enabled coordination and synchronization of all aspects of

governance, information, and influence capabilities toward the campaign. The team consisted of six U.S. personnel: four civil affairs soldiers (team leader, team sergeant, civil reconnaissance soldier who also served as our lead engineer and communicator, and medic) and two psychological operations soldiers.

Additionally, the team frequently collaborated with other elements, including ODAs; EOD teams; foreign SOF elements; and a variety of other joint, interagency, inter-organizational, and multinational partners to leverage the appropriate personnel and capabilities. Finally, the SDF assigned two liaisons to the team, who were responsible for facilitating the team's movement and operations.

CAT 613 was responsible for the northern half of the AOB's sector, which included the northern half of Dashisha (see Figure 24.4). This area of operations encompassed portions of what the Syrian Kurds consider their traditional homeland, areas that had been liberated from the Islamic State years prior, areas that had only recently been liberated, and areas still under Islamic State control. This required the team to split its efforts between supporting offensive operations while simultaneously leading stability operations. The team primarily partnered with local civil councils, while the tactical psychological operations team mentored and supported local and regional media cells responsible for providing information support to both the civil councils and the SDF.

The AOB designated the combined civil affairs/psychological operations teams as the primary maneuver element in the Green Blob and made them responsible for leading efforts to consolidate gains. Impending offensive operations, however, competed for the team's limited capacity and led to a big decision: how and when to allocate efforts (people, time, equipment, funds, and other elements) across a large area in support of both offensive and stability operations.

Civil Affairs in support of offensive operations

CAT 613 participated in the planning, execution, and transition to offensive operations in Dashisha. Prior to the operation's start, the team participated in the AOB planning while simultaneously preparing the environment for the clearing operation. The team adopted an "outside-in" approach; rather than focusing exclusively on the areas within Islamic State control, the team focused on the recently liberated areas along the periphery. The team sought to ensure that these areas could both absorb the massive influx of people (internally displaced persons as well as fleeing Islamic State fighters and their families) and extend influence, especially security and governance, into enemy-held territory.

As the operation drew near, the team deliberately focused on preparing the surrounding civil councils and population centers to incorporate liberated villages and populations, including preparing them for the expected food, water, and medical requirements. Additionally, the team established relationships with other U.S. government agencies and non-governmental organizations to coordinate efforts.

Working with the SDF, the team identified several active and potential crossing points along the front line and helped establish permanent and mobile screening sites. This allowed the team to improve security while gaining access to civilians who had been under Islamic State control. The information collected at these sites increased operational understanding within Islamic State-held territory, helped the AOB refine its ground tactical plan, and hastened transition to stability operations. The sites also allowed the attached psychological operations team to disseminate messages by using local civilians crossing into enemy-held territory to spread information among the populace.

Once the SDF's clearing operation began, the team transitioned to a follow-and-support role, following roughly 36–48 hours behind and conducting civil reconnaissance and civil engagement in newly liberated areas. This allowed the team to gain the most updated understanding of the situation, both in liberated and enemy-held areas, and bring resources to help consolidate the SDF's gains.

During this time, the team worked closely with the civil councils, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and several local non-governmental organizations to extend the reach of governance and essential services (which consisted primarily of humanitarian aid in the early phases) to the newly liberated

Figure 24.4 CAT 613 area of operations, April–October 2018.

region. Although this improved the lives of those who had recently been under the control of the Islamic State, the primary purpose was to quickly stabilize the area under SDF control.

Numerous factions competed for influence and control in the region, which was historically undergoverned. The Syrian regime, Russia, Iran, and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units all had, or desired, some degree of influence in Dashisha, and it was crucial for the SDF to be the first to establish control in the newly liberated area. Having governance, security, and humanitarian aid ready for injection into the vacuum was critical to ensuring the Islamic State could not return and other adversarial actors could not fill the gap they left behind.

Once the clearing operations completed, the team began transitioning to stability operations. In some cases, this transition occurred while offensive operations continued deeper in the enemy-held pocket. During this phase, the team, using the information gained while conducting civil reconnaissance, worked with the adjacent civil councils to create lasting security, governance, and stability in the area. While the first two phases of the clearing operation—preparation and execution—were heavily focused on the “outside” portion of the “outside-in” approach, stability operations were primarily focused inside the former Islamic State pocket.

During this time, the team and its partner force began work to establish new civil councils, transitioned from short-term humanitarian aid to longer-term stability assistance (e.g., clinics, bridge repairs, water infrastructure), and, alongside an ODA, began working with the force that would be responsible for securing the area, including the border with Iraq.

Governance and influence in support of stability operations

One particular district within CAT 613’s responsibility, Marqadah, was liberated from the Islamic State in November 2017. After liberation, recovery of the district, including its administrative center, had stagnated as the counter-Islamic State offensive redirected resources elsewhere.

Six months later, when CAT 613 arrived, Marqadah showed little sign of progress: rubble, closed stores and clinics, and old and new Islamic State graffiti were easily visible throughout the towns. In line with its outward appearance, both the SDF and the locals claimed that Islamic State “sleepers” were prevalent throughout the area, threatening those who worked with coalition forces, attacking isolated SDF checkpoints, emplacing improvised explosive devices, and reporting on SDF and coalition movements—a particular problem given the upcoming offensive operations in Dashisha and Hajin.

Furthermore, established governance did not yet exist, which left a vacuum easily exploitable by hostile and adversarial actors. Although the SDF had seized the district with SOF support, it was clear that we had not yet consolidated the gains. The area remained unstable and rife for exploitation, civilians were scared and unwilling to hedge their bets on the coalition, and the Islamic State maintained the ability to disrupt future military operations. Having identified these issues, the team, working with multinational partners, planned and executed stability operations to create enduring security and governance in the area.

The initial priority for the team was to work with the provincial council to establish a plan for stability operations in the district. The team emphasized the need for the council to increase prioritization and resources for the area. At the time, the provincial council was governing remotely, having only recently established an “Emergency Services Committee” that was responsible for laying the groundwork for governance in the area. This body was both geographically and demographically separated from the population, as it was composed of Kurds and Arabs from towns further north. The council had a plan for the district, but for a variety of reasons—including a lack of funding and resources—it was not moving quickly.

The team began working closely with the members of the Emergency Services Committee to implement their governance and stability plans. The committee would serve as the primary executors while the team helped to provide the needed funding, resources, and security mechanisms. To support the process, the team established inroads into the local tribes—an effort the SDF and councils were often hesitant to

do—to maximize local knowledge and ensure all key influencers were involved in the process. Ultimately, all parties agreed to expedite the establishment of a Marqadah Civil Council, which stood up approximately four months later.

The team implemented several projects and programs, alongside the civil council and SDF, to ensure security and enhance stability in the district. Unlike the team's initial projects during offensive operations, which primarily consisted of satisfying the immediate humanitarian assistance needs of the population, the activities in this district were all focused toward achieving enduring stability effects. They included renovating the council's headquarters, establishing a clinic, delivering potable water, and providing heavy equipment for rubble removal.

Additionally, the attached psychological operations team worked with the SDF to identify and remove Islamic State graffiti throughout the district. Finally, both the CAT and one ODA worked extensively with the local SDF to provide security for the region—including conducting combined presence patrols—to build their capacity and increase local confidence in the SDF and civil council. Whatever the project, program, or activity, the goal was to establish conditions favorable to U.S. and partner force interests and shape the environment to be untenable to hostile forces and adversarial actors.

AOB lessons learned

Emphasize mission command

Mission command is the Army's philosophy of command and control. It is built on trust, communicating clear commander intent and shared understanding of the end-state.²⁴ The AOB executed successful mission command by ensuring all of the detachments understood the big picture and how they contributed to it. The AOB commander conducted video teleconferences five times a week, and the detachment commanders communicated directly for issues that crossed their sectors and shared resources to achieve the mission.

The video teleconference forced all players to talk about developments in their respective areas of operation. This, in turn, facilitated cross-talk and created a shared understanding among the various elements under the AOB umbrella. Shared understanding created the conditions for mutual trust. Trust is the bedrock that drives successful operations and enables decisions to be pushed down to the lowest level, which creates strategic effect.

Big tent leadership makes effective teams

The AOB did not have the luxury of conducting pre-mission training with all its supporting assets (artillery or medics, for example); the first time it saw many of these assets was when it conducted the relief in place with the previous AOB. Thus, the AOB had to quickly incorporate these elements, which constituted close to 75% of the AOB's in-country personnel, into the team. As a part of relief in place and throughout the deployment, the AOB and its detachments conducted training with the elements to ensure everyone understood how to fight together.

ODA lessons learned

Find opportunity in chaos

The SDF's pivot toward Afrin completely derailed offensive operations. SDF partners were frustrated and upset that coalition forces would not intervene in Afrin to counter Turkish aggression and protect Kurdish families. In the midst of emotional turmoil and rough relations at the tactical level, including an incident where a Kurdish soldier threatened a detachment member, the detachment managed to take advantage of

the tactical pause to consolidate previous gains and prepare for future offensive operations. Establishing a base the size of Green Village is not an easy task for a detachment, but the tactical pause allowed for a deliberate occupation and expansion that facilitated successful offensive operations. There is opportunity in chaos—even if it is just a tactical pause.

Know the limitations of allied and partner forces

The ultimate purpose of the detachment's varying missions was to destroy, or set conditions to destroy, the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate. When conducting operations with allied or partner forces, even straightforward purposes often disintegrate into a murky pool of competing objectives, restrictive rules of engagement, and diverging tactics. To overcome the most ambiguous situations, commanders must understand and accept that partners may have a different way of operating and must have a thorough understanding of their partner's capabilities, limitations, restrictions, and desired end state.

Constantly assess

Partner force assessments should be conducted continuously and require an active effort to execute properly. Assessing a culminating exercise or event is an initial, not a final, assessment. They should occur more often, during less glamorous activities. Simple observations—such as how many fighters were in a defensive position, the ethnicity of fighters, the age of fighters, and type of weapons present—indicated the priority the SDF placed on different locations or missions. A small change from eight fighters per position to six may seem small, yet when multiplied across 100 positions, that seemingly insignificant change indicated a significant reprioritization.

CAT lessons learned

Irregular warfare is about influence

Joint U.S. doctrine defines irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over relevant population(s).”²⁵ It is more than “hearts and minds.” Real influence is about successfully mobilizing a population in your desired direction. This requires creative application of lethal and non-lethal capabilities at the tactical and operational levels. It also requires participants to leverage the knowledge and capabilities of people and organizations outside of the direct chain of command, including members of other U.S. agencies, foreign governments, non-governmental organizations, local security forces, and civilians. Lethal and non-lethal efforts should always be mutually supporting, with a goal of influencing all relevant actors.

Consolidate gains

Consolidating gains translates short-term tactical and operational achievements into enduring conditions consistent with the desired end state. It is also one of the most challenging components. To succeed, leaders must re-evaluate their focus and priorities throughout the operation.

In Syria, successful clearing operations did not mean the work was complete in liberated areas; the Islamic State still maintained an underground presence, and significant threats to stability remained. As a result, the ultimate end state had not been achieved. CAT 613 applied the “outside-in” approach to consolidate gains. This involved focusing more attention on the liberated areas than the Islamic State-controlled areas. Not only did this help to establish desired conditions in the “green” (friendly-controlled area), but it also had the natural effect of supporting operations in the “red” (enemy-controlled area). This helped

hasten the consolidation of gains in new areas because it positioned partners to project influence before, during, and after offensive operations. Regardless of the method, consolidation of gains is a military necessity. It is the only way to tie a series of winning battles into a winning war.

Understand how a partner force operates: do not try to mirror image

When conducting irregular warfare, indigenous partners bring a level of local knowledge and networks that far exceed the advising force. Often, they have been fighting for years or decades. It is probable that they have already developed their own way of doing business (fighting, governing, and messaging). The goal is to influence their behavior, as opposed to completely revamping their methods.

In Syria, the governing structures, networks, relationships, and underlying ideologies were set in place long before the civil war began. CAT 613's job was to assist the SDF in improving their legitimacy while simultaneously influencing their behavior to more closely align with U.S. interests. Rather than overhauling their systems or methods, the CAT tapped into their existing knowledge and structures while providing them the necessary resources, much of which they lacked. The mutually beneficial nature of the relationship helped the CAT to focus its partnership toward its shared end state. That said, the CAT's ability to provide something that its partners needed and lacked (funding and resources) gave it leverage, enabling the CAT to wield influence. In irregular warfare, influencing partners is as important as influencing the population and the enemy.

Notes

- 1 Operation Inherent Resolve was the U.S. military's operational name for its mission to defeat the Islamic State.
- 2 "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," *Wilson Center*, October 28, 2019, www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state.
- 3 ODAs are also known as Special Forces A Teams or detachments. A detachment consists of 12 Special Forces soldiers, or "Green Berets": the commander (an officer), an assistant detachment commander (a warrant officer), a team sergeant, an intelligence sergeant, two weapons sergeants, two engineering sergeants, two communications sergeants, and two medical sergeants.
- 4 Rukimini Callimachi, "Fight to Retake Last ISIS Territory Begins," *New York Times*, September 11, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/world/middleeast/isis-syria.html.
- 5 Map created using Google Maps.
- 6 An enabler is "an organization or capability that supports a particular [course of action] and/or accomplishment of a particular objective." In this case, artillery and other elements were enablers that supported the AOB and its mission to defeat the Islamic State. See Colin Marcum, "How Enablers Shape the Deep Fight for the BCT," *Fires* (March–April 2017).
- 7 Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "Raqqa, ISIS 'Capital,' Is Captured, U.S.-Backed Forces Say," *New York Times*, October 17, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/17/world/middleeast/isis-syria-raqqa.html.
- 8 "Russia: Syria Government Forces Now on East Bank of Euphrates River," *Reuters*, September 15, 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-euphrates/russia-syria-government-forces-now-on-east-bank-of-euphrates-river-idUSKCN1BQ2FQ.
- 9 Zeynep Yekeler, *Understanding Turkey's Afrin Operation* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018).
- 10 Liz Sly, "Kurds Pull Back From ISIS Fight in Syria, Saying U.S. 'Let Us Down,'" *Washington Post*, March 6, 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/world/kurds-pull-back-from-isis-fight-in-syria-say-they-are-let-down-by-us/2018/03/06/3fd2c2ca-2173-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd_story.html.
- 11 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and US Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *New York Times*, May 24, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html.
- 12 MREs, or meals ready-to-eat, are self-contained, individual field rations packaged in small plastic bags.
- 13 The artillery platoon was deployed to a static location without its trucks, making shooting and moving very difficult. The AOB operations sergeant was tasked with finding the equipment to move the artillery after shooting counterfire and around the battlefield to best support the operations.

- 14 The golden hour is the hour immediately following traumatic injury in which medical treatment to prevent irreversible internal damage and optimize the chance of survival is most effective.
- 15 Map created using Google Maps.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Contain is “a tactical mission task that requires the commander to stop, hold, or surround enemy forces or to cause them to center their activity on a given front and prevent them from withdrawing any part of their forces for use elsewhere.” Containment allows an enemy to reposition within the designated geographical area, whereas fixing an enemy does not. Geographic terms or time may express the limits of the containment. See Department of the Army, *Terms and Military Symbols*, ADP 1–02 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2018), 1–22.
- 18 Eric Schmitt, Ben Hubbard, and Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Attack in Syria Kills 4 Americans, Raising New Worries About Troop Withdrawal,” *New York Times*, January 16, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/01/16/world/middleeast/isis-attack-syria-troops.html.
- 19 Brandon Colas, “Game Theory, Predictability and Route Selection,” *Infantry* 98, no. 3 (2009): 14–15; Liam Collins, e-mail to co-author, October 2, 2020.
- 20 Department of the Army, *Terms and Military Symbols*, 1–32.
- 21 A “9-line” MEDEVAC request is a standardized report to simplify and communicate injuries and pick up site information to facilitate rapid medical evacuation. See Eric Sof, “What Is a 9-Line MEDEVAC and Easy Procedures to Call It,” *Spec Ops*, March 25, 2020, <https://special-ops.org/what-is-a-9-line-medevac-and-how-to-properly-call-it/>.
- 22 All individuals have since recovered from their injuries.
- 23 Department of the Army, *Terms and Military Symbols*, 1–16.
- 24 Department of the Army, *Mission Command*, ADRP 6–0 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2012).
- 25 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Special Operations*, JP 3–05 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014), II–1.