

July 7th, 2014.

I have never known things to be more dangerous. I said these same words just a few days ago, but since then things out here have gotten even worse. Three days ago the Russians launched a series of attacks on several critical locations around Lebanon. All these facilities were occupied by the UNSFL and LAF, and targets included Beirut IAP, along with several smaller airstrips and ports. The attacks are believed to have been made by a combination of Russian special forces and paratroopers, supported by a sizable contingent of Kazan Group soldiers. The attack at Beirut was an audacious one, with Russian transport aircraft landing on the runway to deploy light armoured vehicles in support of the attack, although this ultimately failed, thanks to close air support provided by US carrier based aircraft.

So why did the Russians take this dangerous step? Well we're still not sure of the exact reasons but we strongly suspect the announcement of more US troops arriving into Lebanon triggered pre-emptive action from Russia. The UNSFL presence in Lebanon has already clearly been an issue for Russian plans in Syria and Lebanon and it's most likely that Russia wanted to act before the situation tipped dramatically further against them.

We also saw the Russians attack the Truman and Stennis strike groups with both drones and anti-ship missiles, and although these attacks were easily repelled they were highly disruptive to our carrier operations - which was probably the point. It's again concerning however that Russian drones were able to penetrate the strike group's airspace with ease, a mystery that's yet to be solved. RAF Akrotiri, the principal air base supporting operations in Lebanon and Syria was also attacked. This was a more serious attack, which Akrotiri was less equipped to repel. A number of aircraft on the ground were destroyed, along with a number of hardened shelters. Thankfully there were no casualties - a small miracle given the scale of the attack. We were caught up in all this activity, first diverting towards Akrotiri and then Paphos as the Russian attacks spread. We were well looked after by the Cypriots at their military airbase adjoining Paphos airport, and made the short trip back to the Truman the next day.

With everything going on, we've been kept really busy the past two days, with enhanced CAPs being flown by the air wing and more of us sitting on alert 5 and alert 30. Thankfully the last two days have been relatively calm, and although there have been isolated exchanges of fire between ground forces and two incidents of Russian SAMs firing on US aircraft, there have been no further serious engagements. Despite the Russian aggression on display they are clearly not stupid and not looking to escalate any further than needed to achieve their goals. Whether this lull allows a diplomatic solution to be reached remains to be seen, although I don't see how the attack on RAF Akrotiri can go unanswered.

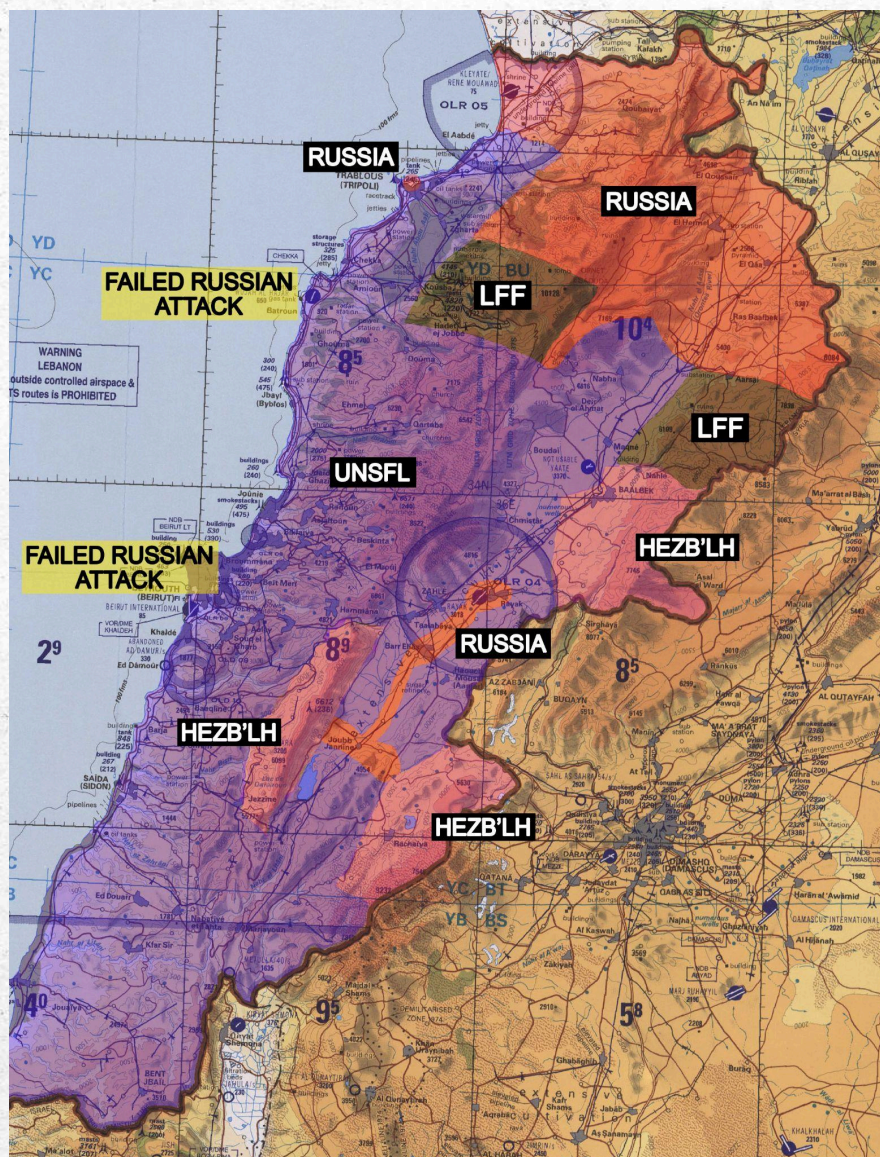
As for diplomacy, the UN general assembly has condemned the Russian attacks on it's peacekeeping force, with the Lebanese government lodging a protest in the UN. The Russians responded with claims the UNSFL is cover for NATO operations in Syria and Lebanon, blaming the US and Israel for provoking wider hostilities in the region by attacking Russian targets in northwest Syria. A UN security council resolution demanding Russia's withdrawal of all military forces from Lebanon was vetoed by Russia, with China also set to abstain. China also appears to be providing significant diplomatic support to Russia, maybe a hint at wider Chinese ambitions in the region.

Since returning from Paphos after the dust storm had dissipated, I've personally flown three CAP missions in the last two days. Both were uneventful. I suspected things might be about to change when a series of briefings were scheduled for today.

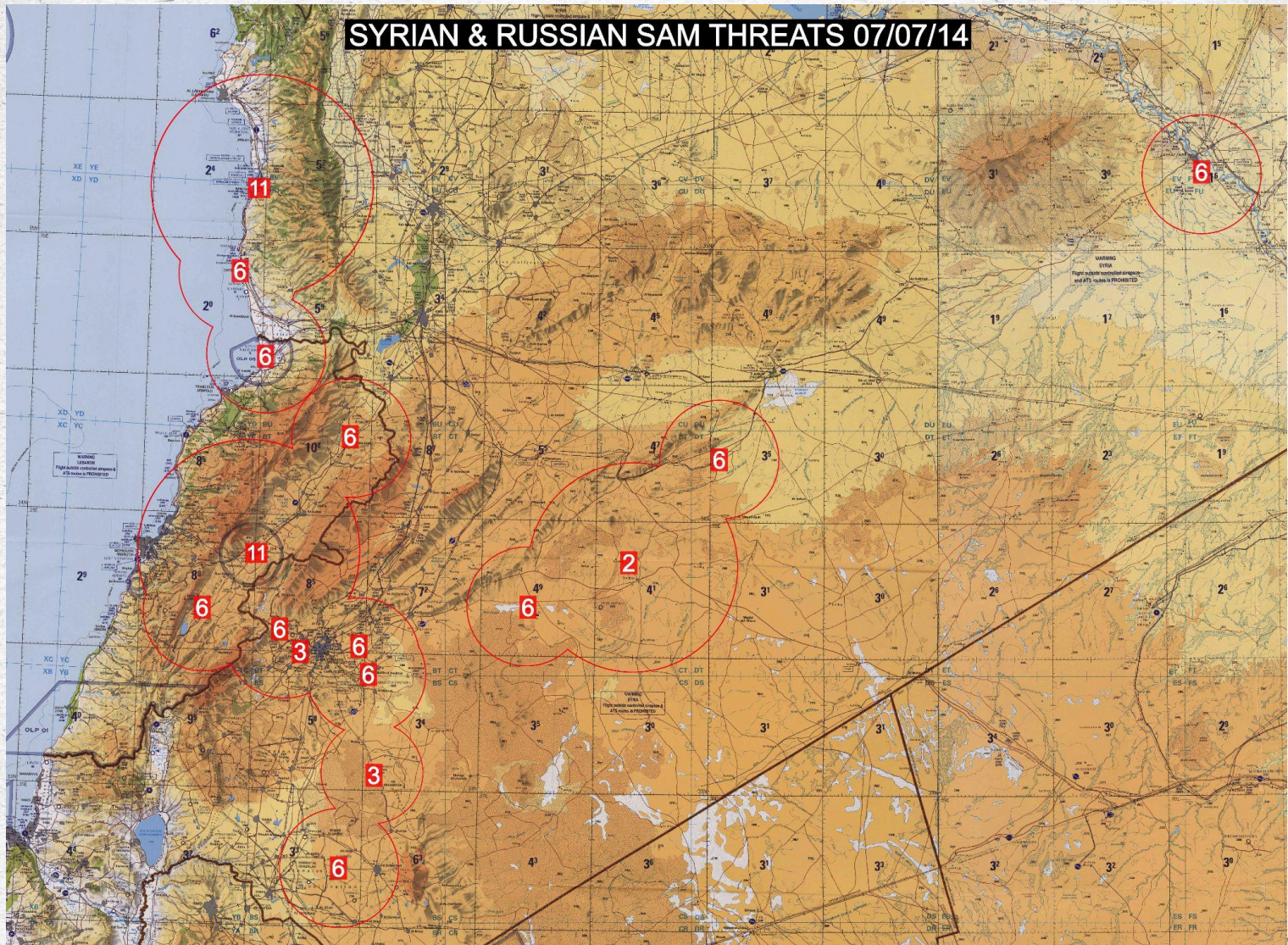
The first of these was the intel brief, held as always by Major Daniels. There was a lot to take in.

The Major began by updating us on the status of Russian and UN forces in Lebanon. The Russians carried out successful airborne attacks in several important locations in Lebanon, with the port at Tripoli, Rayak airport, and the towns of Joub Janine and Bar Elias in the southern Bekaa all now under Russian control. The UN outpost Trashcan Tango was lost during these attacks, with the capture of its garrison, who were released by Russia within 48 hours of their capture and returned to the UN. Russian armoured units also thrust south in the Bekaa, making small gains on the higher ground overlooking the Bekaa Valley. Attacks were also attempted on Rafic Hariri IAP in Beirut and Wujah Al Hajar airbase, both of which were eventually cleared of Russian troops.

The capture of these locations has important ramifications in Lebanon. Joub Janine sits on several main roads, with good connections to Rayak airport as well as all three Hezbollah enclaves in Lebanon. Removing UN forces and linking all these areas together will make the movement of Hezbollah fighters and Russian equipment much easier. This also opens up a new direct ground route to Damascus for Hezbollah and Russia. By taking Rayak, Russia has been able to reinforce the area with heavier equipment and put the UN position in the northern Bekaa Valley under serious pressure - with Russian units now sitting to their front and rear - and it is now feasible the Russians will attempt to link Rayak with their forces in the north. If this happens then Russia will have direct ground routes all the way from the northwest Syrian region to Damascus and the UN positions in the Bekaa will likely be lost.



By controlling the Bekaa Valley Russia has also been able to expand an air defense umbrella across Lebanon - protecting Hezbollah from Israeli attacks, denying western air power access to Lebanon and inhibiting any further interference in Russian plans for the region. Over the last 48 hours a number of new Russian SAM sites have been detected, with an SA-11 deployed at Rayak and an SA-6 near Joub Janine. Additional air defences are also present in the northwest, with further SA-6s and SA-11s deployed in this area.



Major Daniels next turned to an analysis of Russia's strategic goals and the assessment on their future intentions.

Russia looks intent on propping up the Syrian government by any means necessary. Syrian offensives into SDF held areas have not gone well and the Syrian military is in a dire state, with serious shortages in both equipment and manpower, shortfalls that have been supplemented so far with Russian and Kazan units. Russia has also been attempting to re-arm and re-vitalise Hezbollah in order to bring fresh support back into the Syrian theater. Lebanon offers Russia with new opportunities in the region, if the Syrian government was to fall then Russia would lose access to it's only Mediterranean naval base and it's only airbase in the region. Russia may well be looking to sway Lebanese politics to it's side in order to hedge against a failure in Syria.

The expanding US and UN presence in Lebanon runs counter to these goals, as do Israeli attempts to stem the flow of weapons to Hezbollah, with Israel asserting that a strong Hezbollah will always be a threat to Israel. The Russians up to now have been attempting to make their presence felt in Lebanon, and deter the west from expanding operations here for fear of risking an escalation with Russia.

The planned deployment of further US troops to Lebanon to assist with the deteriorating security situation has appeared to trigger a Russian escalation and the attacks we saw three days ago.

The Russian attacks are assessed to have three goals. The first goal was to seize key transport nodes in Lebanon to prevent their use by US forces and conversely allow the Russians to use them instead. The second goal was to establish A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) over most of Lebanon, northwest Syria and Damascus. A newly sited anti-ship missile position at Tripoli's port appears to support this argument.



The third goal was to disrupt our aerial response, with the attacks on the strike group and on RAF Akrotiri designed to disrupt operations at these sites. This is particularly important as the Turks will still not allow combat operations into Syria and Lebanon from Incirlik, and Jordan does not wish to antagonise Russia by allowing further offensive combat operations against Russia from its bases.

The next stages of Russia's plan are not yet clear, but a safe assumption would be the ramping up of combat operations in Syria, with a freer Russian hand to bring heavy equipment in from the ports in northwest Syria and Lebanon and the denial of safe airspace in which NATO aircraft can operate. This would allow Syria and Russia more leeway to pursue the conflict in any way they wish, with the threat of attack by western aircraft diminished.

Continuing, Daniels covered the analysis of Russia's future stance against the west in Syria and Lebanon. Up to now Russia's hostile actions have been with a strategic goal in mind, now initial progress has been made against this goal, the expectation - backed up by the last 48 hours of relative calm - is that Russia will seek to hold it's gains, but not seek further conflict with the west through further expansion. Russia is however expected to vigorously defend the territory it has seized. This puts the US in a difficult position, to do nothing empowers Russian aggression in Lebanon, but to take action will likely serve to escalate things further. Russia is likely banking on the west's reluctance for escalation to work in their favour. The US has not yet deployed additional forces to Lebanon, if they still attempt to or not has not yet been decided.

Daniels next turned to the Russian air force, who were notably absent during our recent missions. Intelligence has been received to suggest that in order to protect Russian gains in Lebanon, Russian high command is strongly considering letting the air force off it's leash and allowing it to participate in defensive operations. Several flights of Russian Flankers have also been observed deploying to Syrian airbases. We know that politics has been at play in the background with the Russian air force, and if these reports are correct then we may be about to see a serious shift in Russian policy. Of course this could also be information that has been deliberately leaked in order to provide further deterrence against western retaliation. Our stance towards Russian aircraft should remain cautious, and our ROE remains to return fire only. The use of Russian drones in attacks on the strike group and Akroriti was the final topic of the intel brief. It is suspected that a seaborne launch platform is being used, given the proximity to the carrier that these drones are first being detected. No further information is available on this so far, but we have been asked to keep an eye out for suspicious activity by ships in the Med.

Once the intel briefing had concluded we had an hour of downtime, where conversation in the squadron inevitably turned to speculation about the United States' next steps. Our opinions were unanimous, no-one wanted further conflict, but we all knew deep down that the Russian attacks had to be responded to. Nomad was of a particularly strong opinion, that the 'escalate to de-escalate' doctrine we heard so much about should be adopted by the US. We have the capability to hit Russia hard, so hard they won't get back up. Some of us disagreed with that, after all that is the scenario that Russia's doctrine exists for - a nuclear escalation to force us to back down. It was a sobering thought and shows just how delicate a tightrope we're walking right now.

After an hour of vigorous debate Link arrived to deliver his briefing. Taking the podium he began to speak.

"Good afternoon Red Devils, as you know the situation here in the middle east is in unprecedented territory. The US and our allies are facing an ever escalating threat from Russia and Russian proxy forces in Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Cyprus and out here in the Mediterranean. This Russian aggression will not be tolerated."

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, this sounded like it was going to be serious brief. Link continued.

"Tomorrow morning, US and UK forces will respond with a major - but proportional - attack on Russian facilities in northwest Syria and Lebanon. These attacks will target Russian staging areas for incoming military equipment and ammunition stockpiles, along with the newly deployed ASM site at the port of Tripoli. We are holding short of targeting troop concentrations or command posts at this time, in the hope that we can hit the Russians hard enough to cripple their ability to capitalise on their gains in Lebanon, but with minimal loss of life."

“This is the target list.” Link clicked a slide onto the briefing screen.



“There are four targets. The staging area at Rayak - aka ‘Roadhouse’ - this will be targeted by cruise missiles from the Truman strike group. Hornets from VFA-34, under the callsign ‘Vulture 3’ will target the staging area at Rene Mouawad airstrip - codeword ‘Kaleidoscope’. Next, a flight of British Tornados, callsign ‘Bull 1’, will destroy the ASM site at Tripoli. Finally, we will be targeting the staging area at Bassel Al Assad airbase, otherwise known as Hijack.”

“We will be supplying two two-ships to the attack on Hijack. Assignments will be Flair and Slick as Devil 1 and Steep and Soprano as Devil 2.”

“In support of the attack, we will be putting up DCA, SEAD and EW flights from both the Stennis and Truman. TOT for Hijack is 03:56Z, with a vul window of 15 minutes, ending 04:11Z. During this window a number of decoys will also be launched at the targets to wear down the SHORAD and support the EW and SEAD efforts.”

Having outlined the mission for us, Link began to brief each flight's mission in more detail.

Our scheduled launch time is 03:25Z, good weather is expected all through tomorrow morning so we anticipate case 1 conditions throughout the day.

Once airborne I will rendezvous with Soprano at waypoint 1 before we push as a two ship towards waypoint two. All Devil flights have been assigned an altitude block of 20-25,000 feet during our transit. As we transit across the Med enroute for waypoint two we will check in on Strike 1. A backup frequency 'Strike 2' has also been supplied.

We will go feet dry at waypoint two, the requirement to use Lima Alpha and Bravo has been suspended following the Russian SAM deployment. From waypoint two we will follow our flight plan east through Lebanon and then north through Syria and on towards waypoint six. This route has been planned to thread between multiple threats, exploiting where we assess there to be small gaps in the missile umbrella. Although Russia has deployed a number of new SAMs they still lack the numbers to completely blanket the area, especially during our electronic attack efforts. A direct route to the target over the sea was considered and rejected as the lack of any terrain cover and the presence of Russian ships such as the Velikiy to the west of the target makes this a highly unattractive proposition.

At waypoint six we will turn west and begin our attack run, delivering two JSOWs apiece to our targets in a standoff attack.



Our targets will be the ammunition storage bunkers and weapons depots at the airbase. I will target DMPI 3, and Soprano DMPI 4, with Devil 1 taking DMPIs 1 and 2.

Our TOT for waypoint five is 03:56Z. We will have a fifteen minute vul period from this time during which the SEAD flight 'Razor 1' will be on station to suppress the SA-10 adjacent to Al Assad. Upon our go signal, Razor will begin their attack on the SA-10, 'Knight 4' flight will also release air-launched decoys at Al Assad, with the intent of drawing off the two SA-15s protecting the site. The SA-10 poses the biggest threat to our mission and will therefore be likely to suck up all available SEAD support, as a result we also be carrying one HARM each to aid with self protection. During the vul window Spartan 1 will perform a standoff jam against Hijack from the west, with Spartan 2 performing a second standoff jam from the east.

Once we have delivered our weapons we will flow back through the same waypoints to go feet dry at waypoint 2 and push back to Mother. Due to the increased threat from Russia and their potent surface to air threat at sea, we have moved our Shell tanker track west of Cyprus. Texaco has moved north to operate over northern Syria.

Two flights of Hornets, 'Viking 1' and 'Viking 2', will be on a CAP station over the Med to provide DCA as required during the operation.

Red Crown's altitude restrictions remain in place for our return to Mother, the assigned altitude for tomorrow is 23,500 feet.

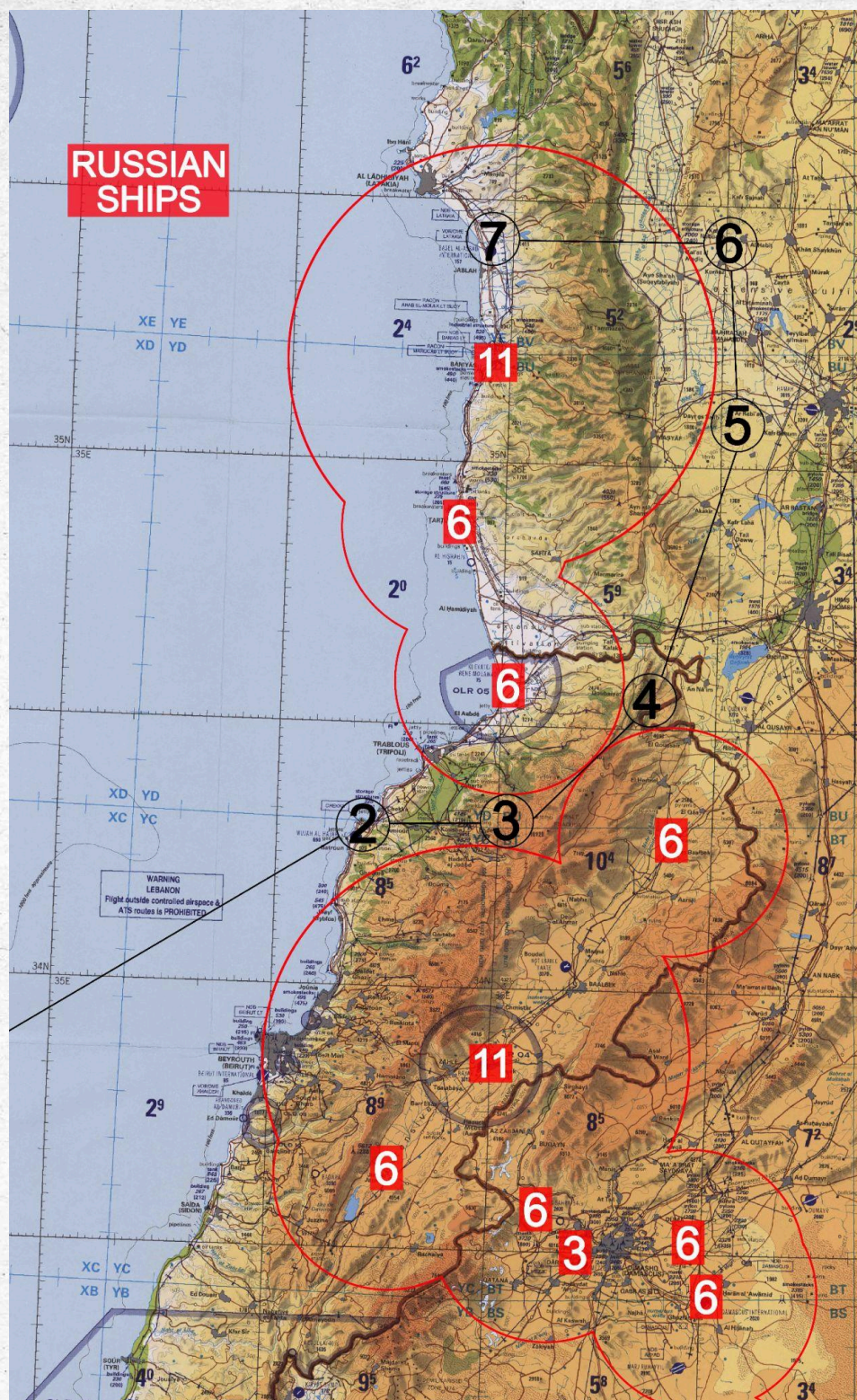
Bullseye is set for Hijack.

My loadout for this mission will be two AGM-154C JSOWs, along with one HARM. We will also be carrying two additional AIM-120s to normal, for a total of three AIM-120s and two AIM-9Xs. This gives us a potent self-escort capability against both surface based and air based threats. Total aircraft weight will be 48,160lb. Bingo fuel from the target area is 5,800lb, which will allow us enough fuel to make the longer journey back through our ingress route.

Our divert will be Ramat David, with a minimum divert fuel of 1,900lb.

Turkey has categorically denied the US the use of Turkish airspace for combat operations against Russia so we should take care not to violate Turkish airspace north of the target.

The threat picture for this mission is severe, but with correct execution we can minimise the danger to our aircraft. Care should be taken on our target ingress and egress to thread between the threat rings in Lebanon, and in northwest Syria we should ensure we maintain our distance from Hijack, where SA-10, SA-11 and SA-15 all pose a threat. We know from our previous attack on X-Ray that the mountains east of Al Assad contain a variety of AAA and SHORAD threats as well. We have of course also used this attack route before, it offers better protection than the alternatives but we still worry that Russian might expect another attack from this direction so the highest state of vigilance should be maintained. The threat of Russian air force intervention is also the most severe we've seen, so we should be alert to the threat of Mig-29, Mig-31 or Su-27.



The briefing then concluded and we all retired to spend the rest of the day rehearsing and preparing for the mission. As I did so I kept finding my mind drifting to recent events, and the dangers we all face right now. These really are unprecedented times and things still show no sign of slowing down, we always knew the danger of slipping into a confrontation with Russia over Syria was a possibility, but deep down I never expected that the US or Russia would allow it to come to this. To be in an actual shooting war with Russia - at least over Syria - is a crazy situation. I hope we can navigate a way out of it soon, the implications of failing to do so are keeping me awake at night.