

Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on U.S.-Russia Video Conference

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The Department of Defense today held a video conference co-chaired by Acting Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs Elissa Slotkin and Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, director, J-5, Strategic Plans and Policy on the Joint Staff, with Russian Ministry of Defense counterparts. The video conference was held to discuss airstrikes conducted by Russian forces on June 16 on the At-Tanf border garrison, striking Syrian opposition forces conducting counter-ISIL operations in the area. This extraordinary session was convened under the auspices of the Safety of Flight Memorandum of Understanding, an arrangement between the counter-ISIL coalition and Russian Federation to maintain safety in the air space over Syria.

Department officials expressed strong concerns about the attack on the coalition-supported counter-ISIL forces at the At-Tanf garrison, which included forces that are participants in the cessation of hostilities in Syria, and emphasized that those concerns would be addressed through ongoing diplomatic discussions on the cessation of hostilities. Regarding safety, department officials conveyed that Russia's continued strikes at At-Tanf, even after U.S. attempts to inform Russian forces through proper channels of on-going coalition air support to the counter-ISIL forces, created safety concerns for U.S. and coalition forces.

Department officials requested Russian responses to address those concerns. The two sides reiterated the need to adhere to measures to enhance operational safety and avoid accidents and misunderstandings in the air space over Syria.