Statement Before the

House Committee on Armed Services

Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities

"Department of Defense's Role in Foreign Assistance"

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July 11, 2018

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Chairman Stefanik, Ranking Member Langevin, and distinguished Members, it is my honor to testify before you today on the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)'s role in foreign assistance.

DoD plays an important *supporting* role in U.S. humanitarian and disaster relief (HA/DR) and stabilization missions as crises and contingencies arise around the globe. With the security environment presenting a range of challenging operational contexts, including fragile or fragmenting states and contested areas, DoD's ability to mobilize resources quickly, secure access, and "jump-start" critical HA/DR and stabilization operations is a key function of the U.S. foreign policy toolkit. In addition, with strategic competitors China and Russia investing across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, reinforcing a network of government and non-government partners at the state, sub-state, and transregional levels through HA/DR and stabilization missions will bolster U.S. efforts to counter coercion and retain access and influence. To this end, the 2018 National Defense Strategy highlights the imperative for DoD to enable U.S. interagency counterparts to advance U.S. influence and interests.[1] DoD *supports* the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in HA/DR and stabilization activities.

Lessons Learned

Every HA/DR and stabilization response provides an opportunity to garner best practices and lessons learned.

Ebola Crisis. Operation UNITED ASSISTANCE, DoD's support to the U.S. government's response to the Ebola crisis in Liberia in 2014 to 2015 is a recent example. The lack of understanding of the operational environment, the unique elements of the mission, unclear roles and responsibilities within DoD and across U.S. government departments and agencies, inadequate planning, and force projection shortfalls presented hurdles early in the process, although the mission was ultimately successful.[2] This response revealed a gap in deploying Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DARTs) to these types of crises. The trigger for forming DARTs is usually a specific incident. However, disease response may not have an obvious triggering moment – as was discovered during the Ebola crisis – leading to questions of what the threshold for response is and who decides. In addition, internal DoD planning for these types of crises had been deprioritized below other national defense priorities, contributing to a lack of understanding of which capabilities could be leveraged across the Department for the response. Insufficient planning time, uncertain conditions, and an ill-defined mission led DoD planners to assume the worst case, which resulted in the movement of substantial equipment that was not needed for the eventual mission. Another outgrowth of the planning shortfalls was the inclination of DoD to centralize decision-making in Washington, encumbering at times the need for the rapid operational decisions in the field. Additionally, DoD's overreliance on classified computer networks to send unclassified information hindered its ability to work quickly and effectively with civilian and non-federal entities. Finally, ten years of deploying to mature operating

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[1] "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf
[2] "Operation UNITED ASSISTANCE: The DoD Response to Ebola in West Africa," Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis (JCOA), January 6, 2016, http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/ebola/OUA_report_jan2016.pdf

locations had degraded some of DoD's capabilities for deploying to austere locations, as was found in Liberia.[3] These lessons have been absorbed by DoD, though challenges may remain in responding to the next health disaster crisis.

Syria Crisis. DoD, and the broader U.S. government, is learning lessons from stability operations in Syria real-time. DoD personnel were first on the ground in northeastern Syria following the counterterrorism fight against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). It could have started initial stability operations to hand over to State and USAID personnel, but it operated within the bounds of its authorities. However, the complexity of the Syrian conflict, with multilayered geopolitical, regional, and local dynamics intertwined and specific to different parts of the country, has hindered post-ISIS clearing stabilization efforts in northeastern Syria and led to the halt of assistance for northwestern and southern Syria. As counterterrorism efforts have shifted to local, Syrian-led stability operations in northeastern Syria, many underlying challenges of the conflict have come to the forefront, not least managing relationships with NATO ally Turkey and Kurdish partners in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), competition with Russia, and deterring Iranian entrenchment.

Working "by, with, and through" local Syrian partners and implementers remains the focus of clearing rubble, removing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and unexploded ordnance (UXO), securing safe passage of civilians back their homes, restarting schools and health care facilities, and restoring water. Expert technical, interagency teams seasoned by years of experience in the field are working to address these challenges in Turkey, Jordan, and on the ground in Syria in places like Manbij and Raqqa. Through the humanitarian-military coordination mechanism in Amman, Jordan, humanitarian organizations can raise concerns about humanitarian access and reports of SDF conduct vis-à-vis Syria civilians. However, Turkish-Kurd tensions have pulled Kurdish partner attention away from stabilization efforts in northeastern Syria. Limitations of an unreliable state-based authority in the Syrian government and the challenges of bolstering credible sub-state civilian and security authorities, are compounded by the political uncertainty of U.S. strategy and commitment in Syria. The Trump Administration's freeze of $200 million in stabilization assistance will also undermine U.S. efforts to enable partners to consolidate security gains. Moreover, expectation gaps among Syrian civilians living in and returning to their homes and the security and services available to them are reportedly looming large. Clearing formidable amounts of rubble, interlaced with IEDs and UXO from ISIS' destruction and Coalition airstrikes, and restoring services are proving to be herculean tasks for the talented but small U.S. stabilization team and humanitarian implementers advising local Syrian partners. ISIS or like-minded groups may well embed or return to exploit these gaps.

In light of these lessons born of recent experience, DoD is adapting its overall policy for stabilization to clarify its core responsibilities as security, basic public order, and the immediate needs of the population, in support of State and USAID operations.

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[3] Ibid.

Challenges

Beyond the lessons and gaps evident in recent HA/DR and stabilization experiences in Liberia and Syria, the U.S. government inevitably is challenged in at least three respects in any HA/DR and stabilization mission. First, given that DoD is often the first U.S. entity on the ground to respond to crises, there may be a U.S. government tendency to frame the overall policy implementation and mission from a national security perspective and crowd out other important foreign policy considerations, such as how these activities fit into a broader strategy for a particular country or region and what second- and third-order effects the intervention may have. This may lead to a preference for primarily leveraging military capabilities for a civilian-led and focused operation and mission creep beyond the original policy and mandate for U.S. forces. Second, growing political and public skepticism of the return on investment for U.S. foreign assistance writ large, given requirements and needs within the United States, may constrain future policy and legislative latitude in conducting HA/DR and stabilization missions. Finally, cuts to the State and USAID budgets will impair their ability to sustain and be responsive to foreign assistance requirements around the globe; DoD in turn may have to work doubly hard not to overreach if the departments it is supporting do not have the manpower or resourcing to perform their leading functions.

Opportunities

DoD benefits from a rigorous, internal lessons learned process that may allow it examine mission history, adapt, and be responsive to future HA/DR and stabilization requirements. In addition, DoD operators have forged robust relationships with USAID and State personnel over the last 15 years through shared HA/DR and stabilization experiences, particularly in the Middle East and Africa, such that there are at least two generations of U.S. military personnel that have a deep sense of the importance of interagency relationships and coordination. This common experience as it relates to stabilization was recently codified in the combined State, USAID, DoD Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) framework, which offers a common definition and set of principles for stabilization for the first time.[4] More broadly, beyond the humanitarian imperative to respond to civilians and partners in need, DoD and the U.S. government benefits from conducting HA/DR and stabilization missions in several respects:

- engendering trust and fostering relationships with partner countries and non-state local partners;
- affording an opportunity to build partner capacity, performing operations by, with, and through partners when possible, commensurate with U.S. foreign policy goals;
- facilitating combatant command access where other military activities may be limited;
- obtaining knowledge of the laws, institutions, systems, and capacities of partners, which can inform future operational planning; and
- ensuring U.S. forces are ready for a range of contingencies, enhancing the response and effectiveness of U.S. forces during crises.

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[4] "A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas," 2018, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and U.S. Department of Defense, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Jun/13/2001931133/-1/-1/1/STABILIZATION-ASSISTANCE-REVIEW.PDF

HA/DR exercises and planning may also facilitate partnerships with countries that may not yet have the political, fiscal, or operational capability to perform other military exercises (e.g., in Southeast Asia).

DoD relationships with humanitarian implementers are growing but are still riddled with suspicion on both sides. With their close access to and communication with affected civilians, humanitarian organizations are uniquely placed to provide critical information to military counterparts about the impacts of HA/DR and stability operations on civilian populations, while still abiding by their principle of neutrality. DoD should seek to expand and deepen these relationships, working in tandem with USAID and State.

Recommendations

DoD will continue to be called upon to support HA/DR and stability operations around the globe. To incorporate lessons learned, mitigate challenges, and harness opportunities in planning and execution, the U.S. government, with DoD in a supporting role, should take the following steps.

Prioritization

- Be transparent about U.S. HA/DR and stabilization priorities, decide on clear objectives and desired outcomes, and set *realistic and sustainable goals with local buy-in.*

  o Lofty infrastructure goals cannot be met when basic provision of services is a challenge; and security metrics that work for one part of the world cannot be transplanted onto another.

  o Make humanitarian and security imperatives complementary and reinforcing.

  o Identify and manage expectations with local and regional partners. Determine offramps and mitigation steps up front if expectations result in disagreements during operations.

- Prioritize, layer, and sequence lines of effort among interagency and multinational partners.

  o *Delegate and deconflict tasks to* produce a more efficient and harmonious operating environment for the United States and any international partners involved in HA/DR and stabilization efforts.

Planning

- Develop tailored playbooks for a range of HA/DR and stabilization contingencies, with U.S. interagency nodes and mechanisms identified that can be pulled into teams and employed.

- Conduct scenario-based, tabletop and operational HA/DR and stabilization exercises with a mix of national security policy, operators, and non-federal entities to inform planning for future operations.

- Operationalize the SAR framework by:

    o Establishing criteria and priorities to guide stabilization;

    o Creating a synchronized division of labor and burden sharing with multilateral organizations and bilateral allies and partners;

    o Organizing U.S. departments and agencies to improve return on investment for stabilization goals;

    o Identifying tools, authorities, and funding to enable sequenced and targeted stabilization efforts; and

    o Institutionalizing assessment, monitoring, evaluation, and accountability.

Oversight and Accountability

- Increase assessment, monitoring, and evaluation systems and accountability measures to understand the local context before launching the mission and ensure HA/DR and stabilization objectives and outcomes are met.

    o Create opportunities for feedback and *course* correction throughout planning and execution and to *garner* lessons learned for future operations.

    o *Avoid oversimplification of ground dynamics and realities that can harmfully change local incentives or* create or exacerbate fissures locally that did not previously exist, thereby complicating the HA/DR or stabilization mission.

Authorities and Resourcing

- *Pick the right people* with the regional and functional expertise to truly understand local dynamics and implement tailored initiatives to bring about lasting relief and security to the area.

- Improve authorities and mechanisms for operating in complex environments, and at the sub-state and transregional levels, especially for contexts in which reliable state governance may not exist or be able to be engaged.

Communication

- Own the narrative: speak effectively and consistently about U.S. intentions and activities.

- Engage with humanitarian implementers regularly throughout the planning and execution of HA/DR and stabilization missions to inform understanding of the local context, partners, and impact on local civilians, while respecting their principle of neutrality.