

Out of Sync

U.S. Africa Command and Recent Interagency Challenges

by William Denn, J.J. Williams and Devanie Johnson

U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), the Department of Defense's (DoD) newest, geographic combatant command formed in 2007, exemplifies a bold, new experiment in whole-of-government interagency cooperation. Structured from the ground up to facilitate the integration of interagency partners, it was created with the best intentions of how twenty-first century U.S. government agencies could synchronize development, diplomacy, and defense objectives. Nine years later, however, there still exists problems in interagency policy synchronization and day-to-day coordination of operations. This article will highlight observations from some recent operations in Africa and propose recommendations for AFRICOM to continue to improve interagency coordination.

AFRICOM's Uniqueness: A Combatant Command Plus

Historically, the African continent remained a low priority in both U.S. foreign and defense policies. It was not until 1952 when several North African countries fell under the U.S. European Command portfolio that Africa was included in the U.S. military command structure. In 1983, under the Goldwater Nichols Act's restructuring of the geographic combatant commands, responsibility

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for Africa was divided among three different combatant commands: U.S. European Command (EUCOM), U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), and U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM).

It was not until post-September 11, 2001, however, that Africa grew in strategic importance to U.S. national security interests. In March 2006, General John Abizaid, then CENTCOM Commander, noted in Congressional testimony that Africa remained “vulnerable to penetration by regional extremist groups.” EUCOM and CENTCOM, already taxed with the unique challenges of their areas of operation, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, assessed that the rising security and stability and challenges in Africa warranted a separate headquarters.

In 2007, President George W. Bush approved the creation of AFRICOM, generated initially from a command element from EUCOM and stationed in Stuttgart, Germany. According to career diplomat David Brown, the former Diplomatic Advisor at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, as a new headquarters, AFRICOM was shaped by four key imperatives: (1) an increased recognition of the interdependence of security and development; (2) a new emphasis on conflict prevention and stability operations rather than warfighting; (3) the emergence of the broader concept of human security and the “responsibility to protect” international norms; and (4) a growing need for whole-of-government approaches to interagency cooperation. The result of these imperatives structured AFRICOM with a broader soft power mandate aimed at building a stable security environment and sought to resource the headquarters with a relatively larger (compared to its peer combatant commands) personnel contingent from other U.S. government agencies. Within DoD channels, AFRICOM was described as a “combatant command plus” due to its augmented interagency design and mandate.

In addition to having a larger contingent of

personnel from other U.S. government agencies, the leadership at the top of AFRICOM was also structured to reflect an interagency perspective. The Deputy Commander for Civil-Military Engagement, the civilian leader in AFRICOM, was charged with plans and programs associated with health, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, security sector reform, peace support operations, and directing the J9 Outreach staff. Typically, a former ambassador with the two-star equivalent rank of Minister-Counselor, the Deputy Commander for Civil-Military Engagement brought regional expertise and diplomacy/development experience to AFRICOM.

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Whereas today, all combatant commands incorporate interagency partners at some level, AFRICOM sought to elevate integration to new levels. The initial plan for the AFRICOM staff called for 25 percent of the staff to be sourced from U.S. government agencies other than DoD. However, the realities of the U.S. government soon sunk in, and due to a lack of capacity, only 2 percent of the staff came from civilian agencies by 2011.

Another AFRICOM innovation was where the headquarters emplaced its interagency partners. From the start, AFRICOM sought to embed interagency partners within the various staff planning sections, in sharp contrast to other combatant commands. For example, U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) emplaced all interagency partners in a separate joint interagency task force, JIATF-South, that focused mainly on SOUTHCOM’s

counternarcotic mission. PACOM, on the other hand, emplaced all interagency partners in the J9 (Outreach) section. While PACOM's and SOUTHCOM's strategies created one-stop-shops for interagency coordination, they had the effect of isolating the interagency from other staff sections. In contrast, AFRICOM emplaced interagency partners within the J3 (Operations), J4 (Logistics), J5 (Strategy, Plans and Programs), and J9 (Outreach) sections, as well as foreign policy advisors in service component commands such as U.S. Army Africa (USARAF).

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Despite these important initial choices in interagency organizational structure, AFRICOM has recently faced challenges in interagency cooperation, specifically in policy synchronization at the regional level and in day-to-day operations coordination. The following section will highlight two recent case studies: first, the synchronization of AFRICOM's countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy and the Department of State's (State) transnational organized crime (TOC) strategy will highlight difficulties in policy synchronization; second, AFRICOM's use of regionally aligned forces (RAF) and the 101st Airborne Division's response to the 2014 Ebola crisis will highlight recent challenges in day-to-day interagency coordination.

Challenges in Policy Synchronization

Despite AFRICOM and its Army service component USARAF current levels of interagency integration, they continue to be challenged with synchronizing missions

with State counterparts, particularly Counter Terrorism and the West African Bureaus.

In 2011, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recognized in an assessment that there is an important need to increase the unity of effort between DoD and State in Africa. One particular problem was insufficient personnel from State aligned with DoD counterparts to manage the synchronization of strategic guidance in West Africa. While raw numbers do not reflect a complete understanding of how mismatches in personnel and problems affect synchronization, they do hint where challenges may arise. For example, AFRICOM's headquarters is staffed with approximately 2,000 personnel in Germany and approximately 9,000 personnel across the whole command. State's Africa Bureau, on the other hand, according to diplomat David Brown, is staffed with only about 200 personnel, of which 150 are foreign service officers and 50 are administrative support. Again, these numbers do not necessarily indicate differences in priorities or predict interagency difficulties, but it may cause problems when such mismatched personnel structures attempt to work and coordinate with each other.

Misalignments, however, have a significant impact on achieving U.S. national security interests in Africa. One recent 2015 GAO assessment specifically addressed the overlap of government defense missions, global health, and international affairs, particularly in West Africa. Fragmentation and duplication of national security programs only further disenfranchise DoD's and State's efforts within the region.

One particular example highlighting the misalignment and fragmentation between DoD and State in Africa centers on CVE strategies and TOC strategies. In 2011, AFRICOM sought to increase security in Africa through DoD's role in CVE. CVE is a comprehensive and sustainable strategy that seeks to address the entire "life cycle" of extremists from initial radicalization to ultimate acts of violent extremism. AFRICOM's

CVE strategy, particularly in West Africa, establishes exercises and security cooperation programs across the continent to help mitigate violent extremist activity, specifically targeting Boko Haram and Al Qaeda groups. For instance, AFRICOM routinely assists border security operations with multiple partner nations by way of security cooperation programs to prevent the flow of fighters throughout the region. AFRICOM also participates in various training exercises with partner nations to build partner capacity targeting counterterrorism and violent extremist activity.

Despite many of AFRICOM's CVE security cooperation efforts, violent extremist groups continued to rise in West Africa, especially in areas like Nigeria. In August of 2011, Boko Haram bombed a UN mission in Abuja, Nigeria, killing twenty-five, and injuring eighty more. This was just one of several major attacks that occurred against the Nigerian government between 2011 and 2014. There have been several other terrorist events in Nigeria which gained major public attention.

Simultaneous and separate to AFRICOM's CVE initiatives in West Africa was the State's role in combating TOC. The National Security Council defines TOC as the self-perpetuating associations of individuals who operate transnationally for the purpose of obtaining power, influence, monetary and/or commercial gains, wholly or in part by illegal means, while protecting their activities through a pattern of corruption and/or violence, or while protecting their illegal activities through a transnational organizational structure and the exploitation of transnational commerce or communication mechanisms. State's TOC strategy initiatives attempt to raise international awareness about the reality of the TOC threat to international security; galvanize multilateral action to constrain the reach and influence of TOC; deprive TOC of its means and infrastructure; shrink the threat TOC poses to citizen safety, national security,

and governance; and ultimately defeat the TOC networks that pose the greatest threat to national security. TOC represents sophisticated and multi-faceted threats that cannot be addressed through law enforcement action alone.

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The reality, however, is that CVE and TOC are innately linked. Regional extremist groups such as Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) use transnational crime to raise money, recruit, and facilitate logistics for their extremist operations. Consequentially, the TOC strategy can help combat terrorism but does not effectively nest or synchronize with AFRICOM's CVE strategy because of misaligned organizations pursuing separate and sometimes redundant policies and strategies. Ideally, the TOC strategy, while essential, would be more effective in West Africa if it merged its capabilities with defense initiatives. If it could feed intelligence to counterterrorism elements (both host nation and AFRICOM elements) or be synchronized with AFRICOM's efforts to build host-nation law enforcement and special operations units, then both TOC and CVE strategies could be more effective in combating these destabilizing challenges in West Africa.

In 2016, the White House Summit for Countering Violent Extremism addressed many of these synchronization and redundancy challenges to countering violent extremism, arguing that the efforts should widen the global base of CVE stakeholders. Since then, there has been progress at the strategic level; agencies focusing on TOC with foreign governments,

civil society, and the private sector are now working to weaken the legitimacy and resonance of violent extremist messaging and narratives, including through social media. This is a first step toward aligning U.S. policies and goals, but until these policies are synchronized by the regional organizations implementing them, there is still room for improvement.

Conducting separate core strategies to address symptoms of the same problem ultimately is an inefficient use of U.S. government resources. CVE and TOC strategies led by the DoD and State, respectively, represent an example of how poorly coordinated strategic initiatives can be ineffective despite regional organizations like AFRICOM with interagency integration.

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Challenges in Day-to-Day Coordination

The previous section utilized the case study of CVE and TOC strategies to show how both DoD and State, despite interagency integration efforts at AFRICOM, still fail to effectively synchronize efforts to achieve unity of effort within Africa. Unfortunately, a lack of integration between AFRICOM and State also impacts day-to-day operations of ground units working at the tactical/field level as well. Problems in interagency integration have particularly affected U.S. Army brigades performing security cooperation missions across the continent and the 101st Airborne Division during the recent Operation United Assistance operation combating Ebola in West Africa.

RAF Support of AFRICOM

AFRICOM and its subordinate command USARAF partners with nations throughout the African continent through a variety of joint security cooperation efforts. Security cooperation, highlighted by a recent 2015 GAO assessment, covers a broad set of activities that promote U.S. interests, build partner nations' capabilities for self-defense and coalition operations, and provides U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access to host nations. Some examples of security cooperation activities include sending military liaison teams, conducting seminars and conferences, and training and equipping partner nations' security forces.

Security cooperation activities are planned and resourced each year in formal and informal dialogues among U.S. embassies, each country's Office of Security Cooperation, as well as USARAF and AFRICOM. USARAF attempts to hold several planning conferences a year to synchronize these activities across the continent, however, due to the sheer number of offices that USARAF must coordinate with, coordination is often less than comprehensive. Due to sometimes fragmented communication among embassies, Offices of Security Cooperation, and USARAF, incomplete orders are often passed to the tactical units tasked with executing the security cooperation activities.

The 2015 GAO assessment, "Regionally Aligned Forces: DOD Could Enhance Army Brigades' Efforts in Africa by Improving Activity Coordination and Mission-Specific Preparation," highlighted some of these coordination problems and the impact they have on AFRICOM's RAF, a brigade combat team in the U.S. tasked with assisting USARAF's activities. The first problem is RAF Soldiers are often unprepared or untrained to meet their activity objectives—which is a tremendous waste of government resources and can undermine U.S. regional objectives. According to the assessment, for

instance, one African country coordinated with the U.S. Office of Security Cooperation to host U.S. military mechanics to teach an equipment maintenance course; however, that USARAF did not communicate what type of equipment the Soldiers would train on. As a result, the Soldiers arrived in country unfamiliar with the equipment the host nation military used and ultimately the training had to be canceled.¹

A similar consequence of poorly communicated objectives between embassies and USARAF is that RAF brigades plan incomplete or improper training for host nation partners. Another example highlighted by the GAO report was an RAF unit who planned to conduct advanced artillery training for host nation counterparts without realizing the host nation soldiers lacked even basic artillery skills. Training quickly had to be revamped and altered.

Interagency confusion has resulted in cases where Soldiers experienced challenges and delays in obtaining official passports. USARAF and RAF brigades support State-coordinated and approved security cooperation, yet despite State being the passport approving authority, RAF units are unable to get passports for Soldiers that are conducting the security cooperation training. As a result of this lack of interagency coordination, primary trainers are sometimes replaced with lesser qualified alternate trainers or the activities themselves are canceled.²

A lack of interagency integration also undermines the quality of training that these RAF units receive. Security cooperation activities often involve small groups of Soldiers deploying, sometimes as pairs of individuals, squads, or platoon-sized elements. The diverse nature of deployments across such a large continent requires mature Soldiers, culturally attuned to the needs and unique challenges of each host nation. Since State is sponsoring and approving these activities, it would be beneficial to leverage State's regional expertise to help resource and design the RAF brigade's

regional and cultural training. Unfortunately, as several of the early RAF brigades experienced, they were on their own to design, resource, and execute cultural and regional training for their anticipated security cooperation activities. One brigade from Fort Lewis coordinated with a local university to design a short, condensed, regional familiarization with Africa. While that brigade's leadership deserves accolades for designing and resourcing the brigade's own training, it seems inconsistent with the importance of the RAF mission that brigade officers must find local experts on Africa to prepare for these deployments.

These four examples of problems for RAF brigades: (1) unprepared to meet objectives; (2) unaware of security cooperation activity details; (3) unable to secure passports; and (4) unable to leverage State's regional expertise for training and preparation for deployments are not simply communication issues but systemic of larger interagency coordination and synchronization failures between DoD and State on the African continent.

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U.S. Response to Ebola.

The systemic, interagency integration problems between DoD and State were also apparent at the tactical and field levels during the U.S. military's recent response to Ebola in 2014 to 2015. In September of 2014, the White House, in response to a UN Security Council request for assistance, deployed a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to coordinate the U.S. government response and to assist the Liberian government. As part of the U.S. whole-of-government response, DoD deployed

the 101st Airborne Division headquarters to coordinate the over 3,000 soldiers sent to assist.

U.S. Army and Joint doctrine primarily empowers corps headquarters or joint task forces (JTFs) as the primary headquarters for large-scale, stability operations to integrate interagency cooperation. Interagency integration is accomplished at these headquarters through organizations such as joint interagency coordination groups (JIACGs) or civil-military operations centers (CMOCs), which are augmented and staffed with senior interagency partners in order to leverage the expertise of the interagency. Because of the size of the U.S. military mission in Liberia, a smaller headquarters (division) was tasked with managing the crisis. The unintended consequence resulted in a headquarters without a preferred level of training and with less staff resourcing and preparation to integrate a complicated interagency mission.

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As Major General Gary Volesky, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, noted in a Center for Army Lessons Learned interview, “Few of the 101st Division staff members possessed experience in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) missions...”³ Fortunately, for the 101st, deployment was scheduled after a previously-scheduled training program for the staff at the Mission Command Training Program (MCTP). MCTP is a staff training program at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for brigade, division, and corps staffs where they are tested in processes and systems in a simulated operational environment. The division staff J9 or

civil-military operations section, quickly pieced together a two-day Interagency Academics Seminar in conjunction with MCTP to bring together USAID, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, State, the UN, the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Disease (USAMRIID), the Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. National Institutes of Health.⁴

There was a lot of risk, however, in the decision to send the 101st Airborne Headquarters because of its lack of experience in HA/DR missions. The newly-formed staff were training for a conventional operations deployment, called decisive action, a combination of offensive, defensive, and stability tasks. Many on the staff had limited exposure to working and integrating with the interagency. If the MCTP training rotation had not been previously scheduled, it would be likely that the 101st Airborne would have deployed without its supplemental, albeit limited, two-day exposure to the interagency.

A lack of robust interagency integration mechanisms became all the more apparent after the headquarters arrived in Liberia. The USARAF commander, in charge prior to the 101st Airborne arriving, quickly grasped the reality that unity of effort among the many different partners on the ground could only happen if USARAF shared information on unclassified networks rather than the classified networks the staff was accustomed to.⁵ The USARAF and the 101st Airborne Division staff had primarily trained operating on classified Army and intelligence computer systems. If they were to openly share information with interagency and NGO partners, they would need tools like Google Earth rather than the Army’s Command Post of the Future. Likewise, interagency partners and NGOs needed computer and internet access. The 101st was simply unprepared, especially in the austere environment of Liberia, to establish an effective knowledge management process to not only give network access to interagency and

interorganizational partners, but also to share information across the network.⁶

The Ebola crisis was not a complete failure of interagency integration. Thankfully, early on in the response the DART assisted the Liberian government, specifically its Ministry of Health in forming a national coordination center called the National Ebola Command Center (NECC). The NECC served as the critical hub for all interagency, intergovernmental, and interorganizational coordination for the Ebola mission in Liberia. When the 101st Airborne arrived, the J9 actually made an excellent decision not to set up its own CMOC. Instead the 101st would provide liaisons to the NECC as well as augment the NECC with intelligence analysts to aid the coordination center in understanding the nature of the Ebola epidemic. In the end, because of interagency integration processes outside DoD channels, the mission could be accomplished. Not every stability operation, however, will have interagency partners that bring their own capability to set up a robust coordination center. In even more austere or dangerous environments, the U.S. military will likely be the lead agency; if so, is it prepared at the tactical level to set up a robust CMOC that gives all the interagency partners the ability to assist in planning and operational response? If it is a division headquarters, the Ebola case leads us to believe that the military would struggle to integrate all interagency partners.

The Ebola crisis also highlighted the organizational culture challenges that exist when integrating interagency partners at the tactical level. According to the Ebola after-action reports, U.S. Army leaders sometime had a difficult time being subordinate to civilian organizations, which resulted in damaged relationships between individuals and organizations.⁷ “[T]he U.S. Army has developed a Warfighter mentality that did not serve USARAF personnel well in a permissive environment (i.e., sovereign nation). This caused friction and

put into motion unnecessary assets, units, and capabilities.”⁸ In an interagency environment, civilian organizations often do not have clearly-defined, decision-making processes, which can be challenging to military organizations that are accustomed to making decisions and acting quickly.⁹ Organizational friction points caused by differences in culture consistently arise between the military and civilian agency communities; these cultural misunderstandings are only heightened in high stress environments. The 101st Airborne Division, accustomed to quickly solving problems, had to adapt by learning how it could support interagency partners without unnecessarily taking over and overtly militarizing a mostly civilian response to the epidemic. Over time, the internal conflicts eased through greater interagency exposure and coordination.

Both of these case studies, RAF in Africa and the 101st Airborne Division supporting the Ebola response in West Africa, are clear examples of how unsynchronized organizations can generate real and direct challenges for troops and civilians alike. The following section proposes several recommendations on how AFRICOM and State can alleviate some of these integration challenges for operations, planning, and policy.

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Recommendations

Based on the previous case studies, we propose the following recommendations:

- **Empower lower-level staffs and subordinate elements to directly coordinate with interagency partners.**

While AFRICOM's staff may serve as a model for interagency integration, the effects of the integration are not being realized at the lowest levels of coordination. Specifically, interagency counterparts and USARAF are not integrated enough to reduce coordination problems for the RAF units implementing AFRICOM initiatives. AFRICOM should grant direct liaison authorizations for subordinate units, such as the RAF brigades, to allow subordinate staffs to clearly understand security cooperation objectives and provide for sufficient logistical coordination of personnel movement to Africa. RAF units should be free to reach out to embassies and Offices of Security Cooperation to decrease synchronization difficulties.

- **Re-examine advantages and disadvantages of interagency integration in JIACGs versus formal staff integration.**

JIACGs are the primary means for interagency coordination in other combatant commands like PACOM. One-stop-shops have advantages in simplifying interagency coordination but disadvantages in neglecting integration into other staff planning operations. Due to previous GAO critiques, AFRICOM has sought to improve coordination by maintaining integration across formal staff sections and, in addition, implement a monthly interagency working forum to bring all partners together to address coordination concerns. As AFRICOM continues to explore this reform, interagency coordination may improve as this process is institutionalized. However, it may be beneficial for certain high-priority missions (CVE, RAF, etc.) to form an *ad hoc* JIACG to address the interagency coordination and policy synchronization concerns.

- **Increase interagency integration to subordinate staffs beginning at the strategic level.**

Liaisons and political advisors are not as effective solutions as interagency staffs who are empowered to make command decisions. AFRICOMs subordinate commands, such as USARAF, should be empowered with the same level of interagency integration as AFRICOM in order to improve day-to-day coordination. This reform will require interagency partners to increase their personnel commitment to a higher level than two percent in AFRICOM. It is a worthwhile investment that will increase effectiveness of both the DoD and State within Africa.

- **Increase structures for information sharing between Defense and State in Africa.**

Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's January 2012 strategic guidance recognized the importance of sharing information and its cost if done poorly to achieve national security objectives. As shown, stove-piped information sharing within TOC and CVE strategies in West Africa undermines success. Lead organizations under both strategies should build information-sharing mechanisms to increase effectiveness of both strategies to counter extremist nonstate actors in the region. An assessment is needed to understand how to better increase unity of effort between both DoD and State for these similar efforts.

- **Long-term recommendation: Reform COCOM structure.**

While outside the scope of this paper, much has been written about potential "Goldwater-Nichols Part II" reforms. One such recommendation, articulated in a

2014 Atlantic Council study led by General James Jones, USMC (Retired), recommended reforming the COCOM structure by appointing a civilian head to the organization, reportable to the President, with a military deputy (for warfighting) and civilian deputy (for interagency missions). This civilian leadership position would focus whole-of-government strategies for each combatant command's region. This senior appointee position, likewise, would outrank country ambassadors in order to apply cohesive regional policies with all elements of national power. While this recommendation is currently not feasible because of a lack of political interest, it represents a "big idea" approach to solving policy coordination and synchronization problems across an entire region for the U.S. interagency.

Conclusion

Despite problems in interagency coordination, the recurring observation is that AFRICOM is an adaptable organization, open, willing, and responsive to change. Perhaps above all the other combatant commands, AFRICOM has served as a laboratory to explore new models of interagency integration. In the cases shown, despite occasional hiccups and problems, AFRICOM and its subordinate commands continue day after day to solve problems to accomplish U.S. objectives in Africa. None of the problems highlighted are insurmountable but only require small changes to organizational structure and increasing a spirit of cooperation among all U.S. partners operating in Africa. The authors are hopeful that AFRICOM will continue to be a testbed for new structures and methods to improve whole-of-government approaches to Africa's unique challenges. **IAJ**

NOTES

- 1 U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Regionally Aligned Forces: DOD Could Enhance Army Brigades' Efforts in Africa by Improving Activity Coordination and Mission-Specific Preparation" Washington, 2015, p. 18.
- 2 Ibid., 38.
- 3 Center for Army Lessons Learned, Newsletter Lessons and Best Practices No. 15-09, *Operation United Assistance Setting the Theater: Creating Conditions for Success in West Africa*, Fort Leavenworth, KS, June 2015, pp. 5–6.
- 4 Ross Lightsey, "Fighting Ebola: An Interagency Collaboration Paradigm." *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 81, March 29, 2016, <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/NewsArticleView/tabid/7849/Article/702033/fighting-ebola-an-interagency-collaboration-paradigm.aspx>>, accessed on May 10, 2016.
- 5 Center for Army Lessons Learned, Initial Impressions Report 16-05, *101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) Operation United Assistance: Lessons and Best Practices*, Fort Leavenworth, KS, November 2015, p. 33.
- 6 Ibid., p. 38.
- 7 Center for Army Lessons Learned, Bulletin Lessons and Best Practices No. 15-16, *Operation United Assistance: Report for Follow-On Forces*, Fort Leavenworth, KS, September 2015, p. 7.
- 8 Ibid., p. 4.
- 9 Ibid., p. 7.