

# **Losing Lessons at the Water's Edge:** *Applying FEMA's Interagency Coordination Doctrine to International Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations*

**by Benjamin Cabana**

There are two things for certain when it comes to the study of the interagency process for successful stabilization and reconstruction operations. First, a successful operation requires the coordinated application of the three tools of U.S. foreign policy—diplomacy, defense, and development. Second, the successful coordination of the U.S. government agencies and departments that hold these tools has been critically ineffective. The vast majority of literature on interagency coordination has focused either on increased training and collaboration efforts or on structural reorganization to remedy the problem. On the surface, this is a logical approach. There are two schools of thought when it comes to achieving cooperation across independent organizations. Either you build trust and familiarity across independent partners to increase the willingness and ability to work together, or you merge them under one umbrella, in fact removing the separateness altogether. The first approach is problematic because it relies solely on the willingness of the parties involved to cooperate. If parties want to cooperate, they may, but if they do not wish to do so, this approach is doomed. Lessons from Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond demonstrate that Soldiers and diplomats often do not tend to cooperate, so policymakers should not rely solely on mutual volition to improve the interagency process. The second approach is equally flawed because the conduct of complex contingency operations is not the primary function of any of these organizations. Unity of effort must take place amidst an operation, but this does not change the fact that each agency is rightfully independent in their day-to-day operations. The reasonable conclusion is that neither pure cooperation nor ultimate unification is possible, some sort of hybrid is necessary. The solution must include strong mechanisms for operational coordination, while respecting each organization's autonomy.

Interagency coordination for international stability operations is largely conducted on an ad hoc basis. Each time the U.S. government finds itself conducting an international operation, it constructs mechanisms for interagency coordination anew, and after each failure, lessons learned

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are forgotten before they can be indoctrinated. Domestically, the federal government has indoctrinated an effective interagency process across various agencies and jurisdictional authorities. The skeptic will quickly dismiss any correlation, arguing that responding to a hurricane domestically is far different than trying to bring peace and democracy to Iraq.

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However, upon further examination, this author contends that emergency management offers valuable lessons to foreign policy practitioners. The issue at hand is one of process, not mandate. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) coordinates federal assistance of seven cabinet-level departments and two independent government agencies which have **lead** responsibilities for aspects of a large-scale disaster response. America's federal system of government also poses challenges because the federal government must coordinate activities with the state and local governments with primary security mandates. Despite the challenges, FEMA has created binding doctrine that governs how the U.S. government holistically conducts domestic emergency response—which has inspired similar doctrine around the world.<sup>1</sup> This article seeks to demonstrate the applicability of FEMA's model and calls for academia and foreign policy practitioners to consider the application of this largely untapped and useful field of study to improve interagency coordination during complex contingency operations that take place outside U.S. borders.

**Domestic Incident Response: The**

## **National Response Framework (NRF) and National Incident Management System (NIMS)**

In domestic emergency response, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has developed a systematic approach to interagency coordination through the NRF and the NIMS. Only within the past decade has the homeland security apparatus standardized tools for domestic incident response. Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (HSPD-5), *Management of Domestic Incidents*, published in February 2003, directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop a national response plan and the NIMS to manage the complex task of coordinating response activities across the federal government and in cooperation with state and local governments.<sup>2</sup> The two documents work hand in hand. The NIMS provides the template for the management of domestic incidents, and the NRF provides the structure and mechanisms for national-level policy for incident management.<sup>3</sup> HSPD-5 requires all federal departments and agencies to implement NIMS, and its application is a requisite for state and local governments to receive preparedness assistance.<sup>4</sup> Both documents were developed through a collaborative partnership across the federal government and in cooperation with state and local governments and private and non-profit sectors.<sup>5</sup>

The current NRF is a third-generation document. The founding document, the 1992 Federal Response Plan, focused primarily on federal roles and responsibilities in incident response.<sup>6</sup> The original National Response Plan mandated by HSPD-5 superseded the Federal Response Plan, until it was superseded by the current NRF in January 2008, based on lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina. The framework is a “guide to how the nation conducts all-hazards response.”<sup>7</sup> Recognizing that new administrations make the application of long-

term lessons and best-practices challenging, the NRF is intended to provide a “playbook” to ensure that consistent and proven capabilities are maintained and continuously applied in emergency response.<sup>8</sup> The NRF broadened the scope of the National Response Plan to explain the roles and responsibilities of all parties to incident response, not just those of the federal government.<sup>9</sup>

Federal and other agencies carry out their emergency response responsibilities within the mechanisms established in the NRF.<sup>10</sup> The NRF assigns federal response coordination to the Secretary of Homeland Security. The Secretary’s coordination role does not in any way impede other departments and agencies or state or local partners from carrying out their responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> FEMA coordinates the response activities across the federal government and of certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) by activating 15 emergency support functions (ESF). Each ESF has a lead and supporting agencies, and these 15 ESFs, applied together, constitute a holistic response to any incident.

At the field level, the NRF mandates joint field offices be established to coordinate federal, state, local, private sector, and NGO actors, according to organizational principles of the NIMS.<sup>12</sup> A unified coordination group (NIMS unified command), consisting of senior officials with primary statutory and jurisdictional responsibilities for the response,<sup>13</sup> oversees the operation. The Federal Coordinating Officer is a senior FEMA official appointed to coordinate federal support, to execute Stafford Act authorities, and to execute mission assignments for other departments and agencies.<sup>14</sup> The Federal Coordinating Officer interfaces with state and local authorities to determine priorities and objectives for the federal response, and the Defense Coordinating Officer is responsible for coordinating Department of Defense (DoD) activities with civilian responders.<sup>15</sup>

The NRF also establishes consistent planning requirements. A strategic guidance statement and strategic plan define broad national strategies, establish objectives and responsibilities, and determine performance measurement strategies. A national-level interagency concept plan describes concepts of operations for integrating federal capabilities to meet objectives established in the strategic plan. Finally, federal departments and agencies create operations plans to describe how they will allocate resources and personnel to support the concept plan objectives.<sup>16</sup>

The NRF’s counterpart, the NIMS, is flexible enough to be used for management of any incident, regardless of size, complexity, cause, or location.<sup>17</sup> It establishes a standard organizational structure for management of operations and allows agencies with different legal, geographic, and functional authorities to work together effectively without impeding individual organizations’

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authorities, responsibilities, or accountability through unified command.<sup>18</sup> Within a unified command, the leaders of each organization jointly determine objectives, strategies, plans, resource allocation, and priorities. A single set of objectives is established, and the efforts of all participating agencies are performed under a single incident action plan.<sup>19</sup> The effectiveness of the NIMS is enhanced because it is used across the entire U.S. emergency management community, not just by federal responders. The National Integration Center manages NIMS implementation, training, administration,

and revision, and ensures that state and local jurisdictions are compliant with and proficient in NIMS.<sup>20</sup>

The NIMS is built around a common and proven command and management system: the Incident Command System (ICS). The ICS, initially developed in the 1970s in California to coordinate firefighting forest fires across multiple jurisdictions, is designed to enable efficient management of any incident. It consists of six functional areas—command, operations, planning, logistics, finance/administration, and intelligence/investigations.<sup>21</sup> It is based on 14 proven management characteristics that strengthen efficiency—common terminology, modular organization, management by

criticized after Katrina because parallel command structures between federal and state personnel created questions of authority and complicated responsibilities.<sup>24</sup> Further, state authorities lacked sufficient knowledge of the NIMS, had confusing jurisdictions and authorities, and operated under different leadership styles.<sup>25</sup> This criticism was largely unfair, because the NIMS was designed to provide a mechanism for joint command without imposing a central command over all partners. Ongoing training and practice of the NIMS has greatly improved its effectiveness.<sup>26</sup> These are living documents, and as shortcomings are learned through application, the NIMS and NRF are updated and improved. Having doctrine and improving upon it as lessons are learned is far better than having no doctrine whatsoever.

In sum, in order to improve interagency coordination in domestic complex contingency operations, the U.S. government has created an effective system of interagency coordination by incorporating organizational theory and proven management strategies into strategic doctrine that is binding across the federal government and state and local partners. The critical features that make the NIMS and NRF effective include the following:

- **Standardization.** NRF is a basic “playbook” that ensures that institutional knowledge and best practices are applied across administrations.
- **Clear lines of authority.** Roles and responsibilities are clearly delineated and defined across the U.S. government through ESFs.
- **Consistent planning.** Consistent planning requirements ensure that operations of each agency contribute to the strategic objectives for the operation
- **Autonomy of stakeholders.** DHS coordinates the response, but the autonomy

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objective, incident action planning, manageable span of control, incident facilities and locations, comprehensive resource management, integrated communications, establishment and transfer of command, chain of command and unity of command, unified command, accountability, dispatch/deployment, and information and intelligence management.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the NIMS uses proven management and organizational practices, not ad hoc systems created largely in isolation.

Admittedly, the NRF and the NIMS have received their fair share of criticism over the years. However, the NRF has been far more successful than its predecessor, the National Response Plan.<sup>23</sup> The NIMS was initially

and jurisdictional authority of all U.S. government entities are respected.

- **Universal application.** Both documents apply to all incidents, regardless of size, complexity, cause, or location.
- **Consistent application.** Both documents are always in effect, ensuring that these tools are applied to all domestic response operations.
- **Binding across the U.S. government.** All federal agencies are mandated by executive order to use the NRF and NIMS.
- **Used by non-U.S. government stakeholders.** State and local governments must implement the NIMS to receive federal preparedness assistance, ensuring that all levels of government operate under the same structure.
- **Living doctrine.** The NIMS and NRF are always subject to revision based on lessons learned to improve on their content without losing the progress made thus far.

No such framework and system of management has been created for international contingency operations. The next section reviews a history of far less ambitious interagency coordination efforts for international contingency operations.

## **Interagency Coordination Efforts in International Operations**

### ***Presidential Decision Directive 56***

President Clinton established the first interagency coordination mechanism for complex contingency operations overseas. The lessons of Somalia and Bosnia demonstrated a need to remedy the failures to coordinate planning and execution for these missions.<sup>27</sup> After Operation Restore Hope in Haiti applied many lessons learned from Somalia and Bosnia,

Clinton sought to institutionalize these lessons so that interagency planning and coordination improvements would not be lost.<sup>28</sup> After two years of planning and vetting across the government, Presidential Decision Directive 56 (PDD-56) *Managing Complex Contingency Operations* created the first internal management tool for complex contingency operations.<sup>29</sup> The directive had five central pillars:

- A National Security Council Executive Committee provided unified planning guidance and oversaw the day-to-day management of the operation.
- A political-military plan established a whole-of-government strategy.
- Interagency rehearsals refined agency plans and unity of effort.
- Interagency after-action reviews allowed for assessment and lessons learned.
- Interagency training would create a cadre of officials with improved interagency management skills.<sup>30</sup>

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PDD-56 was largely focused on achieving strategic consensus in Washington, but did not seek to translate this into effective coordination at the operational level.<sup>31</sup> The heart of PDD-56 was the political-military plan, which would provide the strategic objectives to govern the interagency operators in the operational area.<sup>32</sup> After-action reviews would identify legal,

budgetary, and execution problems to ensure that future operations did not repeat these mistakes.<sup>33</sup> Like the NRF, PDD-56 recognized the need for ongoing improvements. However, the initiation of PDD-56 required a National Security Council judgment call or pressure from a high-level official, and the process was thus never initiated, and its utility was never demonstrated.<sup>34</sup> PDD-56 was a promising first-step for managing complex contingency operations, but failure to implement it left room for improvement. In sum, PDD-56 had a much smaller scope than the NRF and NIMS. The

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strategic planning and training requirements in PDD-56 are only two aspects of a much larger domestic response framework, and PDD-56 provided no efforts to remedy interagency coordination at the operational level.

The Bush Administration never initiated PDD-56. Planning for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq largely removed civilian agencies from the initial planning process.<sup>35</sup> After three years in Iraq, it was clear that interagency coordination and a robust civilian capacity were required to conduct effective reconstruction activities.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the conclusions drawn from operations in Somalia and Bosnia that led to PDD-56 were relearned in 2005, because the initial lessons were lost due to failure to implement PDD-56.

#### ***National Security Presidential Directive 44***

In December 2005, George W. Bush

implemented National Security Presidential Directive 44 (NSPD-44) *Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Reconstruction and Stabilization* formally superseding PDD-56. The directive assigned the Secretary of State as the lead coordinator of U.S. government efforts to prepare for, plan, and conduct stabilization and reconstruction activities.<sup>37</sup> The Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization would coordinate all U.S. government reconstruction and stabilization activities. The Secretaries of State and Defense were to jointly develop a framework to coordinate civilian and military operations at all levels.<sup>38</sup> Finally, NSPD-44 established a Policy Coordination Committee for Reconstruction and Stabilization Operations, to be chaired by the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization and a National Security Council staff member.<sup>39</sup>

As a result, the State Department established the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) in 2004 to organize all civilian efforts of the U.S. government and coordinate them with the military.<sup>40</sup> Until S/CRS was created, all elements of the Iraq operation were conducted out of the Pentagon.<sup>41</sup> From the outset, S/CRS was hampered because the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Justice, State Department regional bureaus, and other stakeholders tried to limit the office's role.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, the S/CRS progressed and by 2007 created an Interagency Management System (IMS) to coordinate international operations.

#### ***Interagency Management System***

The IMS sought to bring USAID, State Department, DoD, and other actors into a loose command and control structure.<sup>43</sup> The IMS has three components of interagency management. First, at the Washington-level, the Country Reconstruction and Stabilization Group would prepare a strategic plan to include a common strategic goal, concept of operations, major U.S.

government tasks, and resource requirements to guide all U.S. civilians in Washington and in the field.<sup>44</sup> Second, at the geographic combatant command headquarters, an Integration Planning Cell would integrate the civilian component of the operation with the military operational plans.<sup>45</sup> Finally, in the field or at an embassy, an Advance Civilian Team, overseen by the assigned Chief of Mission, would integrate into the existing embassy or USAID mission structure, and Field Advance Civilian Teams could deploy to implement programs at the local or provincial level.<sup>46</sup>

The IMS established no framework for roles and responsibilities, no coordination mechanisms with non-U.S. government partners, and no system of command and management at the operational or tactical level. It did, however, explain the relationship of the strategic headquarters-based planning with operational- and tactical-level operations and designated the Chief of Mission as the leader of all civilian actors. It largely failed to address exactly how civilians would coordinate efforts with the military command. If the NIMS were used at the field level, a consistent rather than ad hoc structure would exist through which the DoD could interface with civilian leaders. Though IMS was approved at a high level in the Bush Administration, it was never implemented in a real-world crisis.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Quadrennial Development and Diplomacy Review: Creating an IORF Based on the NIMS/NRF***

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published the first ever Quadrennial Development and Diplomacy Review (QDDR) in 2010. The QDDR set forth an ambitious review and reform agenda for State Department and USAID.<sup>48</sup> One principal challenge recognized in the QDDR was that efforts to coordinate with DoD and other civilian agencies had been “largely ad hoc or post hoc,” and the U.S. government had

not made crisis management a central mission under an adequate operational structure.<sup>49</sup>

The QDDR rescinded the IMS and proposed an International Operational Response Framework (IORF), which would ensure accountability, clarify responsibilities, and establish procedures for planning and operations both in Washington and in the field.<sup>50</sup> As inspiration, the IORF would apply lessons learned from both domestic and international interagency response and would “draw on the widely recognized FEMA NIMS” and other international mechanisms.<sup>51</sup> However, progress toward creating the IORF has been lacking. This author seeks to promote the merits of following through on this particular QDDR proposal.

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## **Analysis and Recommendations**

This analysis of policy efforts to improve interagency coordination has sought to demonstrate a failure of the U.S. government to apply the same set of lessons to the same problem in two different contexts. The domestic model coordinates seven cabinet-level departments and two independent agencies with lead roles in large-scale emergency response. However, for international operations, no binding doctrine has been created to govern the interagency process. DoD is probably the most organized, plan-oriented organization in the world, whereas civilian diplomats and development experts have no such expertise in operational planning. FEMA has unique expertise in civilian operational planning for contingency operations that the State Department could leverage, but

it has largely failed to do so. The QDDR was a critical first step, but years after the QDDR was published, there is still no IORF. Academia and emergency management and foreign policy practitioners should analyze the applicability of the NIMS and an overarching policy framework like the NRF to stability operations, and this paper seeks to initiate that largely absent but critical discussion.

The NRF is built around 15 ESFs, which taken as a whole constitute a comprehensive emergency response. Similarly, George Mason University's School of Public Policy

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has developed a "Conceptual Model of Peace Operations" that breaks down a complex contingency operation into functions, tasks, and organizations. Four functions (peacemaking, peacekeeping, peace building, and peace support) are needed to achieve success in stability operations.<sup>52</sup> Each function is broken down into various tasks that may be assigned, as appropriate, to individual organizations and can be measured for success.<sup>53</sup> Tasks are related to the organizations that have the appropriate capacity to accomplish them.<sup>54</sup> The "Conceptual Model of Peace Operations" tasks and related organizations could provide the basis for the international version of the domestic ESFs and lead agencies.

An IORF should serve as the official "playbook" for stability operations, ensuring that the overall strategic framework will be implemented and improved upon across administrations. It should be a living document,

continuously improved upon, but always in effect. Like the NRF, it should be unclassified, with classified annexes, as necessary. The writers of the NRF understood the importance of providing partners with a familiarity with the baseline concepts and mechanics of the document, and an IORF would benefit similarly.<sup>55</sup> The IORF would clarify how the whole-of-government conducts contingency operations and transitions from stabilization to reconstruction and demobilization. It would establish mechanisms for coordination, funding, and cross-agency mission-assignment. It would hold agencies accountable for their respective assigned tasks. This would greatly assist the State Department in getting much-needed buy in and support from other civilian agencies that are key partners in such international operations but are reluctant to commit resources to such missions.

The NRF is nothing without the NIMS, and the NIMS is nothing without the NRF. Because the NIMS can be applied to any incident, regardless of size, cause, location, or complexity, it could be directly adopted in international contingency operations. It is already known around the world, and its contents are already the inspiration for many foreign emergency management systems. The IORF should work hand in hand with the NIMS, as does the NRF. In order to implement such a sweeping reform, the NIMS/IORF must be mandated by Presidential Directive, as was the NRF/NIMS in HSPD-5, and it should be vetted across the U.S. government.

The NIMS and an IORF would give the U.S. government a playbook for how to conduct stability operations overseas. It would define concepts, identify key players and responsibilities of U.S. government agencies, and explain the interactions of the U.S. government with local governments, NGOs, the private sector, and other international actors. It should use the "Conceptual Model of

Peace Operations” as a basis for establishing the international version of the ESFs and assign lead agencies for each task. The NIMS, based on its flexibility to be used in any incident, should eventually become an international standard for management of stabilization and reconstruction activities, and the United Nations, NGOs, and foreign governments should be encouraged to utilize the principles of the NIMS, as many already do for emergency management. The NIMS is successful because all emergency responders in the U.S. use it. NIMS compliance is required for a state or local organization to receive federal preparedness assistance. Similar incentives could eventually be used for awarding development contracts to NGOs. If all parties involved in a stability operation were to eventually use the NIMS, our ability to successfully unite efforts among various organizations would also greatly increase.

## Conclusion

International contingency operations that require a large civilian response for stabilization and reconstruction tasks are largely in their infancy, whereas emergency management mechanisms have evolved over decades. It would be tragic if the foreign policy community continued to ignore the large field of knowledge and expertise that exists domestically. A contingency operation is a contingency operation, whether domestic or international, and the challenges associated with navigating the complex web of interagency partners is no less challenging domestically. It appears that in managing complex contingency operations, lessons learned stop at the water’s edge. It falls to the academic community and to policymakers to advance or refute the ideas in this paper and evaluate the applicability of the NIMS and NRF to international stability operations, but no good will come from continuing to ignore this potential application of tried interagency principles. The NRF and NIMS are the best tools for managing complex contingency operations that currently exists. If a better system existed for managing the interagency process, the emergency response community would probably already be using it. **IAJ**

## NOTES

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