



# Evil on the Horizon

(AP Photo)

## A Perspective on the Department of State's Role in Securing Man-Portable Air Defense Systems in Syria

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**P**OLICYMAKERS IN WASHINGTON, far removed from the soldiers and marines fighting for their lives in conflicts half a world away, rarely understand the impact their decisions have on our nation's military men and women. Further, and as many of us know all too well, the complexity of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with myriad transnational challenges, reveals that the military element of power alone is not sufficient to achieve national security objectives.

To help remedy the problem, the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) created the Interagency Fellowship Program to familiarize officers with the other elements of national power. One goal of the fellowship, which enables mid-career officers to participate directly in the U.S. interagency process by assigning them to positions within federal departments or agencies, is to improve national security by synchronizing missions, promoting cohesiveness, and ensuring unity of effort with Army and interagency players.<sup>1</sup> During my assignment as an interagency fellow, I served in the Department of State with the Interagency Man-Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) Task Force. MANPADS—often referred to as shoulder-fired missiles—pose a particular threat to both military and civil aviation. In the hands of terrorists, MANPADS could be used to cripple the civil aviation industry in particular and the global economy in general. To prevent such contingencies, the Interagency MANPADS Task Force was constituted in 2007 by order of the Deputies Committee of the National Security Staff. The task force oversees implementation of the International Aviation Threat Reduction Plan and integrates all elements of national power to reduce or eliminate terrorist access to MANPADS and other standoff weapons.

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The MANPADS Task Force, housed in the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement of the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs at State, reports directly to the National Security Staff and includes representatives from the Department of State, Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Homeland Security, the intelligence community, and others. Even though the mission is globally focused, I spent the lion's share of my time planning for the threat posed by MANPADS falling into the hands of terrorists and other nonstate actors during and after the crisis in Syria.

For our purposes, the U.S. planning effort for Syria will provide the lens to examine the unique role played by the State Department within the interagency process, including how the organization functions and works with other players.

Before diving in, it is important to put the MANPADS threat in Syria into context. At the time of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Bashar al-Assad's regime had acquired a sizeable inventory of MANPADS, mostly to counter the Israeli air threat. The Assad regime possessed thousands of ex-Soviet SA-7 MANPADS, as well as a significant number of more advanced systems.

Beyond regime-held stocks, video and photographic evidence from the civil war in Syria has shown opposition forces, including the al-Qaida affiliate al-Nusra Front, in possession of a variety of MANPADS acquired from captured government stockpiles or from international donors.<sup>2</sup> Current evidence reveals a multitude of MANPADS already in the hands of terrorists or at risk of being acquired by such groups in Syria. Most disconcerting is that these terrorist organizations may use instability within Syria to acquire more and better MANPADS and ultimately transport them across borders for future terrorist operations. Combined, these facts make MANPADS in Syria an important national security issue for the United States.

For future events, it is worthwhile for military planners to examine interagency efforts to secure MANPADS in Syria because by understanding current challenges, future interagency planning will be improved. In particular, it is important to understand—

- How the State Department's unique responsibilities, abilities, and culture influence the process.
- How well State partners with DOD.

- How well State is able to coordinate with other interagency partners to plan and execute operations.

The State Department's inclusive nature, focus on diplomacy, and lack of resources enable and force them to coordinate with others to achieve their objectives. The situation in Syria demonstrates the importance of the State-DOD partnership, while simultaneously revealing many of the shortcomings of the relationship. Fortunately, the State Department is well equipped to engage in effective interagency coordination because it has an institutional culture of inclusion and because interagency coordination is a requirement for the execution of foreign policy, both in Washington and at the country team level.

To remedy the shortcomings in State-DOD coordination, I propose two solutions. One involves assigning personnel from each organization into the key planning body of the other early in the process. The other remedy involves expanding existing personnel exchange programs and implementing an incentive structure to draw top-tier talent into those positions. Overall, effective interagency coordination—that is, the harmonious functioning of parts for effective results—can be achieved only when all partners willingly share information and work together toward a common goal.<sup>3</sup>

## Why is the State Department Key?

The Department of State's unique set of responsibilities, abilities, and culture influence its approach toward the crisis in Syria. Here it is important to remember that the State Department's mission (and responsibility) is to use diplomacy to "create a more secure, democratic, and prosperous world for the benefit of the American people and the international community."<sup>4</sup> State uses the following underlying principles to guide their approach toward mission accomplishment.

- First, they focus on building and maintaining bilateral and multilateral relationships with international partners and institutions.
- Next, they work to protect the nation against transnational threats like terrorism, poverty, and disease.
- Finally, they aspire to foster a more democratic and prosperous world that is integrated into the global economy.

Again, State uses the diplomatic element of national power to achieve U.S. foreign policy and national security objectives.

In the case of Syria, diplomacy supports “the Syrian people’s aspirations for a Syrian-led transition to a democratic, inclusive, and unified Syria.”<sup>5</sup> This mission has been extraordinarily difficult to accomplish in the midst of a civil war, and the challenge was magnified by the U.S. decision to close its embassy in Damascus in February 2012. Now, U.S. diplomats must work with and through international partners to set the conditions for success in Syria.

This predicament highlights one of the major limitations of State—namely that diplomats depend on the U.S. military, contractors, and multinational partners for physical security as they pursue foreign policy goals. Limited access to the country significantly limits the State Department’s options to secure MANPADS, support the Syrian people, and protect the United States against various transnational threats.

While the nonpermissive security environment severely limits what State can do, the inclusive nature of the department makes it effective for coordinating

the international response to secure MANPADS in Syria. The State Department has taken a lead role in coordinating with international partners, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to prepare for the likely proliferation of MANPADS from Syrian stocks upon the fall of the Assad regime. Specifically, State conducted detailed discussions with the key U.S. allies known as “Five Eyes” countries (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand) and others (Belgium, France, and Germany) to identify ways to engage the region, leverage multilateral fora, and establish the international way ahead to mitigate the illicit proliferation of MANPADS and other portable advanced conventional weapons from Syria. All this coordination will pay dividends toward preventing a proliferation crisis in the future.

As far as an institutional culture, the Department of State tends to be more freewheeling, deliberative, and inclusive in their planning processes compared to others. According to national security experts Roger George and Harvey Rishikof, State depends on a culture that seeks allies, friends, and coalitions over a range of institutions harnessed to manage global instability.<sup>6</sup>



Members of Ahrar al-Sham brigade, one of the Syrian rebels groups, exercise in a training camp at an unknown place in Syria, 29 November 2013. (AP Photo)



For example, when it came to planning for securing MANPADS in Syria, State's informal nature initially presented some coordination challenges, especially with DOD. It took State a while to figure out how to approach the problem, including how to integrate interagency partners into its informal planning process. Conversely, DOD had multiple plans ready to go on the shelf to contend with the situation in Syria—plans derived through rigorous staff processes such as the military decision-making process and joint operation planning process.

The Department of Defense's formalized system lends a sense of regimen to its planning, something that is sorely missing at State. However, after myriad detailed discussions between State and our counterparts at DOD, we were able to complement one another's internal planning processes by informing and integrating efforts.

## **The Critical Piece: State-DOD Coordination**

State worked closely with DOD planners and other federal agencies to coordinate the response to the threat posed by MANPADS in Syria. Ten-plus years of warfare have taught us that the military element of power alone is not sufficient to achieve national security objectives. In particular, the U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan reveals how important it is to orchestrate all the elements of national power so they work in concert and have mutually supporting effects.

With that in mind, contingency planning for securing MANPADS in the Levant is predicated on a whole-of-government approach. While the U.S. aim is for a diplomatic solution to end the crisis in Syria, the importance of the region to U.S. interests has forced DOD leaders (and planners) to work in earnest with counterparts throughout the government to update existing plans and provide the president with military options to contend with the situation in the region. To that end, State Department planners have worked closely with their DOD and interagency counterparts to coordinate various efforts to secure MANPADS and ensure current DOD plans are reflective of broader U.S. government interests. In fact, the plan to secure MANPADS in Syria has been coordinated throughout the U.S. government to such a degree that it is truly an interagency effort.

Planning for the crisis in Syria—a crisis that is likely to span the spectrum of conflict—is evidence the U.S. military must engage the State Department early and often and be as transparent as possible to achieve organizational goals. Early candid discussions are critical because they reveal those activities best suited for the military and those best left to the diplomatic and technical experts from State. Furthermore, and perhaps more important, a consistent dialogue early between State and the military can mitigate duplication of effort and clearly delineate roles and responsibilities each should play in particular contingencies.

When planning for MANPADS in Syria, planners with the Interagency MANPADS Task Force worked closely with their counterparts in DOD to integrate plans for securing MANPADS into existing DOD efforts. In addition, planners from the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy, the Joint Staff, United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), United States European Command, and relevant defense support agencies kept both the Interagency MANPADS Task Force and the broader State Department apprised of their priorities and plans in general for the crisis in Syria. This coordination enabled each individual organization to understand one another's priorities and concerns and identify the roles and responsibilities each was best suited to undertake in Syria.

The other important factor regarding State and DOD coordination is transparency. A high level of information sharing engenders trust and helps establish a common operational picture among organizations. This is important because parochialism often prevents agencies from fully disclosing the extent and nature of their planning efforts. Transparency between State and DOD was an issue when it came to Syria contingency planning. While planners shared information on issues like assistance, refugee flows, and the like, both sides were reticent to engage in extended dialogue on more detailed planning efforts. Unfortunately, stovepipes and other “cylinders of excellence” remain alive and well within the U.S. interagency planning process; consequently, any U.S. plan is likely to be duplicative and inefficient at best and incomplete and fratricidal at worst. Overall, failure to share information between organizations that are supposed to be part of the same team could lead to distrust and ultimately undermine U.S. government objectives vis-à-vis Syria.

## State's Interagency Coordination is Effective Because...

The State Department, unlike other federal organizations, is well equipped to conduct operations with other nonmilitary departments and agencies because of its inherent organizational culture—namely one of inclusion. State's tendency toward openness means more voices are at the table and, perhaps more importantly, dissenting voices are encouraged among participants. When it came to State Department planning for MANPADS security in Syria, interagency players from DOD, the Department of Homeland Security, the intelligence community, and others were invited and included in various working groups early in the process.

Candid debates over divergent views on issues such as scope, responsibilities, authorities, and funding took place in an open forum. Moreover, the MANPADS Task Force, which is a standing body focused on the MANPADS threat around the world, provided the State Department (and others) an interagency-cleared assessment and perspective on ways to deal with the threat. For this reason, the State Department's plan for securing MANPADS in Syria was more informed and robust than it would have been otherwise.

The other reason State is so well suited for interagency cooperation is that it is forced, by the very nature of the role it plays within our government, to coordinate and synchronize all aspects of the federal bureaucracy in support of foreign policy objectives. Planning efforts by Foreign Service officers and their civil servant counterparts in Washington and within country teams at embassies around the world demand a high degree of interagency collaboration to achieve success. In the case of Syria, Foreign Affairs officers in State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement and representatives of the Interagency MANPADS Task Force worked tirelessly to coordinate with regional desk officers from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, myriad functional bureaus, and the broader U.S. government. They also worked with various international partners and multilateral organizations to capitalize on one another's relative advantage to secure MANPADS in Syria.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, we discussed the extent of State Department coordination with interagency and international partners; however, we did not high-

light the amount of internal coordination that goes on to prepare for situations like the one the United States faces in Syria. It is important to note that nothing State does occurs in a vacuum. Relevant players with both regional and functional perspectives thoroughly debate every issue.

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When it came to planning for the potential threat of MANPADS in Syria, regional bureaus and functional bureaus were brought together to develop a State Department response. This internal coordination was critical when State went ahead to meet with both interagency and international partners.

While large in scale in D.C., coordination like this occurs on a micro-level each day at U.S. embassies around the world where the ambassador is responsible for coordinating U.S. government activities and programs with the host nation. The nature of foreign policy, which demands a whole-of-government approach combined with the State Department culture of inclusion, makes State a key player in the interagency planning process to mitigate the threat posed by MANPADS in Syria.

## Improving State-DOD Cooperation

This analysis demonstrates how effective interagency coordination depends on more than a willingness to engage with partners in the broader U.S. government. Genuine interagency coordination—that is, cooperation to achieve synergistic effects—can only be achieved when all partners work together selflessly toward a common goal. State's institutional culture and focus on diplomacy, combined with limited capabilities, influences its

approach toward securing MANPADS in Syria. Further, the problem set reinforces the importance of a close State-DOD partnership; however, it also reveals many of the shortcomings that still exist regarding interagency cooperation. Finally, the case of Syria provides a clear example for why State is so well equipped to engage in effective interagency coordination and how aspects of their culture could, and should, be adopted by others to improve cooperation.

The good news is that a great deal of institutional effort was expended to prepare for the potential threat posed by MANPADS in Syria. This issue captures the attention of our nation's leadership due to the deleterious effects it could have on global commerce. Clearly, the only way to tackle the issue is through an interagency response, and, arguably, the most important factor for any such response is the State-DOD relationship. Therefore, I offer some ways to improve State-DOD coordination to secure MANPADS in Syria, as well as for the numerous other transnational threats the United States faces.

The first proposal is for situations like the one we face in Syria—that is, contingency planning to mitigate the impact of a particular threat. A way to promote collaboration would be to insert personnel from each organization into the planning body of the other early in the process. For example, in the case of Syria, contingency planning, Foreign Service officers (or civil servants) from Near Eastern Affairs Bureau or the Bureau of Conflict and Stability Operations could be assigned as members of the issue-focused USCENTCOM planning cell as soon as it was stood up. Similarly, assigning

military officers from the USCENTCOM J-5 (or Joint Staff) to either of the aforementioned State Department bureaus would provide a DOD voice in State Department efforts. The benefit of this solution is that it integrates efforts early and is a relatively easy, flexible response for both organizations. Clearly, individuals in selected positions would have to be identified and prepared to serve when and where they are most needed.

Another way, beyond early engagement in the various planning processes, is to expand interagency assignment opportunities and reward select personnel with promotion incentives or some other lucrative benefit. Essentially, this is an argument for expanding the existing CGSC fellowship and other DOD-State personnel exchange program assignments that exist today. I am sure division-level staffs would welcome the addition of State Department political advisors, while State would be more than happy to integrate more military officers within their bureaus and offices.<sup>8</sup>

Further, select officers (Foreign Service and military) should be assigned to counterpart agencies early in their careers to enable subsequent assignments. This would enable those officers to build experiences and contribute to a deeper interagency relationship down the road. A successful expansion of the existing program can only be achieved by providing incentives for participants, such as promotion incentives or some other reward. The benefit will be top-tier talent seeking out interagency positions. Much work remains, but implementation of some of these recommendations would go a long way to improve the situation. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. Ralph Doughty, Information Memo: Summary of the ILE Interagency Fellowship as a Broadening Experience, Fort Leavenworth, KS (2010), 2.

2. Arms Control Association website provides background on MANPADS in Syrian opposition hands, <<http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/manpads>> (12 August 2013).

3. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary provides the definition for "coordination," <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coordination>> (27 April 2013).

4. State Department Mission Statement from <<http://www.state.gov/s/d/rrm/rls/dosstrat/2004/23503.htm>> (22 March 2013).

5. Fact Sheet on U.S. Government Assistance to the Syrian People, <<http://geneva.usmission.gov/2013/03/05/facts-on-u-s-assistance-to-the-syrian-people/>> (22 March 2013).

6. Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof, *The National Security Enterprise: Navigating the Labyrinth* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 92.

7. M. McCreary, 2013. Some of the agencies and departments that were part of the planning process for the crisis in Syria included DOD, DHS, Customs and Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Agency for International Development, Federal Bureau of Investigation, the intelligence community, and others.

8. S. Mull, 2012, memorandum for Michael L. Bruhn, executive secretary, Department of Defense: Personnel Exchange Program between the Departments of Defense and State, Washington, DC, 1. The memorandum of understanding between State and DOD mandates that no more than 98 personnel will be exchanged between the two organizations. Political advisors are generally assigned to DOD military commands in the United States and overseas and to service chiefs of staff in the DOD; (2) military academies or war colleges as faculty; or other foreign affairs personnel. No political advisors are currently assigned to division-level staffs or lower.