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# Evaluating Female Engagement Team Effectiveness in Afghanistan

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**Evaluating Female Engagement Team Effectiveness in Afghanistan**

Anna Catherine Coll

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of the  
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in International Relations- Political Science

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A.C.C.

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## **Introduction**

The United States and Afghan Northern Alliance forces toppled the Taliban government in 2001 in the early months of Operation Enduring Freedom with relative ease. Beginning in 2002, however, the Taliban and a number of other groups<sup>1</sup> launched a sustained campaign to overthrow the government of Afghanistan and force the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces.<sup>2</sup> Within a year, the Taliban and other insurgent groups had expanded into areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan, taking advantage of the central government's failure to extend governance to the country's rural areas.<sup>3</sup> Large unit operations undertaken early by the United States to destroy insurgent forces yielded mixed results, and anti-government forces continued to grow.<sup>4</sup> By 2006, the Afghan government faced a full-blown insurgency.<sup>5</sup>

Despite increased U.S. troop levels in the country, the insurgency in Afghanistan has proved remarkably strong and adaptable. Today, insurgents continue to engage in low-intensity warfare against NATO and Afghan troops, as well as in the targeted assassination of government officials. The security situation remains tenuous; a United Nations report from this year estimates that more than 3,000 civilians were killed in the war in 2011, the fifth year in a row that number had increased.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, doubts about the legitimacy of the Afghan government persist. In January 2009, President Hamid Karzai's approval rating hovered at 52 percent, down 31 percentage points from his highest approval rating in 2005.<sup>7</sup> Allegations of electoral fraud related to Karzai's

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Taliban movement, insurgent forces included the so-called "Haqqani network" and

<sup>2</sup> Jones 2008, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>4</sup> Mansoor 2006, 78.

<sup>5</sup> Jones 2008, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Magnowski 2012.

<sup>7</sup> ABC News 2009.

reelection in late 2009 further contributed to the leader's declining popularity. The insurgency in Afghanistan also continues to benefit from outside funding and support as well as sanctuary in Pakistan.

Recognizing the futility of early operations focused on targeting the enemy directly, the United States and its allies embarked on a population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign starting in 2006, which focused on enabling and supporting the Afghan government's efforts to defeat the insurgency.<sup>8</sup> The population-centric approach, which the United States and coalition forces continue to pursue to this day, is laid out clearly in 2006's FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*, a collaborative effort between the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps that was strongly influenced by the classical theorists, most notably French Army officer David Galula. Today's dominant population-centric COIN paradigm maintains that the population constitutes the key battleground in the competition between insurgent and counterinsurgent; each side fights to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate.<sup>9</sup> According to advocates of the contemporary population-centric approach, "Victory will be gained when [isolation of the insurgents from their cause and support] is maintained by the people's active support."<sup>10</sup>

One hallmark of the United States' population-centric strategy in Afghanistan has been the development of specialized teams tasked with engaging local populations. One such team is the Female Engagement Team (FET), which the military first developed in 2009 to overcome cultural barriers to access Afghan females, a previously untouchable segment of the Afghan population. The job of the all-female teams is to engage local

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<sup>8</sup> Ken and Smith 2011, 1.

<sup>9</sup> FM 3-24, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Cohen et al. 2006, 50.

women, and at times men and children, in support of battle owners' counterinsurgency objectives. The FET mission statement has undergone many modifications, but can currently be summarized as follows: influence the population through persistent and consistent interaction to create stability and security.

For its relatively small size, the program has received an enormous amount of attention and praise. While the teams are frequently heralded as a success both in military circles and in the media, I contend that assertions that the FET program has been a success are problematic. The FET program has been promoted and defended as a critical element of population-centric counterinsurgency that separates the insurgency from the population on which it depends for support, but there has been no meaningful assessment from which one can make conclusions about the contribution of the teams as a COIN tool.

Specifically, I argue that current assessment models for the FET program are insufficient in two respects. First, while the military has collected a significant amount of data on their independent variable—the activities FETs have done to engage the Afghan population—they have failed to gather in any systematic fashion data that connect the actions of the teams to the mechanisms of population-centric COIN through which they are believed to operate. In particular, the military has not convincingly shown that the outreach conducted by the teams influences women and their communities to stop enabling the insurgency and instead support coalition forces and the Government of Afghanistan (GIROA). Second, the military has failed to establish a causal link between FETs and successful outcomes, most notably, a decrease in insurgency violence. In the absence of sound assessment on which to draw, proponents of the program have relied

heavily upon untested assumptions, sometimes problematic, about the impact of FET engagements among the population, as well as the relevance of those engagements for meeting the goal of weakening the insurgency, to conclude that the program has been a success.

My argument raises an additional question: why is it that assessment models are so poorly developed? I argue that cultural-psychological explanations and bureaucratic politics explanations help us understand the current assessment model for the teams. One possible reason for the current model of assessment is that those evaluating the FET program are confident that the effectiveness of the population-centric COIN approach has been proven; accordingly, programs that correspond to that model can be assumed to be working. Bureaucratic politics explanations may also serve to explain assessment practices: measuring inputs is seen as a way to secure both funding and prestige. I also explore why proponents of the program face unique incentives to make hasty conclusions about the success of the FET program even if they recognize the deficiencies of the current assessment model.

This thesis proceeds as follows. The next section provides an overview of the Marine Corps and Army Female Engagement Team programs. Afterwards, I introduce the strategic justifications for the FET concept provided by its advocates. Based on these justifications, I develop a simple model to shed light on how the teams are believed to operate. I then describe how the Marine and Army teams have been assessed to date. Next, I identify problems associated with the current model of assessment for the program. I conclude by offering potential explanations for the persistent problems in the FET assessment model.

## **CHAPTER I: Female Engagement in the Context of Population-Centric Counterinsurgency**

### **Development of Counterinsurgency Theory and the FET program**

Contemporary population-centric COIN theory contends that the population, not enemy forces, represents the decisive battleground in the competition between insurgent and counterinsurgent. Mobilizing the population, the so-called “neutral” majority<sup>11</sup>, is thus the primary struggle in an internal war.<sup>12</sup> The population-centric approach can be contrasted with the enemy-centric approach, or “direct approach,” which prioritizes kinetic activities aimed at killing or capturing insurgents.<sup>13</sup> Adherents to population-centric COIN doctrine do not argue that enemy forces should be ignored altogether. In fact, the Field Manual articulates the need for the elimination of enemy forces to establish early control over an assigned area.<sup>14</sup> What distinguishes population-centric COIN theory from enemy-centric COIN theory is its assertion that the enemy should not be given the same level of emphasis as the population by counterinsurgents. The enemy-centric approach is flawed, argues the Field Manual, because killing every insurgent is virtually impossible and most insurgencies can replace losses rapidly.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, enemy-centric operations can breed resentment among the population, potentially creating more insurgents through every attempt to eliminate the enemy.

FM 3-24’s assertion that the population is the prize is strongly influenced by the classical theorists of counterinsurgency, most notably French Army officer David Galula and British military officer Robert Thompson. Both authors argue that insurgents must

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<sup>11</sup> Galula 1964, 53.

<sup>12</sup> FM 3-24 2006, 1-40.

<sup>13</sup> See Owen 2011.

<sup>14</sup> FM 3-24 2006, 5-59.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1-128 and 1-129.

maintain their connection to the population because it is what enables them to survive and expand. Current COIN experts share the same view. John A. Nagl reflects on the importance of dividing people the people from the insurgents: “Once the local and regular armed units are cut off from their sources of supply, personnel, and most importantly, intelligence, they wither on the vine or are easily coerced to surrender or destroyed by the security forces with the aid of the local populace.”<sup>16</sup>

It is somewhat surprising that the Marine Corps and the Army were both relatively slow to establish formal teams for direct female engagement in Afghanistan, as population-centric COIN’s assertion that the population is the prize would dictate their need. Demographic data for Afghanistan is unreliable, but one estimate from 2007 holds that women comprise approximately 49% of the total Afghan population.<sup>17</sup> In a discussion of the amount of popular support required for the counterinsurgent to win, FM 3-24 notes that because of the ease with which disorder can be created, getting 51% of the population is not enough; rather, “a solid majority is often essential.”<sup>18</sup> If we accept this premise, ignoring Afghan women would effectively doom any counterinsurgency strategy.

In addition, military manuals dating from 2006 reference the importance of engaging women in COIN operations. FM 3-24 explicitly mentions the significance of winning women in Appendix A: Guide for Action, the manual’s outline of techniques necessary for successful counterinsurgency operations. A-35 emphasizes that women are a critical gateway for obtaining the support of families and in turn the populace.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> Nagl 2002, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Kumar and Raj 2007, 79.

<sup>18</sup> FM 3-24 2006, 1-108.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., A-35.

United States Marine Corps' *Small-Unit Leaders' Guide to Counterinsurgency*, published in June 2006, also draws attention to the role of women in counterinsurgency operations:

“Work to get them on your side and do not dismiss their opinion/influence.”<sup>20</sup>

It would logically follow that to mobilize the population to isolate the insurgency one must first gain access to it. A respect for Afghan cultural norms requires that female counterinsurgents be used to interact with the Afghan female population. Afghanistan is not the only arena in which U.S. forces have had to use female military members to overcome challenges related to traditional gender norms in COIN operations. In Iraq, female military members were used both for search purposes through the Lioness Program during stabilization missions<sup>21</sup>, as well as in an Iraq Women's Engagement Program. Even more so than Iraq, Afghan society is characterized by conservative cultural norms concerning gender. Underlying these norms is an unwritten legal code known as *Pashtunwali*, subscribed to by Afghanistan's dominant ethnic group.<sup>22</sup> In this tribal code, women play a symbolic role at society's core and their honor must be protected. Adherence to the code is seen clearly in the strong division of gender roles and the tradition of *purdah*, or segregation between the sexes.<sup>23</sup> This gender segregation is maintained both through women's use of the veil and their seclusion in walled family compounds.<sup>24</sup> Afghan females are also prohibited from communicating with males to whom they are not related.<sup>25</sup> Due to the code of behavior associated with *purdah*, male

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<sup>20</sup> *Small-Unit Leaders' Guide to Counterinsurgency* 2006, 45.

<sup>21</sup> The Lioness Program placed female Marines at tactical control points throughout the country to prevent insurgents from using females to smuggle contraband or act as suicide bombers.

<sup>22</sup> Abirafeh 2009, 108.

<sup>23</sup> Barakat and Wardell 2002, 918.

<sup>24</sup> Moore et al. 2011, 4.

<sup>25</sup> USMC 2<sup>nd</sup> Expeditionary Brigade FET, 24.

counterinsurgent forces are barred from interacting with Afghan women; only females can access the Afghan females in a culturally sensitive manner.

Moreover, advocates of the FET concept also argue that it is important to use *military* females—as opposed to government-employed civilians or women active in non-governmental organizations, for instance—to access the female population because the outreach the teams conduct requires that teams patrol and operate in zones where the security situation is volatile. That teams are used in areas of operation with high threat levels should come as no surprise; as I discuss below, the teams are conceived of as a COIN tool that contributes to the establishment of security within a given area. While using female civilian counterinsurgents to perform many of the teams’ tasks might be ideal, this preferred division of labor is largely unattainable.<sup>26</sup>

The first FET was an *ad hoc* Marine team created to support a 2009 cordon-and-knock operation in Farah Province to detain two men involved in an IED attack.<sup>27</sup> After the cordon was established, the commander leading the operation asked a village elder if female Marines, accompanied by members of the Afghan National Police, could search several houses.<sup>28</sup> Once inside the homes, the FET distributed school supplies and hygiene products to the homes’ female Pashtun residents and spent several hours chatting with the local women, who proved remarkably receptive to meeting with female Marines.<sup>29</sup> Several days later, the unit and the FET returned to the village to clarify the mission of the Marines in the area as well as to deliver additional supplies.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Watson 2011, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Mehra 2010, 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Pottinger, Jilani, and Russo 2010, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Pottinger 2009.

Following this team's success in accessing the female population, a 2009 after action review penned by the team's organizer, Captain Matt Pottinger, recommended that such teams be used actively as part of the ongoing American counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan: "The benefits (the acquisition of valuable information and the opportunity to positively influence an otherwise untouchable half of the local populace)," the review noted, "clearly outweighed the primary cost (having to take a handful of female Marines from their regular billets on a period, temporary basis)."<sup>31</sup> Throughout the rest of 2009, Marine FETs continued to be assembled upon the request of maneuver units. From July 2009 to December 2009, it is estimated that *ad hoc* teams conducted about 70 short-term search and engagement missions.<sup>32</sup> In March 2010, the first platoon of all female Marines trained as full-time FETs deployed to Afghanistan to work in Regional Command Southwest.<sup>33</sup> The program has since expanded. Marine teams in use today consist of a non-commissioned officer who serves as a team leader and another Marine; when possible, teams are augmented with a female corpsman and a linguist.

The U.S. Army has also recently adopted the FET program. While the Army had identified a need for trained military females starting in 2004, the Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) initially created to meet that need operated only with Special Forces and Ranger units.<sup>34</sup> It was not until January 2011, when the Army convened a three-day FET working group in Kabul, that a unified FET program was created that would assign all-female teams to units outside special operations units.<sup>35</sup> Currently, the Army assigns FETs to each Brigade Combat Team (BCT) deploying to Afghanistan, as well as to each

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<sup>31</sup> Pottinger 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Bedell 2011, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Lowe 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 9.

Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).<sup>36</sup> Army teams, like the Marine teams upon which they were modeled, consist of two female Soldiers and are sometimes augmented by female translators and medical personnel.

### **The strategic logic of female engagement**

Both the Marine Corps and Army Female Engagement Teams have been justified as a critical instrument in commanders' population-centric counterinsurgency toolboxes, with utility across the full spectrum of COIN operations.<sup>37</sup> Flynn and Bras confirm: "Female engagement is not a side project; it is a critical element of population-centric COIN."<sup>38</sup> Intermediate goals of female engagement are as follows: women do not support or enable the insurgency; women influence their families and communities not to support the Taliban; and women influence family and community members to support the government of Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> The ultimate goal of FETs engaging with the population according to Lisa Brooks, a Research Psychologist with the U.S. Army Research Institute, "is to create stability and security in the region."<sup>40</sup> This is consistent with the causal logic of population-centric COIN, which advances that "winning over" the population contributes to a decline in the strength of the insurgency. It is worth noting that the preliminary goals for FETs listed above might be edited to include males as a direct target of influence, considering that the teams also interact with Afghan men. In fact, numerous military documents discuss how Afghan males may be more interested in interacting with military females than military males out of pure curiosity or because they

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<sup>36</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 9.

<sup>37</sup> *IMEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* 2011, 2.d.1

<sup>38</sup> Flynn and Bras 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Brooks 2010, 4; Wolfgang, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Lisa Brooks, e-mail to author, March 2, 2012.

find military females less threatening.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, I present below the rationale given for engaging with females specifically, as that underlies many of the calls for increased female engagement.

The preliminary goals outlined above reflect the belief that Afghan women wield a large amount of sway in their families and communities: accessing the female half of the population not only matters in terms of increasing the sheer number of people who can be influenced by counterinsurgents, but is also critically important because of the nature of the role that women play in traditional societies. Defenders of the FET program contend that Afghan women exercise considerable influence within their communities as inter-family arbitrators, a fact that they believe has been underappreciated.<sup>42</sup> While most insurgent fighters are men, and the conflict in Afghanistan has not seen as many female combatants as in Iraq<sup>43</sup>, women are extremely influential in the social networks that insurgents exploit. For example, counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen, who has praised the FET concept, proposes that “winning” over neutral or friendly women in traditional societies “builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermine the insurgents.”<sup>44</sup> Army Lieutenant Colonel Janet R. Holliday, in a piece on the essential role FETs can play, describes:

The coalition force use of females to break through cultural and religious barriers and misperceptions to reach Afghan women exhibits a show of trust and respect to Afghan traditions and Islamic values. Understanding and respect can breed cooperation, and when this cooperation spreads across families, a powerful tool emerges for fighting the insurgency.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *IMEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* 2011, 2.d.3; Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 63.

<sup>42</sup> Pottinger et al. 2010; Mihalisko 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Claire Russo, interview with author, February 22, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Kilcullen 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Holliday 2012, 91.

In a paper titled “Opinion Dynamics in Gendered Social Networks: An Examination of Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan,” Moore et al. more closely examine the theoretical justifications for engaging Afghan women, drawing upon opinion dynamics models. The group simulated an Afghan community through an abstracted network model, which captured the existence of strong social ties among Afghan women and generally lower levels of affective association and opinion propagation between males characteristic of Afghan culture, and modeled the effect of outside actors’ influences. The results the authors obtained through the simulation support the hypothesis that FETs, by extending contact to the female community within a population, “can bring about a greater shift in opinion than engagement teams who interact with the male community alone.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, FETs interacting with a female or integrated population were found to be significantly more effective at countering opposition influence than an allied team interacting with a fully male population at the 95% confidence level.<sup>47</sup>

A specific and oft-repeated assertion put forth by advocates of the FET program encompassing ideas about women’s unique roles relates to the power Afghan women exercise *within* their families, particularly over their children. Women are not only primary caregivers, but also exert tremendous influence over the “career” trajectories of their sons. Drawing upon Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell’s observation that in Quranic teaching the mother is the gateway to heaven, and that sons in turn require a mother’s support before going to the front line<sup>48</sup>, FET proponents have emphasized that women are the difference between their sons becoming peacemakers or insurgents.<sup>49</sup> One

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<sup>46</sup> Moore et al. 2011, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>48</sup> Baraket and Wardell 2002, 919-920.

<sup>49</sup> Allen et al. 2010, 3.

2010 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) document promoting the FET concept describes: “The fact that 44.6% of the Afghan population is under the age of 14 underscores the need to engage the women who are the caregivers and thus primary influencers of the next generation in their youth, prior to and even during the attainment of fighting age.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, FETs can leverage women’s roles within their families to limit the insurgency’s recruitment pool.<sup>51</sup>

The primary means through which the teams develop and exploit relationships with the local population is by conducting presence patrols and engagements and hosting outreach events through the full spectrum of COIN operations. In the shape and clear phase, FETs have been used to establish early presence and reputation, form relationships with the local community and disseminate information, all in order to build trust and confidence.<sup>52</sup> In the hold phase, teams have been used to engage the community’s entire population and demonstrate coalition commitment to the community. Teams hold *shuras*, another word for community meetings, and other humanitarian and civic action engagements, during this stage.<sup>53</sup> During these events, it is common for FETs to conduct surveys that shed light on the problems facing a village population as well as that population’s propensity to support or not support GIRoA, which enhances their unit’s understanding of the total population picture.<sup>54</sup> Information gleaned from previous engagements is later used in the build phase to shape targeted reconstruction and development efforts<sup>55</sup>, particularly those facilitating the development of women’s

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<sup>50</sup> Vedder 2010, III.

<sup>51</sup> Ricks 2009.

<sup>52</sup> *I MEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* 2011, 2.d.1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.d.1

<sup>54</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 64.

<sup>55</sup> *I MEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* 2011, 2.d.1

political and economic opportunities.<sup>56</sup> Reflecting on the Marine teams' ability to extend influence over the population, Mihalisko describes, "By virtue of the role FETs perform [as outreach Marines], they serve as yet another platform to show local nationals that Coalition forces and GIROA work in the interest of the *entire* community."<sup>57</sup>

Heavily emphasized are the contributions that FETs can make across all phases of COIN to information operations (IO), broadly defined as efforts through which one side shapes the narrative of the conflict to gain an advantage over the enemy.<sup>58</sup> While FM 3-24's information operations section is relatively short<sup>59</sup>, the manual argues that "IO make significant contributions to setting conditions for the success of all other LLOs," or Logical Lines of Operations.<sup>60</sup> Through medical, education, and civic outreach engagements, for instance, FETs may discredit Taliban propaganda declaring that Coalition Forces rape local women or disregard women's role in Islam.<sup>61</sup> In addition, once relationships have been established, teams can spread GIROA and ISAF-friendly messages.<sup>62</sup> A presentation on FETs compiled by the Marine Corps 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Expeditionary Brigade Female Engagement Team asserts: "This war is a battle of perceptions. Every conversation with an Afghan has the potential to reinforce the message that the insurgency supporters are the enemy of the people, thus driving a wedge between the insurgency and the local population."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 2.d.1

<sup>57</sup> Mihalisko.

<sup>58</sup> Exum 2010, 217.

<sup>59</sup> Hoffman (2007) notes that the lack of attention to the information dimension of counterinsurgency in FM 3-24 may have occurred because Army and Marine doctrine in this area is "fairly solid" and the manual's authors may not have felt the need to repeat information in existing publications.

<sup>60</sup> FM 3-24 2006, 5-19.

<sup>61</sup> Mihalisko.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> USMC 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Expeditionary Brigade FET, 15.

The focus of the engagements and outreach conducted by FETs varies by district depending on the perceived needs of the local population. A news article on the Army's Task Force Lonestar Female Engagement Team describes, for example, how the team conducted visits to a local girls school in Farah.<sup>64</sup> One former Army FET officer with whom I spoke described her team's project to bring clean water to a community that had previously been collecting water from a contaminated drinking well; the team taught local families how to make small scale solar stills to address the problem until GIRoA fixed the broken pump.<sup>65</sup> A deployment after action report (AAR) covering the second full-time iteration of the Marine program describes how FETs, using information collected from regular women's *shuras* in Now Zad and Garm Ser, coordinated and planned for local women's centers and projects to provide sources of income for women interested in working. All these activities are united in that they serve as ways for the teams to build local trust and confidence in the Afghan government and coalition forces so that local populations do not support or enable the insurgency.

It is worth stressing that while FETs are believed to undermine the insurgency and contribute to security, they were not created to help counterinsurgent forces fight the enemy *directly*. Most significantly, the teams were not created to serve as intelligence assets or to be used for search purposes. The contribution of FETs to creating security in the districts that they work in is believed to lie in the engagement and outreach work the teams do: the teams *show* communities that they work in their interest, and through this encourage the local population to defect to their side, depriving the insurgency of the support it relies upon. As will be seen below, this distinction is sometimes not well

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<sup>64</sup> Hutchinson 2011.

<sup>65</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, January 24, 2012.

understood, and confusion about how FETs are believed to operate at times pervades FET assessment.

## CHAPTER II: The Female Engagement Team Assessment Model

### **The FET puzzle**

Appraisals of the program by the military and media have been quite positive. The Army Commander's Guide to Female Engagement, for instance, declares FETs to be a proven concept and notes: "The Marines accepted the FET concept early and employed it on a large scale well before the army. To their credit, they have had great success using it."<sup>66</sup> A deployment after action report on the second full-time iteration of the Marine FET program observes that FETs have been successful in districts of Helmand province in all stages of COIN.<sup>67</sup>

FETs have also been the subject of a considerable amount of media coverage as well as the focus of several journal articles. For example, in a blog post, Tom Ricks remarked, "The bottom line is that done right, [the FET approach] works surprisingly well, with benefits among the population that can't be achieved by males."<sup>68</sup> A recent article in *Military Review* by Army Lieutenant Colonel Janet R. Holliday declares, "Coalition forces are finding that one of the best ways to achieve strategic goals is to use female marines and soldiers to influence the family unit."<sup>69</sup> Another journal article by Michael T. Flynn and Roxanne Bras concludes, "FETs work."<sup>70</sup>

What is puzzling, however, is that both the teams and proponents of the program have a tendency to fall short of rational assessment of the program. Conclusions about FET success have been made in the absence of complete assessment of the program, which I describe below. For one to draw conclusions about the success of the FET

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<sup>66</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 3.

<sup>67</sup> *1 MEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* PPT 2011, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Ricks 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Holliday 2012, 90.

<sup>70</sup> Flynn and Bras 2010.

concept, one must either adopt an extremely limited definition of what constitutes effectiveness, or make extensive and questionable assumptions about the relationship between female engagement and insurgency strength.

### **Assessing the FET program**

The chain of reasoning through which FETs should function according to the justification for the program described in the previous section, is as follows:

*Engagement → influence among women and through women → decrease in the strength of the insurgency.*

As outlined in previous sections, the mechanism underlying the movement from engagement to influence is believed to be “hearts-and-minds”-style social and humanitarian provision and information operations: both are used to show Afghan females that coalition forces and the Afghan government hold their interests at heart. Having seen that counterinsurgents work on their behalf, Afghan women should influence others within their social networks not to support the insurgency as well. Driving the connection between counterinsurgent influence over the population and a decrease in the insurgency is the fact that as local populations turn to the counterinsurgent side, the insurgency finds itself deprived of its freedom of movement, its source of intelligence, and its resources, be they money or recruits.

In the above model, engagement should be understood as an input. More engagement, provided that it is done “well,” should lead to greater perceived legitimacy of the government and coalition forces by the population, and in turn increased counterinsurgent influence among the population; that increased influence could be

viewed as an output. Finally, influence over the population should lead to a decrease in the potency of the insurgency according to the logic of population-centric COIN in which FETs are situated. After all, increasing FET influence over the population should prevent insurgents from maintaining connectivity to the population, which enables them to survive and expand. Measures that capture the strength of insurgency should be appreciated as outcome metrics. For FETs to be deemed a success, we need to have measured something at each of these nodes in a specific area of operation and appreciate a link between them. I discuss below how FET assessment to date has allowed us, if at all, to understand the chain I lay out above.

In order to develop as clear a picture of FET assessment as possible, I gathered data from a number of sources. First, I acquired after action reports and reviews for several Marine FET deployments as well as reports on Army FET operations, which describe FET accomplishments, discuss lessons learned, and provide guidance for the future employment of the teams. Second, I interviewed members of the military and civilians who have been involved with the Marine Corps and Army programs. Among those I interviewed were officers-in-charge of FET deployments, non-commissioned officers serving on the teams, civilian advisors to the teams, and researchers involved in developing FET training packages and refining FET assessment models.

My data has at least two limitations. First, while I was able to gain access to sensitive material on the program, I was not able to access classified material. Reports on individual team missions are classified to protect the identities of the Afghans referred to in them. I am nonetheless confident that I was able to develop a good understanding of how FET assessment has been conducted to date both through the reports I was able to

access and by asking those on the teams what measures of effectiveness they were tracking and reporting to commanders. Moreover, the reports that I was able to obtain are those covering multi-month deployments or long-term operations of the teams. These are the kinds of reports which one would expect to draw out FET assessment through the above chain. A second limitation of my data is that I have to treat my sources as anonymous at various points, and some of the information in the reports I cite is redacted.

The following sub-sections reveal that FET assessment to date is not complete. Assessment centers heavily on tracking inputs. Indicators about the influence the teams have had are tracked inconsistently, and no reports on or appraisals of the program tie FET presence to a decrease in insurgent violence.

#### *The input: engagement with Afghan women*

As I mentioned above, engagement with Afghan women should be considered an input in any assessment model of the teams. Quantitative and anecdotal data on the program to date allow us to understand the engagement part of this puzzle fairly well.

The military has been highly effective in tracking the numbers of engagements the teams conduct. A Marine Corps FET Deployment after action report covering the deployment of the first full-time FET from March 2010 to October 2010 notes, for example, that the teams conducted 3,136 engagements during 576 dismounted movements.<sup>71</sup> The 10.2 Deployment After Action Report covering the subsequent Marine FET deployment to Helmand province from September 2010 to April 2011 also lists the number of missions the teams conducted, including a breakdown by type of engagement and a tracker of the numbers of different kinds of engagement over time. In the

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<sup>71</sup> *IMEF FET 10.1 Deployment AAR* 2010, 6.

PowerPoint accompanying that AAR, quantitative information is provided for each district in Helmand in which the teams conducted engagements. For instance, the three teams operating in twelve villages in the district of Garm Ser engaged 1,374 men and 727 women. Over the course of the deployment, the teams in Garm Ser conducted 35 women's *shuras* and eight projects in support of women's economic opportunities, as well as one health initiative.<sup>72</sup> In the district of Nawa, one team worked in five villages. The team engaged 264 men and 379 women, coordinated two projects in support of female economic opportunities, and held one *shura* on Patrol Base Jaker, one of the Marine Corp's bases.<sup>73</sup> Interviews with more recent Marine team members reveal that numbers of engagements and projects continue to be reported. Like the Marine teams, Army FETs have started to report numbers of *shuras* and engagements to their commanders.<sup>74</sup>

We also have a significant amount of anecdotal data that confirms FETs have conducted outreach activities. For instance, the Marine Corps 10.1 Deployment After Action Report previously referred to describes how the teams conducted "enhanced medical outreach programs" in districts by providing medical assistance from the FET Independent Duty Corpsman.<sup>75</sup> The Marine Corps FET 10.2 Deployment After Action Report describes how teams held women's *shuras* in Now Zad and Garm Ser, allowing local women the opportunity to express the community's needs and concerns.<sup>76</sup> Information gathered from those meetings was then used to develop projects to provide income sources for women interested in working. A separate after action review of the

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<sup>72</sup> I MEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR PPT 2011, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>74</sup> Lauren N. Luckey, e-mail to author, January 28, 2012.

<sup>75</sup> I MEF FET 10.1 Deployment AAR 2010, 6.

<sup>76</sup> I MEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR 2011, 2.d.1.

deployment of a single Marine Corps team during the 10.2 deployment describes how the team was able to coordinate women's clinics and schools in a highly kinetic area.<sup>77</sup>

The ability of FETs to collect atmospheric and disseminate information is also suggested by anecdotes and numerical data. For example, Mihalisko summarizes how FETs sometimes accompanied a midwife sponsored by the Ministry of Public Health on her visits to new villages to inform female village members that she was able to see female patients.<sup>78</sup> A report on Operation Da Khozo Hoqoq, a series of shuras that the PRT Nangarhar Female Engagement Team conducted as part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's "Elimination of Violence Against Women Campaign," describes how Army FETs informed local women about the Afghan EVAW law to end harmful traditional violence against women as well as the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) through presentations and by handing out tri-folds that the women could take back to their families and villages.<sup>79</sup> To track the quantity of information distributed by the teams, it is not uncommon for FETs to report the number of informational items like brochures handed out to women attending events held by the teams.<sup>80</sup>

While the answer to the question of whether FETs have been successful at accessing and engaging the population generally appears to be yes, not every team has had easy access and smooth outreach. For example, while Army FETs in Nangarhar province of RC-East enjoyed fairly open access to the female population, their FET counterparts in Kunar province were unable to achieve the same access to the population

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<sup>77</sup> *After Action Review of Female Engagement Team Deployment for Northern (Redacted)* 2011 I, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Mihalisko.

<sup>79</sup> Goehler 2012, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Lauren N. Luckey, e-mail to author, January 28, 2012.

because the Afghan government's Department of Women's Affairs (DOWA)<sup>81</sup> in that province did not want the teams to hold shuras.<sup>82</sup>

How important are the data on the number and types of engagements the teams have conducted? The data are significant for at least two reasons. First, collecting data about numbers and types of engagement is a necessary first step in evaluating FETs. We would hypothesize, for example, that in areas where FETs have been deployed extensively, community satisfaction with COIN efforts and the Afghan government should be high, and insurgent violence should be low provided that we have accounted for selection effects. Thus, we want to have data on force lay down and their levels of efforts to engage the population.

Second, the sheer number of engagements teams have conducted refutes the argument that community engagement would be difficult, if not impossible. During the program's early stages, some members of the military had voiced concern that Pashtun men would be offended by the presence of American women and would not welcome them to engage with females in their families. FETs have generally not only been able to interact with local women, which male Marines and Soldiers had been unable to do, but also may be key in *initiating* access with the broader population. The 10.2 AAR describes, for instance, how locals in Sangin were initially unwilling to engage with coalition forces; the FETs were among the first forces to overcome this barrier and later became a key source for local atmospherics for the battalion.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Departments of Women's Affairs are branches of the Afghan Government's Ministry of Women's Affairs, a policymaking body created in 2002 with the aim of promoting women's rights and advancement (Cortright and Persinger 2010, 8).

<sup>82</sup> Kristin Goehler, e-mail to author, January 30, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> *IMEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* 2011, 2.d.1.

The data also show that the teams interact with high numbers of Afghan men. The same after action report described above analyzes the reasons for this positive reception among the male population:

Due to cultural stereotypes and assumptions, Afghan men do not view female Marines with the same suspicions or skepticism with which they may view male Marines. In addition, since Afghan women are sheltered from society, the presence of women is a curiosity. As a result, men are frequently more unguarded with western women and are often even eager to speak with the FETs.<sup>84</sup>

This phenomenon is discussed in many pieces on the teams as Afghan men seeing American women as a sort of “third gender.”<sup>85</sup>

*Have FET engagements influenced the population?*

While extremely low levels of engagement likely have little influence on the propensity of the local population to support GIRoA and coalition forces or the insurgency, we cannot automatically know if high levels of engagement are having the desired effect on the population. As one Marine who worked on the program notes, “A successful team may coincidentally have a number of Shuras, patrols and/or engagements. I do not believe that the quantity of anything equates to success.”<sup>86</sup> Kilcullen echoes this sentiment more broadly: “[Input metrics] tell us what we are doing but not the effect we are having.”<sup>87</sup> It is not unimportant that the level of engagement over time is tracked, but one must remember that this information means nothing in isolation. It is necessary to continue assessment along the chain I identify in the beginning of this section.

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<sup>84</sup> *IMEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* 2011, 2.d.3.

<sup>85</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 4-5; Mihalisko.

<sup>86</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, February 21, 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Kilcullen 2010 58-59.

Influence is undoubtedly more difficult to measure than levels of efforts to engage the population, but it remains absolutely essential to find and track some metrics that suggest that engagement has had some preliminary effect on the population's interest or willingness to support the insurgency or GIRoA respectively, as this is mechanism through which population-centric COIN predicts the insurgency is weakened or sustained. As people are "won over" to the side of the counterinsurgent, material support, supply of intelligence, and supply of manpower to the insurgents should decrease, undercutting the insurgency.

Indicators of progress at this nexus would be things like improved quality of interaction and greater support for FET-led initiatives. One of the critical things to note about understanding this step is that it not only requires that one determines some appropriate metrics, but also that one track them *over time*. Our ability to consider this link in the FET equation, particularly on the Army side, has been seriously impaired by shaky and inconsistent reporting procedures.

Improved quality of interaction might be suggested by things such as better information and tip-offs on insurgent activity provided to the teams by the population, one indicator suggested by Kilcullen.<sup>88</sup> Advocates of female engagement frequently offer stories about teams receiving actionable information and intelligence. In northern Nahr-e-Saraj, for example, a local man willing only to speak to the FET offered information that led to the discovery of five IEDs.<sup>89</sup> An additional example of FETs receiving valuable intelligence is an instance in which a FET operating in Garm Ser received information

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<sup>88</sup> Kilcullen 2010, 41.

<sup>89</sup> *I MEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* 2011, 2.d.1.

from an elder that led to the detention of three IED makers.<sup>90</sup> Presented alone these anecdotes tell us very little. While it is, of course, positive that the teams are provided information that can be used to thwart potential insurgent attacks on NATO forces, these stories don't help us understand anything about the utility of the FET version of engagement necessarily. Only if reporting captures the frequency of these tips over time as engagements increase can we gain a clearer view of progress in *influencing* the population in a specific sector.

Some reports have attempted to establish trends over time. For instance, the Marine FET 10.2 Deployment After Action Report PPT presents data from which one can calculate that the the teams hosted 280% more engagements in January 2010 through March 2011 than they had the previous three-month period; enemy activity information collected in the January through March period was 152% higher than information collected during the preceding October through December period.<sup>91</sup> To the extent that we accept frequency of tip-offs as a reflection of the local population's level of support for GIRoA and the forces supporting it, it appears that increased FET engagement has exerted some influence over the communities they work in as predicted. That said, we should make this conclusion cautiously due to the problem of enemy adaptation. As efforts by FETs and other counterinsurgents intensify in a given area of operation, the enemy may launch more attacks in that area. Unless we track the number of attacks insurgents attempt to launch overall, which the teams do not do, we cannot know if more enemy intelligence received by the teams is a function of greater influence or simply due to the fact that violence levels are going up. In other words: is a greater percentage of

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<sup>90</sup> Mihalisko.

<sup>91</sup> *I MEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* PPT 2011, 5.

information on enemy activity being provided to the counterinsurgent by the local population, or is more enemy activity simply being reported because violence is increasing as a whole?

More importantly, however, we should not view this as a measure of FET effectiveness, as the FET mission is not one of intelligence collection.<sup>92</sup> While the teams' occasional acquisition of valuable tactical intelligence does reflect the "every soldier is a sensor"<sup>93</sup> slogan repeated increasingly within the U.S. military and should obviously increase the tactical initiative coalition forces hold in any given area of operation, this is not generally the mechanism through which FETs are conceived as contributing to the larger goal of undermining the insurgency to stabilize a given area. As they've been theorized through the paradigm of population-centric COIN, FETs undermine the insurgency by separating it from the networks on which it relies, not simply enhancing the ability of coalition and Afghan forces to react to insurgent activity. Data on the teams' ability to collect intelligence should thus be appreciated as an indication of increased rapport with the community, and not as a measure of success of the program on a broader level. Moreover, I propose that reporting in this way may have unintended drawbacks, which I explore later in this thesis.

Greater support for FET led-initiatives might be concluded from indicators such as increased rates of participation in programs led by the teams. The same Marine FET 10.2 deployment AAR does attempt to capture the extent to which engagements have created support for FET initiatives. For example, in Marjeh, where five Marine teams worked, there was a 150% increase in female attendance for health initiatives the teams

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<sup>92</sup> FETs are outreach teams by definition. In fact, both the Marine Corps and Army caution against the use of FETs as collection assets.

<sup>93</sup> Magnuson 2007.

conducted.<sup>94</sup> Assessing the extent to which FETs have influenced the population might also involve looking at the numbers of females attending seeking treatment at clinics, seeking legal services, or attending school<sup>95</sup>. In Garm Ser, for instance, schools in the district witnessed an increase in female school attendance. Female school attendance at the Shamalan Girls School was up 166%; another school in the district, Kharako School, saw a 200% increase in female attendance.<sup>96</sup> Teams might also track things like the number of engagements that resulted in teams being invited to return to engage with women.<sup>97</sup>

There is reason to doubt that Army teams have made any progress in tackling the “influence” part of the FET puzzle, as there has been little standardized reporting to date which would be necessary for one to develop any clear picture of the impact of FETs over time. For example, the final report on Operation Da Khozo Hoqoq dated January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012, which summarizes the “results” of seventeen shuras, was intended to serve as the template for all the other FETs operating in RC-East.<sup>98</sup> The “results” discussed in the report, which cover the results of surveys used to gauge initial levels of knowledge of the law and program the FET sought to inform the women about and as well as the results of surveys to track a range of socio-demographic issues of interest to women, need to be appreciated as a way to shape further engagements and as a baseline from which to measure progress, which the report acknowledges up front.<sup>99</sup> It is not surprising that reporting is just starting to be refined in the Army program; late last year the Army was

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<sup>94</sup> *IMEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* PPT 2011, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Brooks 2011.

<sup>96</sup> *IMEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* PPT 2011, 12.

<sup>97</sup> Brooks 2011.

<sup>98</sup> Kristin Goehler, e-mail to author, January 30, 2012.

<sup>99</sup> Goehler 2012, 2.

only beginning to codify the program, institutionalize service-wide training for FETs, and establish where the teams fit within command chains.

The need to establish and track standardized measures of successful influence becomes even more clear if we consider that not all anecdotal evidence suggests FET interactions with the local population go smoothly. Alongside some of the seemingly positive indicators of FET influence discussed above, we also have a number of stories about FET engagement and initiatives flopping. An after action review of a team part of the Marine 10.2 deployment notes, for instance, that “the local community was indifferent to FET efforts to bring the community together or to educate the women in any way.”<sup>100</sup> Media stories covering the work of teams have also described some less-than-successful initiatives. One Public Radio International story on the Marine program shared the story of a FET operating in Helmand Province. One of the projects that the women launched in the village was the opening of a small school permitting girls to attend. Despite the FETs having communicated the idea to parents for months, when the four girls showed up for class on the first day of school, the teacher became uneasy, mentioning that the Taliban’s opposition to girls’ attendance might dissuade parents from bringing their children to school.<sup>101</sup> Ultimately he asks the girls to leave. Another Marine team dispatched to a health center so offended Afghan women during their first visit by searching them at the center’s entrance in view of men that when the team returned for a follow-up visit, women avoided the center and the doctors asked the FET to go away.<sup>102</sup> Some of these missteps could be avoided with more thorough cultural training for the teams, but they nonetheless remind us that not all engagement is necessarily positive; one

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<sup>100</sup> *After Action Review of Female Engagement Team Deployment for (Redacted), (Redacted)* 2011 II, 4.

<sup>101</sup> Campbell 2011.

<sup>102</sup> Jones 2010.

Army FET member reflected, “It’s not always true that doing something is better than nothing.”<sup>103</sup>

There is also anecdotal evidence that well-received outreach projects are sometimes not sustained when a transfer of authority occurs, which bodes poorly for “winning” over the population.<sup>104</sup> Reflecting on a number of FET outreach initiatives, Marine Julia Watson notes, “There is a time and place for these efforts, but without key leaders in the community, and a unity of effort, these efforts have a short shelf life, create a society of dependency, and often fail once units leave the area.”<sup>105</sup> These anecdotes remind us that initiatives and engagements have the potential to build unease and doubt among the population just as easily as they can build trust, and suggest that teams should also be tracking things such as failed follow-up engagements which might indicate failure to positively influence the population in support of coalition forces.

*Has the insurgency been weakened in the area in which FETs operate?*

The connection from influence over the population to a decrease in the insurgency’s strength, indicated in the equation above, is not touched upon in any of the reports or pieces lauding the program that I have encountered. After action reviews frequently allude to success, but that success is not tied in any way to improved security. For instance, an after action review of a team that worked seven months in a village as part of the Marine 10.2 deployment broadly notes that the team “was able to make an impact,” but only provides anecdotal accounts concerning how FETs were able to do things like show cultural respect during engagements with men and women collect

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<sup>103</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, February 8, 2012.

<sup>104</sup> Holliday 2012, 93.

<sup>105</sup> Watson 2012, 12.

atmospherics data, work with a local female doctor to procure medical equipment and medication for her clinic, and identify so-called “impact” projects.<sup>106</sup>

Moreover, those I interviewed confirmed that there has not been a study assessing the contribution of the teams to creating security. While it is certainly not the job of FETs to collect all the information required to capture overall trends in the insurgency within an area of operation, it is nonetheless worrisome that none of the pieces calling for more FET engagement have actually attempted to bring in measures of insurgency strength into their analyses, considering that this is so central to the strategic rationale behind the program. Moreover, reports that cover long periods of time, most notably deployment AARs, do not even acknowledge or highlight this assessment gap.

“Winning over” the population only really matters because it is the means through which the counterinsurgent severs the link between the insurgency and the population on which it relies, thereby weakening the insurgency. Supporters of the program have argued that the teams, by influencing the population with whom they interact, encourage communities to turn away from supporting the insurgency and the Taliban, and can even limit the insurgent manpower pool itself. Moreover, proponents have argued that FETs have a kind of influence multiplier effect by tapping into the dense social networks women oversee. Therefore, FETs should have some positive impact on the security situation over time in the districts in which they are operating.

Numerous COIN experts have written on how the strength of an insurgency in an area can be approximated; those assessing the teams in the future have a wide range of measures from which they could choose. Metrics and indicators proposed by Kilcullen,

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<sup>106</sup> *After Action Review of Female Engagement Team Deployment for (Redacted)* 2011 I.

for example, range from the price of exotic vegetables<sup>107</sup> to civilian accessibility, or the level at which civilians can move around their villages freely.<sup>108</sup> Some researchers currently looking at the program have started to develop measures of effectiveness that would shed light on the strength of the insurgency in a given area. A draft document created during the 2011 meeting of a FET working group in Kabul proposing measures of FET effectiveness, which has yet to be implemented, lists a number of quantitative measures that could shed light on insurgency strength; these include the number of former-insurgent reintegrees accepted back into a given community, statistics on criminal activity including improvised explosive device (IED) explosions, and numbers of insurgent threats received.<sup>109</sup>

So long as the employment of the teams remains slightly uneven because the program is in its early stages, one might also compare improvements in security in districts where teams operate to those in districts without the teams, or make comparisons in security across districts based on the number of teams operating in those districts. Carter Malkasian and Gerald Meyerle perform the latter in their assessment of the impact of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan, which were created to improve security through large-scale reconstruction. The authors ranked districts by degree of security change, based on shifts in a commander's color-coding of the district<sup>110</sup>, as well as by the amount of PRT spending in a given district. They then ran a

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<sup>107</sup> Kilcullen describes that risk and cost factors—including the cost of growing the crop, the risk of transporting it across insecure roads, and making the trip to sell it at the market—are factored into the price of fruits and vegetables. As such, fluctuations in market prices can indicate levels of popular confidence and perceived security (60).

<sup>108</sup> Kilcullen 2010, 63.

<sup>109</sup> Brooks 2011.

<sup>110</sup> Commanders rate districts by color. Districts are rated green for safe, yellow for fairly safe, orange for fairly dangerous, and red for dangerous.

Spearman's Rank correlation to establish whether PRT spending was positively affecting security.<sup>111</sup>

Certainly, gauging whether FET interaction with the community is helping to establish security in a given area of operation is a more complicated task than conducting assessment based on input metrics. Beyond the issue of enemy adaptation raised above, one also encounters the problem of selection effects: teams are often employed in areas that have high levels of insurgent violence. Controlling for a district's proclivity for violence thus becomes essential. That said, if we can't show that engagement with the community works in terms of helping to create stability and security in a given area, we have no basis for thinking FETs are important for our warfighting strategy, let alone that they are a success.

### **What are the acceptable conclusions about the program?**

As the breakdown above suggests, we have a fair amount of information about FET efforts to access the population, incomplete and sometimes conflicting information about the influence the teams have had, and no real information shedding light on the final link in the causal chain. In other words, we have a lot of input metrics that reflect what we are attempting to do to influence the population, but no clear sense of the effects of those efforts, particularly in terms of the larger goal of undercutting the insurgency. From this, we cannot confidently conclude that the teams have been a success. After all, the very logic of population-centric COIN, which FET proponents invoke, is that influence over the population leads to a decrease in the insurgency.

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<sup>111</sup> Malkasian and Meyerle 2009.

I argue that using the empirical data which teams have collected to date to determine that the teams have been successful requires that one make questionable assumptions both about the effectiveness both of “hearts-and-minds” approaches to COIN as well as the potential impact of “winning” women. It is not that the looking at the extent to which FETs have been able to access the population and hold engagements and outreach events with the population is unimportant. The problem lies in that these anecdotes and data don’t tell us anything about the *success* of FET as a COIN tool. In many ways, this is the same assessment problem associated with the “body count” measure used by American forces during the Vietnam War. The “body count” was a poor measure because it failed to give an accurate impression of the state of progress of the American campaign in Vietnam, as the link between killing more insurgents and defeating the insurgency was feeble. In the case of the FET program, unless we are convinced that our assumptions underlying the program are correct, we should refrain from concluding that the program has been a success for the time being.

Accessing the population and engaging them “well” only matter insofar as they contribute to the strategic objective of undercutting the insurgency and increasing security. FETs do not, as they’ve been theorized, conduct female engagement for female engagement’s sake, just as the objective in Afghanistan is not simply to engage the population to conduct population-centric COIN. If measures of “success” for the teams focus heavily on the teams’ ability to access the population and to some extent whether that access has led to increased access, and not whether interaction has had any of the strategic benefits it is argued to have, the teams are always going to be successful by definition. Assessment becomes entirely tautological.

To be able to deduce anything about FET effectiveness we need not obsess over ensuring absolute precision in our data or methodology. We would, however, have to see some collected information embedded in some kind of narrative that takes us through the sequence of *engagement* → *influence* → *decrease in the strength of the insurgency* and that reveals some correlation between points in that chain. Only by unpacking this chain can we draw conclusions both about the success of the program as well as use FETs as a case study through which to test some of our assumptions about population-centric COIN more generally.

## **CHAPTER III: Problems Associated with the Current Assessment Model**

The lack of complete assessment of the FET program could easily be dismissed as unimportant: the program, albeit less efficient, might still be effective overall. In this section I argue that the absence of an effective assessment mechanism for the program also carries with it great risks.

### **The dangers of assumption**

It is not enough to assume that because a program corresponds on the surface to the model of population-centric COIN that we have chosen to apply in Afghanistan that it is actually *working* in light of the goal of suppressing the insurgency. Moreover, we have reasons to question whether FETs are offering both the tactical and strategic benefits that they have been said to. First, there has been continuous debate among military circles whether FETs are the preferred tool for this kind of engagement. Second, it is not clear that similar female engagement programs have worked historically in COIN campaigns to build sustainable trust with the population. Third, there is some evidence that the FET concept overestimates the amount of influence Afghan women exercise in their families and communities. Finally, historians have increasingly questioned whether “hearts-and-minds” approaches were essential to previous population-centric COIN campaigns in general. The third and fourth points should be of particular concern to us, as it may help us understand the likelihood that that influencing women through engagement will manifest itself in a decrease in the insurgency.

*Are FETs optimal for female engagement?*

A number of people familiar with the FET program have questioned whether FETs are the best tool through which to reach out to the local female population. For example, one Marine Civil Affairs trainer argues that FETs lack the military occupational specialty to perform the tasks they are given:

Setting up a sewing co-op for women when the vast majority of men in the same area are unemployed is a recipe for disaster; it is shameful for the women to have jobs when the men don't. Further, doing health-related outreaches for a day or two, when there is a local doctor, midwife, etc. undercuts the long-term solution for healthcare, which is not us, but the locals. These are themes Civil Affairs Marines are aware of, whereas the FET, because they've had minimal training to consider such things, is not aware.<sup>112</sup>

In her study of gender-focused aid interventions that occurred in the aftermath of the Taliban's fall, Lina Abirafeh raises some of the same concerns put forth by the Civil Affairs trainer. Many of the Pashtun women whom she interviewed through her research pointed to the connection between men's honor and their roles as family providers, and stressed that initiatives should not be directed exclusively at women where men were without work. As one Pashtun woman described, "We don't want men to be unemployed and without dignity. Their dignity will also bring us more freedom."<sup>113</sup> This is the very kind of awareness that the Civil Affairs trainer above argues is developed through intensive training, which many of the FETs lack.

Another former Marine notes that FETs are not nearly as well integrated as other enablers that do similar work, like the Civil Affairs Teams referred to above.<sup>114</sup> FETs, for instance, have just begun to coordinate with Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs),

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<sup>112</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, February 13, 2012.

<sup>113</sup> Abirafeh 2009, 109.

<sup>114</sup> Watson 2011, 23.

the Afghan government, and local NGOs, entities that Julia Watson asserts “bring the capacity for long-term sustainability.”<sup>115</sup> The argument here is not that the underlying rationale for FET is bad— namely, that winning over the population needs to be an essential goal for counterinsurgents— but rather that FETs may lack the capacity to build and sustain relationships with the population long-term; there are other teams that can do the same work that FETs are engaged in relatively better, and our attention and scarce resources should be directed towards strengthening those teams. One Civil Affairs trainer summarizes, “The juice isn’t worth the squeeze.”<sup>116</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss the Civil Affairs trainer’s argument that resources would be better spent strengthening and enlarging Civil Affairs Groups as the result of inherent bias. Her argument may actually be worth exploring, however. One source cited Garm Ser and Musa Qala as good examples of villages in which FETs may have played an integral role in breaking the insurgency’s hold. These were also villages in which teams were partnered with Civil Affairs initiatives.<sup>117</sup> In addition, some after action reviews authored by members of teams raise the very problem of not being sufficiently well-connected. One covering a team that served in Afghanistan from late 2010 to early 2011 notes that the FET “found it difficult to start and continue progress with projects within the communities that would be sustainable because of the AO’s nomadic nature, and lack of coordination with other enablers.”<sup>118</sup>

Another potential problem is that the program has not yet been replicated by ANSF, and the likelihood that it will be is extremely low. The United States and its allies

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<sup>115</sup> Watson 2011, 21.

<sup>116</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, February 7, 2012.

<sup>117</sup> Valerie Jackson, e-mail to author, February 7, 2012.

<sup>118</sup> *After Action Review of Female Engagement Team Deployment (Redacted) Area of Operation 2011 V, 1.*

are involved in the conflict in Afghanistan as third-party counterinsurgents, and enabling the Afghan government to withstand U.S. departure and continue against the insurgency on its own if necessary has long been an objective. With the date for American withdrawal fast approaching, developing the Afghan government's capabilities to take over the fight has been increasingly stressed. In a paper on gender integration in Afghanistan, Dr. Jack Kem and Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Smith note:

The FET concept fails to develop increasingly self-reliant Afghan security forces. Contrary to the strategic objective, it reinforces conducting unilateral and coalition-led operations. Understandably, a lack of capacity in the ANSF regarding female soldiers and police has limited their employment, but it must be considered as ISAF transitions security responsibility to the GIRoA.<sup>119</sup>

While some teams have actually been involved in the training of female Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) forces, numbers of ANA and ANP females have been well below recruiting objectives.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, the majority of female ANSF members are based in Kabul, not the rural provinces where insurgents frequently operate.<sup>121</sup> Creating Afghan FETs would not just be a tremendous challenge because of the small numbers of women in both forces but also because of underlying cultural norms and gender expectations in Afghan society.<sup>122</sup> Women currently in the forces primarily complete secretarial and administrative duties, and already face enormous threats while serving in this capacity. Between 2008 and 2009, for example,

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<sup>119</sup> Kwm and Smith 2011, 12.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>121</sup> Taylor.

<sup>122</sup> Zoe Bedell, e-mail to author, September 27, 2012.

three policewomen were murdered.<sup>123</sup> Zoe Bedell describes how many female ANP she saw in Helmand Province had not told their families they were policewomen, and typically left their uniforms at work so not to be targets each time they went in: “The idea that you’re going to take women who can’t even walk to work openly or tell their families, their closest family members, what they do, that they’re going to go out and go door to door and sit down and talk with people... It’s a little far-fetched to me.”<sup>124</sup>

One former Army FET Officer-in-Charge whom I spoke with did mention that her team had been accompanied by a female ANP officer on an engagement in Azam Kalay<sup>125</sup>, but this appears to have been a clear exception. The improbability of having ANSF FETs in the near future does raise questions about whether resources and time would have been better spent developing a tool for female outreach that would have been more sustainable.

### *Placing FETs in historical context*

In addition to the above concerns, there is also reason to question the historic precedent invoked by champions of the FET program. The Army Commander’s Guide for Female Engagement cites the French use of *Equipes Médico-sociales Itinérantes* (EMSI), which translates roughly to mobile medical-social teams, during the Algerian war between 1954 to 1962 as one example of female engagement in the context of larger pacification efforts. The teams, which included both Army women as well as civilians such as doctors and social workers, provided sociomedical assistance to Algerian women as a medium through which to engage Algerian women and improve the reputation of the

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<sup>123</sup> Taylor.

<sup>124</sup> Council on Foreign Relations 2011.

<sup>125</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, January 24, 2012.

French.<sup>126</sup> Overall, the aim of the program “was to ‘expand’ women’s influence from the family to the larger society, but in accordance with ‘pacification’ objectives.”<sup>127</sup> The

Commander’s Guide hails the EMSI teams as a triumph:

Feedback from French units highlighted the successes of EMSI, who saw the women as necessary ‘enablers’ that complemented their security actions (more than 350 EMSI settled in the whole theatre). The French Special Administration Section, established to work with the Muslim people, also found EMSI to be one of the most efficient ways to engage the population, and the large numbers of Muslim Algerian women who integrated into the EMSI program showed the relevance and success of the concept.<sup>128</sup>

Among scholars, however, there is little consensus on the contribution of the EMSI program and its effectiveness. Matthew Evangelista, for instance, contends that the EMSI program and the larger strategy of targeting women was actually a failure:

“Whatever the French military’s motives, the strategy of targeting women failed—creating resentment among the males and provoking anti-French sentiment even among the females were the ostensible beneficiaries of the ‘enlightened’ colonial policies favoring women’s liberation.”<sup>129</sup> Here we may in fact have an example of a program that garnered women’s initial acceptance and support, which manifested itself in increasing levels of participation in EMSI events, but which over the long-run influenced the overall population in a negative way and therefore did not serve larger pacification objectives.

*Faulty cultural assumptions: the role of Afghan women*

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<sup>126</sup> Lazreg 2008, 147.

<sup>127</sup> Lazreg 2008, 146.

<sup>128</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 3.

<sup>129</sup> Evangelista 2011, 34.

A third reason to resist drawing quick conclusions about the program's success relates to whether Afghan women assert the level of influence that the FET concept assumes. As formerly described, sponsors of the program are quick to point to the high levels of influence Afghan women exercise in their families and communities to support calls for increased engagement. For instance, one ISAF proposal cites the sway that Afghan women hold as "property owners, primary caregivers, arrangers of marriages that bind families, and inter-family peacemakers."<sup>130</sup> Another supporter of the program describes, "Afghan women know all of the going-on of their villages."<sup>131</sup>

One paper detailing the results of a research project between the Regional Command South West Marine Corps FET and the Human Terrain Analysis Team AF18 draws more cautious conclusions. For the study, Marine FETs formally trained in conducting semi-structured interviews asked questions directly of Afghan men and women in their compounds in Helmand Province between February and March 2011 aimed at determining patterns with respect to women's levels of family influence. Sample questions included: Who makes decisions about household management? Do women have access to money? How do sons decide what they will do for work? Who makes decisions regarding children's marriages? What is the role that a mother plays in child rearing?<sup>132</sup>

Of the women interviewed in their homes, the most common response indicated full dependence on the husband for subsistence; all agreed that it was the responsibility of the man to provide all the resources required for the household to operate.<sup>133</sup> For the

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<sup>130</sup> Vedder 2010, 14.

<sup>131</sup> Mehra 2010, 42-43.

<sup>132</sup> RC(SW) USMC FET and Human Terrain Analysis Team AF18 2011, 1-2.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

question of how young men decided to join either the insurgency or the ANSF, replies were mixed. One young man interviewed said that he would do whatever his mother instructed him to do. The report also notes, “Women stated that they had tremendous influence over their children because children spent 100% of their time with women.”<sup>134</sup> The officer-in-charge for the FET involved in the study, however, argues that this part of the write-up is misleading; many of the responses received indicated the opposite. Responses to questions concerning marriage arrangements also varied considerably: “Decision making for boys and girls betrothal partners rested solely in the hands of the father or the responsibility was shared between mother and father or the father made the decision with the mother’s approval.”<sup>135</sup>

While the study should not be seen as definitive— it focuses exclusively on one province and responses could have been shaped by military presence— it does problematize some of the often-repeated assertions about women’s influence. To the extent that the FET concept relies heavily on assumptions and generalizations about the power exercised by women in the private sphere, the results of the collaborative study suggests that there may be a need to temper some of our expectations about what female engagement can achieve.

Assertions about the influence Afghan women possess are not the only generalizations that proponents of the program have made. A piece by team founder Matt Pottinger, Hali Jilani, and Claire Russo quotes a man from a socially conservative district in southern Afghanistan: “You men come to fight, but we know the women are here to

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<sup>134</sup> RC(SW) USMC FET and Human Terrain Analysis Team AF18 2011, 4.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 4.

help.”<sup>136</sup> This quote has been repeated continuously in pieces written about the program; a cursory Google search reveals that the quote has been featured in two *New York Times* pieces on the teams, in a blog post by Tom Ricks on the *Foreign Policy* website, in a Washington Post Article, and a piece on the Department of Defense’s “DoD Live” blog.<sup>137</sup> It is critical to remember that the quote reflects the beliefs of one Pashtun man who opened his home to a team during one FET patrol in one district of southern Afghanistan. It is possible that his statement reflects the beliefs of Pashtun men more generally, but we should be extremely wary of generalizing about all Pashtun men from this isolated statement.

#### *The fallibility of population-centric COIN*

A final reason to be more cautious in making conclusions about the success of the FET concept is that a number of works have questioned whether “hearts-and-minds” approaches were central to successful COIN campaigns of the past, and particularly whether “hearts-and-minds”-style persuasion was ever essential for breaking an insurgency. Though there is a lack of consensus within the field what exactly “hearts-and-minds” constitutes, for the purposes of this thesis, I define a “hearts-and-minds” approach as one anchored in minimum force, social provision, and information operations.

One piece engaged in questioning traditional case study analysis is Karl Hack’s piece “The Malayan Emergency as counterinsurgency paradigm.” Traditional accounts of the 1948-1960 Malayan Emergency, most notably John Nagl’s *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, maintain that the British

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<sup>136</sup> Pottinger et al. 2010, 5.

<sup>137</sup> See Broadwell 2009; Bumiller 2010; Ricks 2009; McAleer and Salaro 2009; and Mullen 2010.

campaign to defeat the insurgency turned in the 1952 to 1954 period, thanks to innovative new methods introduced by General Gerald Templar.<sup>138</sup> One such innovation that Nagl devotes particular attention to is improvement in information operations. During the Templer years, he writes, a Psychological Warfare section of the Information Services was tasked with winning hearts and minds; its mission was both to persuade insurgents to surrender and to provide information as well as to convince the people that the government was capable of providing services.<sup>139</sup> Hack disputes Nagl's traditional breakdown of the Malayan insurgency, arguing instead that it was population control and security approaches that were most important in breaking the insurgency's back. "Hearts-and-minds" was not key until later, and played an essential role only once territory had already been secured.<sup>140</sup> Hack's interpretation runs counter to the emphasis on winning hearts and minds as means through which to establish security, a belief that factors prominently into justifications for the FET program.

Authors like David Kilcullen and Peter Mansoor also caution counterinsurgents against confusing "hearts-and-minds" with the idea of getting people to like you. Kilcullen asserts: "The gratitude theory— 'be nice to the people, meet their needs and they will feel grateful and stop supporting the insurgents'—does not work. The enemy simply intimidates the population when COIN forces/government are not present."<sup>141</sup> Mansoor similarly describes:

[Counterinsurgents] would do well to remember the first rule of economics: anything free will be overused. In providing a civilian population with essential services and reconstruction assistance, it is

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<sup>138</sup> Also see Alderson 2010.

<sup>139</sup> Nagl 2002, 93.

<sup>140</sup> Hack 2009, 385.

<sup>141</sup> Kilcullen 2007.

critical that military organizations force the people to make an active choice in favor of supporting the legitimate governing authority. Otherwise, any aid rendered will be accepted gladly, and have zero impact on the ultimate outcome of the conflict.<sup>142</sup>

Buy-in to the so-called “gratitude theory” pervaded a few of the descriptions of the program sent to me by FET members in e-mail exchanges. For example, one former Marine FET leader, reflecting on how people used to joke about how FETs were “just there to pass out teddy bears and drink tea,” described:

What FET did by passing out teddy bears and drinking tea, is that we offered something that the Taliban couldn't. Kindness. The Taliban's not passing out teddy bears, or conducting medical engagements, or asking me how I'm doing, or bringing me blankets, or bringing me food, or helping secure my village. No, in fact that Taliban was/ is asking the villagers for all that stuff.<sup>143</sup>

The impulse to “be nice” to the Afghan people is understandable, but FET leaders should make clear that the FET mission is not simply one of goodwill. Communicating this more clearly should be a priority for future FET leaders, as it will likely shape the approach for assessment adopted by the teams under them.

### **Implications of the current model of assessment**

As I've described in the preceding section, one deficiency of the current model of assessment is that it fails to shed light on whether FET engagement has contributed to a decrease in insurgent activity within a certain area, and encourages us to rely upon extensive assumptions to fill assessment gaps. An additional shortcoming of the current model is that it may contribute to existing confusion about the FET mission or lead to

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<sup>142</sup> Mansoor 2010, 83.

<sup>143</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, February 21, 2012.

mission creep, defined as a shift away from or an expansion of a program's original goals.

Among those measures included in sections on FET accomplishments in after action reports are the pieces of enemy intelligence collected and the number of times FETs were used in a search capacity. For instance, the Marine Corps FET 10.2 Deployment AAR describes that the teams received 197 pieces of enemy intelligence during their deployment to Helmand province.<sup>144</sup> The 10.1 Deployment AAR describes how FETs participated in ten cordon and search operations; one of these led to the discovery of an IED-making cell after FETs found a secret compartment in a room where women were being held.<sup>145</sup> Teams part of the same deployment also searched 2,266 women during operations at checkpoints. Similarly, the 10.1 AAR notes that FETs were used by ground commanders to search 353 compounds holding women during clearing operations over the course of their eight-month deployment.<sup>146</sup>

The problem with using these measures to show what the teams have accomplished is that these measures are not commensurate with the stated FET mission to build relations with Afghan women through engagement and outreach. Military literature on both the Army and Marine Corps programs explicitly state that the mission of the teams is *not* to conduct female searches; in fact, both the Army and Marine Corps have separate teams for this purpose. Nor is the purpose of the teams to collect intelligence. A document on the Marine program declares: "Female engagement teams

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<sup>144</sup> *1 MEF FET 10.2 Deployment AAR* 2011, 1.a.

<sup>145</sup> *1 MEF 10.1 Deployment AAR* 2010, 6.

<sup>146</sup> *1 MEF 10.1 Deployment AAR* 2010, 6.

are not collection assets.”<sup>147</sup> The Army Commander’s Guide asserts: “FETs are not intelligence collectors.”<sup>148</sup>

The issue is not simply that having FETs work in a search capacity and collecting intelligence is not how the teams are supposed to be employed; statements by those who have worked on or who have participated as part of the program emphasize that using FETs in these ways actually detracts from the teams’ ability to build relationships with local women. For one, using FETs to collect intelligence or search women, particularly in clearing operations, is likely to damage their legitimacy among the Afghan population.

Zoe Bedell describes:

One of the reasons the teams are so effective is that the people trust them. This is mainly for cultural reasons—they just don’t believe that women could pose a threat—but if you do anything to destroy that natural trust, the teams are going to become instantly less effective.<sup>149</sup>

When used solely to engage with the Afghan population, FETs maintain somewhat of a “neutral” standing, allowing the population to feel comfortable working with the teams. Military literature is also outspoken on this topic. The Army Commander’s Guide to Female Engagement describes: “Cordon and knock operations are not a preferred use of FETs, as they do not allow women to establish necessary rapport with Afghan women.”<sup>150</sup> A document on the Marine program similarly notes: “Female engagement initiatives that promote the use of females as collection assets can seriously impede engagement processes, scare women away, and put local women in

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<sup>147</sup> Mihalisko.

<sup>148</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 22.

<sup>149</sup> Zoe Bedell, e-mail to author, October 2, 2011.

<sup>150</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 71.

danger.”<sup>151</sup> This point is echoed in the Army guide mentioned previously: “The U.S. military must understand that it would take only a handful of murder and intimidation incidents to completely and permanently cripple the FET’s rapport with local women in key areas.”<sup>152</sup>

Using FETs as collection assets hurts not only their legitimacy. Beyond this, many of those who have worked on the program note that using women for the purpose of intelligence collection could endanger the program as a whole. Two sources that I spoke with mentioned that if insurgents see that FETs are working as intelligence collectors they will begin to target or capture members of the teams. “If females are captured it would be a PR disaster,” one noted.<sup>153</sup> Both sources also pointed to the level of resource expenditure that would be needed to respond to such a scenario, alluding to the example of Army Private First Class Jessica Lynch’s rescue by elite Special Operations Forces after her capture by Iraqi forces during the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Despite these cautions, the teams have clearly been used and continue to be used in such capacities. Continuing to report this use as an accomplishment of the teams likely aggravates confusion about the FET mission. Misunderstanding about the FET mission by commanders was an issue brought up by numerous team members and leaders with whom I spoke. Reports also raise this concern. Several after action reviews of Marine teams describe, for instance, how battle space owners’ lack of understanding about what the teams were to be used for resulted in delayed or incorrect FET employment.<sup>154</sup> To some extent, it is not surprising that commanders would be confused about how to use the

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<sup>151</sup> Mihalisko.

<sup>152</sup> Center for Army Lessons Learned 2011, 65.

<sup>153</sup> Anonymous, interview with author, April 4, 2012.

<sup>154</sup> *After Action Review of Female Engagement Team Deployment in (Redacted)* 2011 III, 1; *After Action Review of Female Engagement Team Deployment in (Redacted)* 2011 IV, 1.

teams if reporting on FET “accomplishments” includes details and anecdotes about the teams’ use in roles outside their stated mission.

In addition, collecting and reporting data on what teams have done as collectors and in search capacities may lead to mission creep away from the intended use of the teams. While we typically conceive of a program’s mission and goals as shaping assessment, it is important to remember that assessment methods can also shape mission. Because reports have failed to acknowledge the shortcomings of these measures or the existence of an assessment gap, it would be tempting for teams and commanders to see measures related to the use of teams for intelligence collection and in search capacities as reflective of program goals and in turn use teams for those purposes. We have historic evidence that metrics can influence goals and approaches. For example, a report by the BDM Corporation titled “A Study of Strategic Lessons in Vietnam” reflects on the problems associated with the body count measure of progress: “The often warped interest in body count provided an inducement for countless tactical unit commanders to strive for a big kill (whether legitimate or feigned) in preference for providing security for a hamlet or village.”<sup>155</sup>

If measures begin to contribute to mission creep in the middle of a deployment it could be particularly harmful. One Marine team after action review describes how commanders began to use the FET for so-called “collateral duties” in the later stages of its deployment, which prevented the team from being able to fulfill its central outreach mission. While the review does not describe why battle space owners began to use the teams differently, the observations made by the review’s author are nonetheless important. Reflecting on the team’s incorrect employment, the author of the report writes:

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<sup>155</sup> The BDM Corporation 1980, VI-36.

“[Being used in ways outside our mission] was a major issue considering FET had already conducted numerous engagements in the AO which had established strong ties with the local populace. The lack of patrols during the last month with (redacted) negatively affected those relationships.”<sup>156</sup> Just as improper employment early on can preclude teams from establishing connections with the local population later, so to can improper employment later on harm those relationships already established, dealing a real blow to trust between the populace and coalition forces.

Mission creep would not only likely produce problems for the teams on the ground in the short-run, but would also make it very difficult to distill what the real “lessons-learned” from the program are. Specifically, one externality of FET mission creep would be that it would hamper our ability to test whether FETs confirm the assumptions of population-centric COIN literature about the utility of “hearts-and-minds” approaches. As I have shown, the mission of the teams and the work they conduct as outreach teams corresponds well with “hearts-and-minds” models. Teams are believed to undermine the insurgency through “soft” approaches rooted in information operations and social and humanitarian assistance; they are not conceptualized as directly aiding the enemy-centric side of COIN operations. A shift in mission, particularly in the direction of using FETs to collect enemy intelligence, would mean that the team’s contribution would lie in helping counterinsurgents react to enemy activity, not fighting the enemy indirectly by cutting it off from its popular support base.

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<sup>156</sup> *After Action Review of Female Engagement Team Deployment in (Redacted)* 2011 VI, 1.

## **CHAPTER IV: Potential Explanations for the Current Model of Assessment**

If the previous sections are correct, and the current assessment model is not only inefficient but perhaps counterproductive, this raises the question of why so little attention and investments have been made in conducting better data collection and assessment. While this question is not the core focus of this thesis, it is nonetheless something that was raised in my interviews and exchanges with sources and merits consideration.

The data I've collected provides support for two hypotheses regarding the use of metrics. First, there is a cultural-psychological explanation: because evaluators and proponents of the program have bought into the theory of population-centric COIN, they *assume* that the mere presence of engagement indicates good outcomes. In his discussion of the intelligence failure concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, Robert Jervis reflects on the many phenomena that contributed to characterizations of the Iraqi WMD program by a wide range of intelligence services and most private analysts. Among these are confirmation bias<sup>157</sup>, lack of consideration of alternative hypotheses, and insufficient imagination.<sup>158</sup>

All of these may be at work in the FET case. For example, one potential explanation for the inputs-heavy model of assessment is that members of the teams and advocates of the program strongly believe that their assumptions about the program and the larger paradigm in which it is situated hold true. Central assumptions and alternatives are therefore never re-examined or explored. If one is confident that the majority of

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<sup>157</sup> Confirmation bias refers to the propensity for people to seek information that confirms their beliefs and to overlook information that might contradict them (Jervis 2006, 24).

<sup>158</sup> Jervis 2006.

historical evidence upholds the idea that hearts-and-minds outreach increases security, measuring adherence to believed “best practices” might be a viable form of assessment. As I illustrate in a previous section, however, we should resist accepting the link between hearts-and-mind outreach and security as a given.

Second, there is evidence for bureaucratic politics explanations as well. Bureaucratic politics explanations stress how government actors’ interests in promoting their own agency’s special interests can motivate decision-making. As Jack Snyder argues in his study of World War I, militaries build and justify doctrine not only based upon a doctrine’s effectiveness, but on the basis of securing bureaucratic autonomy, prestige, and resources.<sup>159</sup> Several sources mentioned that the teams favor tracking quantitative inputs such as number of engagements and outreach events because it is a way to secure money for the program. Thus, just as Snyder argues that offensive strategies were preferred by major powers in the lead-up to World War I because such strategies best suited the needs of military organizations, so may certain models of assessment serve the military’s interests more than others. Specifically, inputs-focused models of assessment may help organizational actors secure necessary resources and capabilities. There is historical evidence for bureaucratic politics driving such metrics as well. A similar phenomenon appears to have occurred during the Vietnam War; the BDM study on the Vietnam War referenced above describes how the allocation of combat support assets was strongly influenced “by relative standings in racking up a high body count.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Snyder 1984. See also Allison 1969 Allison and Halperin 1972, 48.

<sup>160</sup> The BDM Corporation 1980, VI-36.

Measuring effectiveness primarily through inputs is also an undeniably attractive way to create an impression of progress in the eyes of the American people. As one Soldier describes, measuring inputs is “a way for leadership to show the public what we're doing in real, time-now, data to make them feel better about American Service men and women overseas.”<sup>161</sup> This position is also consistent with Snyder’s observation that military institutions favor actions that enhance their self-image. Snyder describes, for instance, how one consideration that factors into a military organization’s selection of doctrine is whether it olds “the promise of a demonstrable return on the nation’s investment in military capability.”<sup>162</sup> Though I argue that the assessment model actually fails to track the right indicators of FET contribution to the larger goal of undermining the insurgency in Afghanistan, one can appreciate how measuring inputs might nonetheless be an easy way to create a sense of progress, however artificial.

There is little reason to believe that the cultural-psychological and bureaucratic politics forces I identify above are only shaping assessment of the FET program. Sub-optimal assessment likely occurs in other programs that form part of the United States’ population-centric COIN strategy in Afghanistan for several reasons. First, poor assessment due to both forces has occurred historically, as I point out above with the example of the Vietnam War. Second, the FET program is a relatively small program; the second full-time Marine iteration of the program, for example, consisted of only 47 Marines total.<sup>163</sup> If securing money plays a key role in shaping assessment models for a relatively low-budget program, we would not predict the military to eschew opportunities

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<sup>161</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, January 24, 2012.

<sup>162</sup> Snyder 1984, 121.

<sup>163</sup> Werman 2011.

to secure greater autonomy and resources through the its other COIN programs, many of which are significantly larger.

That conclusions about the success of the program have been put forth so quickly is not surprising. There is reason to believe that pressure to preemptively declare the “success” of a program may be unusually high in the case of the FET program, *even* if those making such claims are aware of the shortcomings of the current model of assessment. For example, a number of team members whom I interviewed hinted at male commanders’ resistance to the idea of females accompanying infantry units. Reasons for this could have something to do with male military culture, or they might relate to legal concerns; after all, military statute bars women from combat units.<sup>164</sup> The difficulty associated with selling the concept to commanders for these reasons may increase incentives to make early conclusions about success to allude to in pitches to commanders. In addition, serving on a FET is often a secondary, informal job for women. Because devoting time to the FET program takes a woman away from her primary job, or Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), “Some teams have had to continually fight with their chain of command to allow them to continue to conduct operations.”<sup>165</sup> The more “successful” one can paint the program to be, the easier it would presumably be for one to convince those in one’s chain of command to grant one time to devote to the FET mission.

A final reason why there may be high incentives to declare the FET program a success even in the absence of good assessment relates to the attention the teams have received in the context of the debate about relaxing restrictions on women in combat. The

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<sup>164</sup> Lindsay Rodman, e-mail to author, January 29, 2012.

<sup>165</sup> Anonymous, e-mai to author, November 23, 2011.

wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have fueled calls to lift some of the current restrictions, with many arguing that those prohibitions are irrelevant due to the absence of clear frontlines in both conflicts. Because the FET program sends female teams out with male infantry units, it has understandably received much scrutiny in light of this larger, ongoing discussion. One of the arguments that has historically been raised in opposition to extending combat roles to women is what Lucinda Peach calls “the efficiency rationale.” Part of this argument involves the purported lesser effectiveness of female soldiers.<sup>166</sup> Pointing to the effectiveness of a program that involves female Soldiers and Marines may be seen by those in favor of rescinding or changing current policies as a means through which to bolster their argument.

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<sup>166</sup> Peach 1996, 164.

## Conclusion

I maintain that we lack an effective assessment mechanism for the FET program to date. Anecdotal and quantitative data that have been collected to date are necessary for better conclusions about the program to be made in the future, but they are hardly sufficient for conclusions about success to have been made. While FETs generally appear thus far to have been a good tool for interacting with what had previously been an overlooked half of the Afghan population, concluding that FETs are a success requires one to make significant assumptions, both about the impact of those engagements and their relevance in terms of the larger goal of defeating the insurgency in Afghanistan. Assertions that the program is a success should thus be met with some skepticism.

Despite the existence of unique incentives for quick conclusions about success for the FET program, I suspect that the assessment puzzle that I've identified is characteristic of a number of other COIN programs in Afghanistan. What is critical to remember is that COIN, by definition, is those actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency. The United States' objective in Afghanistan is to support GIRoA in defeating the insurgency in Afghanistan through a population-centric COIN approach. Winning over the population is a method through which to defeat an insurgency; it is not an end-goal in and of itself. Assessments of programs need to reflect an appreciation of this fact; progress needs to be thought about in relationship to the ultimate goal. Where assessment is not tied to a decrease in the insurgency, those conducting program assessment should make it clear how they define success: is one simply talking about tactical success, or even just about the successful *implementation* of a program, for example?

Conducting assessment in a counterinsurgency campaign is a daunting challenge, and is a problem that has no doubt been exacerbated by a lack of guidance on how to do assessment in COIN in formal publications.<sup>167</sup> Measuring the contribution of any individual COIN program or initiative towards progress towards the larger operational goal is even more difficult. In any given area of operation, numerous teams are being employed and numerous projects are being undertaken; a seemingly infinite number of variables could be influencing an insurgency within a particular zone. Moreover, one will inevitably be forced to awkwardly blend quantitative and qualitative measures of progress into some mash-up indicators. All things considered, it is absolutely true that one is never going to achieve full mathematical rigor and precision in COIN assessment. Nonetheless, a counterinsurgent should seek to identify and gather a few metrics and indicators of progress over time related to one's program that can later be linked to trends in the insurgency.<sup>168</sup> The difficulty of COIN assessment is not an excuse not to do it.

I also maintain that refining our assessments of FETs may be a particularly worthwhile and useful exercise through which to shed light on the benefits and limitations of population-centric "hearts-and-minds" approaches at a time when they've become increasingly questioned. First, female engagement opens access to an entire half of the population with whom contact before had largely been intermittent. In addition, FETs have been upheld as key enablers of positive unit interaction with the community as a whole; the teams have been presented as both friction reducers and sources of cultural understanding for unit commanders that can be used to improve relations between the

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<sup>167</sup> Schroden 2011, 94.

<sup>168</sup> Kilcullen 2010, 56.

military and the local population more largely.<sup>169</sup> Advocates of female engagement also suggest that FETs, by working through well-networked women, have a kind of influence multiplier effect. Regardless of whether one accepts every single one of the claims made by proponents of the program about the teams' potential and the role of Pashtun women, one can easily appreciate that population-centric COIN theory would predict that the teams would be a hugely significant capability.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to refine our assessment of FETs both to better understand the impact of the program as well as the paradigm through which it is has been justified is rapidly fading. U.S. and NATO partners have recently finalized agreements to wind down the war in Afghanistan, and President Obama plans to clarify American withdrawal plans at the NATO summit meeting in Chicago in May.<sup>170</sup> As the U.S. and its allies finalize plans to leave the country, one can expect greater attention to be devoted to force protection. This was certainly the approach encouraged by the Nixon administration during the final stages of the Vietnam War. The administration's so-called "Vietnamization" policy placed great emphasis on reducing American lethality, or the probability that an individual American deployed in Vietnam would die in combat.<sup>171</sup> Reducing the risk of death faced by American troops was seen as an essential part of ending the war honorably in the public's eyes. Reflecting on the likely shift in the direction of force protection that coalition forces will make in Afghanistan, one source noted, "No one wants to hear about casualties in a war that we have already decided we're getting out of."<sup>172</sup> Initiatives that involve coalition forces working in local

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<sup>169</sup> Flynn and Bras 2010.

<sup>170</sup> Bumiller 2012.

<sup>171</sup> Gartner 1998, 243.

<sup>172</sup> Anonymous, interview with author, April 4, 2012.

communities, including female engagement, will likely decrease in order to minimize the exposure of Marines and Soldiers to potential harm.

In light of political developments, champions of the FET program may thus have done themselves a great disservice by failing to develop useful measures of FET effectiveness early. Several women with whom I spoke noted that they did not believe the program is sufficiently rooted within the military. One noted, “[FETs] are not, in my mind, cemented into the army, so I could see them being dismantled after Afghanistan.”<sup>173</sup> While current measures of assessment may serve some short-term goals like securing money for the program, they neither cover the relation of the teams to larger strategic goals nor help us unpack the mechanisms through which the teams work. Current assessments of the program will thus not be very useful for those arguing either to maintain this capability for future COIN operations or to reconstitute similar teams in the early stages of a similar conflict. This case of FETs may ultimately emerge as a cautionary tale against delaying good assessment.

While this thesis has called into question the reasoning behind assertions that the FET program has been a success, it does not answer the question of whether FETs contribute to the end goal of undermining the insurgency within a given area and improving security. My assertion that proponents of the program have not made a persuasive case that the program has undermined the insurgency within a given area in the way they’ve been described to should not be understood as an argument that the teams have been a failure. Coming to that conclusion would entail tracking the same kinds of trends necessary to establish success that proponents of the program have yet to

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<sup>173</sup> Roxanne Bras, e-mail to author, October 29, 2011.

incorporate in their assessments of the teams. Doing so here is impossible because data on security for specific areas are largely classified.

This thesis is also not an argument against the tactical or strategic employment of women in warfare. Even if some of the military's assumptions about the utility of FETs as a strategic asset in population-centric COIN in Afghanistan are ultimately disproven, there are countless other ways in which military females could prove useful in future American military operations. A former Army officer who worked on the FET program notes, for example, that military females attached to infantry units have proved extremely useful in calming gender sensitivities during more kinetic activities.<sup>174</sup> It is also possible that using female counterinsurgents on small teams like this represents the best *relative* use of women in counterinsurgency operations even if the teams have not contributed to defeating the insurgency in the way their advocates and population-centric theory assume.

This project does serve as a reminder of the need to think more critically about how we conceptualize and measure success in a counterinsurgency campaign. My argument that assessment ought to have something to do with desired outcomes is hardly radical. Counterinsurgents' propensity to overlook it, however, makes it worth repeating.

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<sup>174</sup> Anonymous, e-mail to author, October 29, 2011.

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