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Counterinsurgency and Gender: The Case of the Female Engagement Teams

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ANNICK T.R. WIBBEN AND KEALLY MCBRIDE, JUL 17 2012

Since early 2009 teams of female U.S. Marines, known as Female Engagement Teams (FETs), have been deployed in Afghanistan as part of the U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) effort.[1] Initially, they were drawn from troops already on the ground and received little training, but in April 2010 the first forty Marines selected and trained specifically to work as FETs deployed to Helmand province in Southern Afghanistan. Their mission? To engage Afghan women, the "other half" of the population whose hearts and minds need to be won over to ensure the success of the COIN campaign. COIN, a traditional mainstay of colonial rule, was resurrected as an appropriate strategy. General David Petraeus, who had success with population-centric warfare in Iraq, also led its adoption in Afghanistan under General Stanley McChrystal in 2009.

COIN aims to build confidence in the Afghan government and its allies, that is "to win the hearts and minds" of the population, and thus weaken the insurgency in Afghanistan which relies on support for the fighters from the population. Reaching Afghan women, and tapping into their knowledge of the local customs and developments, should have been central to U.S. and allied efforts in Afghanistan from the beginning of the U.S. engagement in 2001, but it took until 2009 (and the formal adoption of COIN) before anyone began directly engaging Afghan women (c.f. Jones 2010). And – it took a while longer for the military to become supportive of the idea. At this point, it is not only the U.S. Marines who are deploying FETs, but allies (like the British) and other military branches (like the U.S. army) have also officially begun developing such teams. Indeed, "coalition forces have formed informal female engagement teams (FETs), mainly from tactical and provincial reconstruction teams, civil affairs forces, and agribusiness development teams" for the past decade, Holliday (2012) points out. "However, U.S. Army efforts remain ad hoc and disorganized, and training and employment are not standardized."[2]

Holliday (2012) is not alone in pointing out the FETs' lack of training and coordination of efforts, not only between different teams (especially during transfer of authority), but also with the larger units of which the FETs are part. As Watson (2011) laments, "the Marine Corps needs to take a progressive role in the training and employment of increasing female engagement efforts in Afghanistan before harm comes of our actions." The ad-hoc nature of much of the training, and the lack of integration of the efforts by FETs can backfire and undermine the overall mission: When FETs are in conversation with women in a particular area and promise follow-up on one or another issue, but are unable to deliver because their efforts are not considered important enough, this is likely to lead to further mistrust, and undermine the overall effort to shift support from the insurgency to coalition forces. Engagement, then, creates expectations upon which the U.S. and her allies must deliver.

Questions of operational effectiveness aside, as outlined in our recent piece on "The Gendering of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan" (McBride & Wibben 2012), the adoption of COIN and the deployment of FETs serve an interesting signaling function in the overall "War on Terror." As many feminist scholars have pointed out (e.g. Bhattacharyya, Hunt, Nayak, Shepherd, Wibben, Young), one narrative of the War on Terror frames it as a "feminist war" – fought in support of women's rights in countries with less than stellar human rights records. As such, the deployment of FETs can be read as further evidence of the "feminist war" narrative. Here the woman soldier deployed in Afghanistan, especially to engage the population, delivers the feminist promise: She signals loudly that the occupation of Afghanistan is fundamentally emancipatory – the U.S. and her allies have good intentions in their

civilizing mission. This presentation of the intervention as moral and virtuous is achieved via a familiar binary framing making "symbolic use of women as markers of cultural, religious and national difference," as Nira Yuval-Davis (2001) writes. Here, U.S. women (deployed in FETs) serve as "a device for ranking the men of the 'other' community as inferior according to their deviation from a putatively normal Western standard" (ibid, cf. Khalid).

The feminist narrative not only helped justify invasion of Afghanistan from the very start, as in Laura Bush's Thanksgiving Day address in 2001, but it has also become the marker of U.S. success. Now that the United States has dismissed the idea of "defeating" the Taliban and is in conference with them to prepare for official withdrawal, Hillary Clinton has announced that safeguarding women's rights is "nonnegotiable".[3] Being able to point to a formal recognition of women's rights will thereby allow the U.S. withdrawal to be considered a victory. Of course, whether official documents have much to do with practice in Afghanistan is highly questionable. Afghanistan has had multiple experiments in constitution making, but very little experience implementing them. There is a stark distinction between rights in theory and rights in practice in the country (Thier 2006/07).

How does this relate to the gendering of COIN and its particular actualization in the deployment of FETs? We would argue that it supports the points raised in our recent piece on the gendering of COIN in Afghanistan, most importantly those relating to the instrumentality of the endeavor and the lack of careful planning in the implementation of COIN. At the same time, however, these accounts show that what happens on the ground more often than not exceeds the intentions of those in charge in unexpected ways. Women soldiers serving on FETs are showing that the imagination of policy-makers as well as IR scholars lags far behind realities on the ground. As such, FETs are showing that it is not so much a matter of whether women can serve in combat – it is a matter of whether their service will get recognized as such.

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For more on this topic see McBride's and Wibben's article, "The Gendering of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan," in the Summer 2012 edition of *Humanity.*

[1] Their inspiration were all-female teams of the Lioness Program in Iraq as well as another Marine Corps effort, the Iraqi Women's Engagement Program (Watson 2011).

[2] Since January 2011,the U.S. Army has been training female soldiers for "Cultural Support Teams" (CSTs), which work with special operations teams.

[3] This has now also become a measure of her legacy as secretary of state (see e.g. http://articles.latimes.com/2012/apr/08/world/la-fg-hillary-clinton-afghanistan-20120409)

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