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The Deployment of Female Counterinsurgents in Afghanistan

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Does an Increased Deployment of Female Counterinsurgents in Afghanistan Change the Practice of It?

The deployment of females in counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns is a recent development and has attracted most attention in the form of the Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Afghanistan. Since the first assignment in February 2009, there has been an ad hoc evolution in the way these all-female teams have been deployed. The literature on female counterinsurgents is split between gender scholars on the one hand (Khalili, 2011), whose focus is often centred on the symbolic role of women in counterinsurgency, and on the other hand, scholars who focus on the strategic role of FETs in counterinsurgency (Christie, 2012; Harding, 2012; Pottinger, Jilani & Russo, 2010 & Watson, 2011). This essay will assess the role FETs have played in changing counterinsurgent practice in Afghanistan. Whilst an increased deployment of female counterinsurgents has enhanced everyday engagements with the Afghan population, as part of 'winning hearts and minds', the failure to incorporate FETs into planning stages, and to fully institutionalise their role, has meant that they have had limited ability in effecting long-term, institutional change on the practice of counterinsurgency.

An increased deployment of FETs in Afghanistan has enhanced the operational effectiveness of population-centric counterinsurgency practice. Harding argues that FETs enhance the operational effectiveness through improved information gathering, enhanced credibility, and better force protection (2012: 21). Pottinger documents how mobile medical centres and Radio Literacy Projects have allowed direct engagement with Afghan women. Indeed, FETs have the unique ability to engage with the 'missing half' of the population, the estimated 49% of females, who have been previously neglected or sidelined. In a culturally sensitive environment where male forces are told not to make eye contact with female Afghans (Pottinger, Jilani & Russo, 2010: 3), female forces can directly engage with, build trust among, and even gather intelligence from (Bumiller, 2010a) local Afghan women. Moreover, the FET ability to transcend gender dichotomies by embodying a 'feminised militarism' had led them to be perceived as a 'third gender' by Afghans (Pottinger, Jilani & Russo, 2010: 2 & Watson, 2011).

Extended the respect usually shown towards men and granted access to family homes (McBride & Wibben, 2012: 210), FETs play a unique enhancing role in 'winning hearts and minds' through direct engagement. However, it is unclear that their deployment alone has contributed to a change in counterinsurgency practice. FETs, instead, should be placed into a broader context, along with Human Terrain Teams, whereby an evolving population-centric COIN campaign aims to broaden cultural understanding. Female counterinsurgents play a facilitating rather than a causal role in changing population-centric COIN doctrine and practice.

A key critique of FETs is that they cannot achieve any ostensible change for the fact of being female alone (Bumiller, 2010b; McBride & Wibben, 2012: 208 & Watson, 2011). Indeed, an increased deployment of females without adequate training cannot hope to fundamentally change counterinsurgency practice. The complexity of the Afghan cultural setting means few can become true experts on it (Watson, 2011). FET training—with a focus on 70% kinetic operations and 30% classroom training—over a four month period (Harding, 2012: 18-19) cannot impart such complex knowledge to members of FETs that already have other full time military jobs (Jones, 2010). Without dedicated full-time teams, FETs have limited ability to bring about long-term change in COIN practices. Furthermore,

The Deployment of Female Counterinsurgents in Afghanistan

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a failure to integrate FETs in the planning stages of operations has meant FETs have faced barriers from the outset. Harding states that FETs must be synchronised in the planning stages of operations (2012: 18-19). Advocates argue that institutionalising FETs, or FET-like capabilities, with Civil Affairs is the only way to ensure that they will be retained by the military for future deployment past the campaign in Afghanistan (Harding, 2012: 18-19 & Watson, 2011). Lacking a voice in the planning stages means that they are operationally prevented from changing counterinsurgency practice.

Whilst an increased deployment of female counterinsurgents may symbolically represent unity in civil-military operations, which is a key facet of population-centric counterinsurgency (FM3-24, 2006), in practice a disconnect still remains. Gender scholars argue that women become the symbols that unite the two logics of intervention in Afghanistan—defeating insurgents and nation-building (Khalili, 2011: 1479). However, Khalil fails to distinguish between women as objects and women as subjects. As objects both Afghan and Western women have been used to legitimate the campaign (McBride and Wibben, 2012: 201-2). However, in practice as subjects, FETs may actually embody the disconnect between military and civil operations. It has already been shown that FET training and implementation has not been carried out in a unified manner, and Watson (2011) further argues that FETs still lack coordination with district stabilisation teams and NGOs. Thus, they do not significantly contribute to integration between the two logics beyond any symbolic role. Whilst as objects female counterinsurgents may seem to be changing counterinsurgency practice, as subjects they have had less impact.

Anxieties over gender roles and meanings of femininity have acted as the largest barrier to females enacting institutional or long-term change on counterinsurgency practice. The first deployed FET teams were pulled from duty in July 2010 after only three weeks of deployment, and due to fears about their 'vulnerability', their subsequent roles were much reduced (McBride & Wibben, 2012: 208-9). A fragmentary order from August 2010 epitomises the way in which female teams are conceptualised as having an enhancing and supporting role in counterinsurgency practice only. As quoted from Harding:

"Female service members serve as an instrument in support of full spectrum COIN operations by enhancing access to civilian women amongst the population and thereby enabling ground forces to conduct operations necessary to defeat the enemy." (Harding, 2012: 9).

COIN practice may have changed in order to facilitate an increased role for females; however, their ability in turn to change COIN practice is limited to an enabling role. Indeed, as long as FETs are 'attached' to other military units, their operational goals will be secondary to those of the units they accompany (McBride and Wibben, 2012: 215). Perhaps with the recent overturn of the Department of Defence Combat Exclusion Policy, female counterinsurgents will be able to effect change on counterinsurgent practice beyond an enhancing and supporting role.

Whilst an increased deployment of female counterinsurgents in Afghanistan may have signaled a symbolic change in how counterinsurgency is practiced, in practice FETs have played an enhancing role rather than a causal role of change. FETs have contributed to more effective implementation of already existing population-centric counterinsurgency practices. However, until female counterinsurgents are incorporated in planning stages and strategically deployed in a sustained manner, their ability to effect change on counterinsurgency practice will not go beyond the enhancing and supporting role they currently play.

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The Deployment of Female Counterinsurgents in Afghanistan

Written by Charlotte Fraser

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