

# Counterinsurgency and Female Engagement Teams in the War in Afghanistan

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### Counterinsurgency and Female Engagement Teams in the Afghanistan War

#### Introduction

Over the past thirteen years of the United States-led counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, both American and Afghan troops have encountered issues with addressing Afghan women, as males are prohibited from looking at or speaking with these women due to pre-existing religious and cultural norms. As a response to this issue, the United States Marine Corps established Female Engagement Teams (FET).[1] FETs are comprised of volunteer American female members of appropriate rank, experience, and maturity whose primary mission is to engage the Afghan female population by developing trust-based and enduring relationships with the Afghan women they encounter on patrols.[2] They do so by building important relationships with the female population, thus winning the confidence and trust of the Afghan people and government.

FETs were not a new concept in Afghanistan. They have existed in a multitude of forms for over a decade in the United States. Both the US Army and Marine Corps have utilized FETs with varying degrees of success. Army civil affairs teams have performed similar missions in both Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Bosnia and Kosovo, but not under the FET name. The Marines accepted the FET concept early and employed it on a large scale well before the Army. FETs have drawn comparison to female Marine units that deployed to Iraq under a program known as Lioness. However, Lioness Marines focused specifically on searching Iraqi women, while FET roles were frequently broader. In August of 2012, the Marine Corps ended its use of female engagement teams in Afghanistan, citing that their work is now performed by Afghan National Security Forces.[3] The US-led coalition in Afghanistan concluded its combat mission on December 28, 2014, marking the official end to the longest war in American history.[4]

In the context of the War in Afghanistan, Female Engagement Teams were ineffective at achieving their primary goal because they were not successfully integrated into United States counterinsurgency. However, it has yet to be determined exactly how Female Engagement Teams were not successfully integrated into US counterinsurgency. Therefore, this thesis seeks to determine whether Female Engagement Teams were unsuccessfully integrated into US counterinsurgency due to inconsistencies in Female Engagement Team policy or implementation. The congruence method is employed to test the predictive power of FM 3-24's integrated actor theory in the context of Female Engagement Teams.[5]

The following definitions of insurgency and counterinsurgency are employed throughout this paper. An *insurgency* is defined as the "organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region." [6] *Counterinsurgency* refers to the "comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes." [7] In the context of the Afghanistan war, counterinsurgency, or COIN, aims to build the Afghan population's confidence in the Afghan government and weaken the Taliban insurgency throughout the region. Mobilizing the community to participate actively in their own safety, stability, security, and success is the foundation of counterinsurgency at local levels.[8] The separation of the "people" and the "insurgents" is central to the practice of COIN, yet it is one distinction that cannot be made so easily.[9] "The very

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idea of a neat physical divide between the insurgency and the people understates the role of family and kinship ties across these categories.”[10] As seen in past counterinsurgency wars, the “people” may include those who physically support the insurgency, not only those who it victimizes.

Insurgency may be a large and growing element of the security challenges faced by many countries in the 21st century. Counterinsurgency requires the integration of all capabilities of the US and often requires this integration for long periods of time. Integration relies on coordination among units and commands to ensure that the full range of available capabilities are used, synchronized, and applied to a given objective. “Failure to incorporate the strategic narrative into actions through the operational level down to the individual counterinsurgent will do greater harm more quickly than almost any action in COIN.”[11] If done properly, operations ingrained with a strategic narrative are enhanced and empowered through sense of purpose, unity of effort, and the ability to gain and maintain initiative against insurgents.

If FETs were successfully integrated into counterinsurgency operations, units would gain greater acceptance from the local population and collect information the unit can use to enhance their operations and provide improved security in their area of operations. It is important to determine why Female Engagement Teams were unsuccessfully integrated into US counterinsurgency because FETs have the potential to be a force multiplier if properly integrated and employed in future COIN operations. First, I give an overview of the available literature on Female Engagement Teams and COIN. Next, I present the theory and process that I employ to answer the following research question: were Female Engagement Teams unsuccessfully integrated into US counterinsurgency due to inconsistencies in Female Engagement Team policy or implementation? After presenting my data and making analysis, I make suggestions to ensure further integration of FETs into COIN. These suggestions may potentially change the overall structure of the military by altering the actions and overall mission of FETs, as well as the units they accompany.

## Literature Review

Integrated actor theory is developed within the US Army’s Counterinsurgency Field Manual, FM 3-24. FM 3-24 provides principles and guidelines for conducting a successful COIN campaign. This field manual establishes doctrine, or fundamental principles, for military operations in a COIN environment based on lessons learned from previous COIN operations. Although originally produced in 2006, the manual was updated in 2014 to include lessons learned over the past six years in Afghanistan. The doctrine laid out by this manual serves as a foundation for this thesis as it seeks to discover why Female Engagement Teams failed to be integrated into COIN. It is imperative to note that the doctrine the manual lays out is extremely controversial as it is written from a single point of view and does not provide any criticism or assessment of US COIN operations. Nonetheless, scholars and journalists overwhelmingly concur that US COIN doctrine was unsuccessful in the case of the Afghanistan war.[12]

Many scholars share a mutual frustration with the grand COIN narrative. Gurman argues that COIN has ultimately failed its mission yet is being considered a success in the eyes of United States military and policy makers.[13] Kilcullen asserts that while the United States frames their invasion as a victory for the people and a gain of freedom for the local population, their COIN efforts result in lengthy, violent wars that produce new tensions and an anti-foreign sentiment that further fuels the insurgency.[14] Munsing contends that US COIN doctrine has taught its Afghan allies to “fight and govern as Americans fight and govern, rather than teaching them to do so in a way consistent with their culture and in line with their own strategic beliefs.”[15] Jones adds to this argument by stating that the United States failed to focus its resources on developing capabilities that help “improve the capacity of the indigenous government and its security forces to wage counterinsurgency warfare.”[16] Azarbaijani-Moghaddam argues “the desperation to show FET as a success permeates UK and USMC reporting.”[17] While these are all very rash accusations of the United States government and military branches, it is essential to consider this potential bias of the US military when analyzing the available official literature on the success of counterinsurgency and Female Engagement Teams in the war in Afghanistan.

Research in the area of Female Engagement Teams in the United States counterinsurgency effort has followed two different avenues: supporting and praising their usage or criticizing their lack of success and offering solutions. Kilcullen, one of many scholars who support the utilization of FETs, argues that female counterinsurgents effectively

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influence the family unit through their engagements with Afghan women.[18] McBride and Wibben suggest that the addition of FETs to counterinsurgency has given American forces an essential and vital tool in reaching out to the Afghan population.[19] They further declare that the deployment of FETs serves as evidence of the “feminist war” narrative, which is described as a war being fought in support of women’s rights in countries with generally unappealing human rights records. The authors argue that the feminist narrative has become a marker of U.S. success. However, Kilcullen, McBride and Wibben fail to recognize that FETs were ultimately unsuccessful in the grand COIN narrative as the program was terminated at the end of 2012. Many scholars who praise the efforts and accomplishments of FETs neglect to acknowledge that FETs were not effective because they were not successfully integrated into US counterinsurgency.

On the other hand, there are scholars who relentlessly critique the practice and management of FETs. Fraser contends that FETs merely paved the way for future female engagement, but did not make substantial change in the COIN effort because they were not given enough attention, in terms of training, separate units, and size.[20] She justly argues that FETs played an enhancing and supporting role in COIN. They supported the units they were attached to, but their operational goals were secondary. Holliday asserts that FETs were disorganized and had a lack of training and integration with other military teams.[21] Eikenberry described FETs as multimillion-dollar teams without a clear purpose.[22] Several scholars agree that expensive ad hoc efforts, such as FETs, may have been well intentioned, but did little to pave the way for the establishment of stable and strong Afghan governance and economic prosperity. While these scholars accurately distinguish the flaws of FETs, they fail to find the root of the flaws. They neither place the blame on FET policy nor FET implementation.

As this thesis seeks to discover whether FETs were ineffective due to inconsistencies in FET policy or in FET implementation, the importance of a strong working relationship between a FET member and her commander is highlighted. This relationship has been extremely underrated by COIN doctrine and COIN scholars. Commanders must understand the benefits of female engagement and the responsibilities inherent in making it work. Azarbaijani-Mogghaddam conducted her own quantitative and survey-style qualitative research in Afghanistan to come to the conclusion that FETs proved to be largely ineffective in their envisioned counterinsurgency role due to their struggle to be perceived as beneficial by male colleagues, specifically their commanders. She concludes that FETs have struggled to demonstrate usefulness and could have potentially had a positive effect had their commanders realized and utilized their real advantages.[23] Jilani, Pottinger, and Russo agree that the lack of ability to intensify and replicate successful female engagements can be resolved by better understanding of the function of FETs by brigade commanders.[24] Harding makes recommendations to ensure further utilization of FETs, such as building a stronger relationship between the FET and the commander and more thorough cultural training.[25] As Azarbaijani-Mogghaddam, Jilani, Pottinger, Russo, and Harding confirm, it is crucial for commanders to recognize the usefulness of FETs and to understand how to utilize FETs during missions. Yet, the scholars neglect to determine whether the role of commanders in the employment of FETs was overlooked due to inconsistencies in FET policy or FET implementation.

The concept of FETs has, thus far, been analyzed too narrowly. Other scholars have based their analysis of FETs on scarce and insufficient factors, such as whether FETs were ultimately successful in achieving their mission. Scholars have hardly researched the question of why FETs failed to be integrated into US counterinsurgency, as much of the available research simply critiques or praises their usage. This thesis employs FM 3-24’s integrated actor theory, a theory that has yet to be applied in research on this topic, to discover whether Female Engagement Teams were unsuccessfully integrated into United States counterinsurgency due to inconsistencies in FET policy or implementation.

## Methodology

This thesis evaluates whether Female Engagement Teams were ultimately ineffective due to inconsistent and insufficient policies or poor implementation of such policies. The congruence method is employed to analyze the following theory presented by the US Department of the Army Headquarters in FM 3-24- the primary manual that provides doctrine for US Army and Marine units that are conducting a counterinsurgency operation. FM 3-24 declares that all actors are successfully integrated into a COIN effort when five specific requirements are

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followed.[26] These requirements have been framed into five questions that will be used to analyze whether FETs are fully integrated into the US COIN effort:

1. Are FETs represented, integrated, and actively involved in the decision-making process and planning stages of operations?
2. Do FETs share an understanding of the situation and knowledge of the problem to be resolved?
3. Are FETs striving to achieve a common goal as the overall US COIN effort?
4. Are FETs capabilities and activities synchronized with other COIN actors, such as their commanders?
5. Do FETs collectively determine the resources, capabilities, and activities necessary to achieve their goal?

This thesis tests the following two hypotheses: H1: FETs were not successfully integrated into the US COIN effort because policies were not consistent with COIN doctrine, and H2: FETs were not successfully integrated into the US COIN effort because the policies were poorly implemented. If the evidence is inconsistent with H1, then the null hypothesis cannot be confirmed or denied, which states that inconsistent policies had no effect on the effectiveness of FETs and their integration into US COIN. If the evidence is inconsistent with H2, then the null hypothesis cannot be confirmed or denied, which states that poor implementation of FET policies had no effect on the integration of FETs into US COIN.

FM 3-24's integrated actor theory works well within the boundaries of the congruence method. The congruence method is useful for examining a theory's ability to predict or be consistent with the outcome of a case.[27] To successfully employ the congruence method to test these hypotheses, I first test H1 and examine whether FET policy is consistent with the requirements of the FM 3-24 integrated actor theory. Next, by testing H2, I examine whether the implementation of FETs was consistent with these same five requirements. To test the accuracy of integrated actor theory and FET policy, I compare the actual outcome of FETs, provided by the evidence for H2, to the results from H1. The data utilized in this thesis has been collected from primary sources such as narratives, official government documents, such as *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams*, and one interview with Dr. Lisare Brooks Babin, a former FET trainer and current researcher at the U.S. Army Research Institute.

Prior to delving into data analysis, it is important to recognize that many scholars have asserted that the United States is desperately trying to frame the Afghanistan war as a victory for the counterinsurgents despite studies proving otherwise.[28] This desperation to show FETs as a success may have permeated United States Marine Corps and Army reporting.[29] Therefore, when testing H2, more emphasis has been put on original research, such as first-hand interviews and narratives of FET and COIN officials.

I assess whether both FET policy and implementation are consistent with each of the five requirements that must be fulfilled to be considered an integrated actor, as framed by FM 3-24. For question one, which asks whether FETs are represented, integrated, and actively involved in the decision making process and planning stages of operations, I utilize information provided in *The Commander's Guide for Female Engagement Teams*, a US army manual to help in the training and utilization of FETs, to test H1, and narratives, anecdotes, and interviews to test H2. I first examine whether policy allowed for FET officials to have a voice in their employment and utilization and then investigate whether this was consistent in actuality.

For question two, which evaluates whether FETs share an understanding of the situation and knowledge of the problem to be resolved, I carefully consider whether FET members have enough experience and training for the duties they are performing. I examine whether the FET culture training is comprehensive and if it is sufficient enough for FETs to successfully achieve their mission goals. For analysis of H1, I utilize the selection, assessment, and training information available in *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams*. For subsequent analysis of H2, I employ information gathered from interviews and available narratives, assessments, and anecdotes to examine whether the implementation of FET selection, assessment, and training was adequate and whether FET volunteers had enough prior experience in actuality.

For question three, which analyzes whether FETs were striving to achieve a common goal as the overall US COIN effort, I will compare the mission statement of FETs with the overall mission of the US counterinsurgency effort to test

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H1. To test H2, I examine whether the FET mission was carried out successfully and if it was precise enough for the FETs to comprehend the duties expected of them.

For question four, which examines whether FETs capabilities and activities were synchronized with other COIN actors, such as their commanders, I examine the working relationship between FETs and their commanders and investigate how the commanders ensure that FETs are utilized to their utmost potential. It is important to analyze the role of FET staffers in theory and in implementation and question whether they were effective and successfully employed.

Finally, for question five, I consider whether FETs have the ability to determine the resources, capabilities, and activities that they are permitted to use during their engagements. FETs require many resources and capabilities to ensure a successful engagement, specifically translators. I interpret the data to analyze whether FETs can directly select the translators, as well as other necessary resources, they require, in policy and in practice, to ensure they have a successful engagement.

The following data section answers the question of whether FETs were unsuccessfully integrated into the US COIN effort due to problems in policy or in practice. There are limits to the data presented below, such as the use of only one primary interview and the lack of accessibility to classified documents, such as official FET reports.

## Data Section

Employing FM 3-24's integrated actor theory, this section presents evidence to analyze whether Female Engagement Teams failed to be integrated into the US COIN effort due to inconsistent and insufficient policies or poor implementation of such policies. Analysis of the data is subsequently provided to determine if the evidence is consistent with either of the hypotheses.

### **H1: FETs were not successfully integrated into the US COIN effort because policies were not consistent with COIN doctrine.**

This section provides evidence to test the hypothesis that FETs were not integrated in US COIN because FET policies were not consistent with COIN doctrine. The following questions used for analysis are taken from FM 3-24's integrated actor theory.[30]

1. Are FETs represented, integrated, and actively involved in the decision-making process and planning stages of operations?

FET officials must be included in the decision-making process and planning stages of operations to address concerns about mission scope, duration, and effectiveness.[31] According to *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams*, the FET officer in charge, as the most experienced and senior member of the FET, participates in most, if not all, classified FET mission planning and briefings.[32] The recorder, who takes notes to document the engagement, may also participate in specific classified FET mission planning and briefings. At a minimum, "at least the FET leader and, when possible, the second FET member need to have a secret security clearance to participate in classified briefings and mission planning." [33] Secret security clearance allows the FET members to have access to classified information about past and upcoming missions.

Given that the FET officer in charge and the recorder, or second FET member, have secret security clearance, they can be actively involved in the decision-making process and planning stages of operations. Therefore, the evidence is consistent with the requirement that FETs are represented in the decision making process and planning stages of operations. It is evident that there exists no problem with FET policy on this of matter of representation.

2. Do FETs share an understanding of the situation and knowledge of the problem to be resolved?

Proper selection, training, and education of FETs are necessary to ensure that FET soldiers share an understanding

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of the situation at hand and have knowledge of the problem to be resolved. Adequate selection, training, and education contribute to successful integration and effective mission command. For FETs to share an understanding and knowledge sufficient enough to perform engagements, FET selection must be meticulous and training must be thorough and comprehensive by including proper language and culture training. If FETs fail to share an understanding and knowledge of the situation at hand, engagements with locals are unproductive and can result in more harm than good.

Cultural understanding is essential because who a society considers to be legitimate will likely be determined by the visitor's knowledge and tolerance of the society's culture and norms. According to FM 3-24, for a military force to succeed in gaining support of the local population, "it must seek to understand the local people and their culture and incorporate the perspectives and concerns of the population in their plans and operations as well as, if not better than, the insurgents incorporate them." [34] Therefore, it is essential for FET members to undergo sufficient cultural training for an adequate amount of time. Poor understanding of the local culture, social taboos, and politics within the village can not only hinder the engagement, but have a negative impact that will prevent the FET from having any additional meetings within the village.

Relevant prior military experience is critical to ensure the FET member is of an appropriate maturity level and understands the basics and inner workings of the military. Efficient FET volunteer recruitment and individual screening are essential components that lead to effective FET candidate selection and FET training and qualification completion. According to *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams*, the brigade combat team (BCT) and provisional reconstruction team (PRT) commanders refer to the FET volunteer list, which consists of female military personnel who have volunteered for a FET assignment, to select the best FET candidates during the FET assessment and selection phase. [35] It is imperative that this selection process is thorough and strict so the candidates with the most applicable experience, understanding, and knowledge are selected to move on to the FET training and qualification phase. While the importance of meticulous FET selection is highlighted in *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams*, the guide does not propose a requirement or suggestion for the minimum military experience of a potential FET member. After FET selection, the candidates selected will attend the FET training and qualification phase.

It is crucial for the FET training program to be all encompassing and intensive to ensure that each FET soldier understands how to achieve her mission goals in the safest and most efficient way. The Army FET Training Support Package (TSP) was approved on June 15, 2011 to be utilized by all Army active duty to train selected BCT female soldiers in female engagement-specific training. [36] *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams* additionally outlines a four-week training program, however, the Center for Army Lessons Learned acknowledges that during the war, most BCTs and PRTs will not be able to allocate a four-week block of time to conduct FET training. At least, "all BCT and PRT FETs will be required to complete FET training in accordance with the FET TSP." [37] Yet, the FET TSP only outlines a nine-day training program to cover a plethora of material necessary for successful functionality of FETs.

According to *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams*, specific topics during Afghan culture training should include, "The Rise of the Taliban, Pashtun Culture and Women, Conversation Skills and Use of Interpreters for FETs, Media Training for FETs, The Origins of Al Qaeda, and Poppy Harvest." [38] Figure 1, *FET TSP Training Schedule*, shows that FETs undergo very minimal language training- only a couple of hours each day for eight days. [39] However, once BCTs and PRTs deploy to Afghanistan, a province-specific FET training will be administered for approximately two days. [40]

In FET policy, there is a lack of standardization of selection and training procedures. According to Ashley Nicolas, FET leader for the 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division:

As an Army, we have trained countless women to fill these roles in the last decade, but because of a lack of a real system of accountability, of uniformity in training, or of proper evaluation, there is no way to account for the level or quality of FET training across the Army. [41]

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Due to this lack of standardized training there was a wide disparity in reported knowledge, skills, and ability levels of FET Soldiers. For example, the FET TSP is required training for all FET members, however, it is intended to serve only as a basis for FET training. The FET TSP provides limited training, and is, by itself, insufficient to prepare FETs to effectively engage with local Afghan women and whomever else they may have encountered on patrols.[42] The Army Research Institute found that some units enhanced the FET TSP with all-encompassing supplementary unit training, but others did not. Therefore, there was an inconsistency in the FET training programs and, consequently, the skills and knowledge of FET Soldiers. As a result of lack of sufficient and consistent FET selection and training, FETs failed to share an understanding of the situation and knowledge of the problem to be resolved. Conclusively, the FET selection and training policies are inconsistent with the COIN doctrine.

## 2. Are FETs striving to achieve a common goal as the overall US COIN effort?

To test whether FETs are striving to achieve a common goal as the overall US COIN effort, it is imperative to compare the mission statements of FETs with the overall mission of the US counterinsurgency effort.

In October 2011, The International Security Alliance Forces Joint Command Female Engagement Team Program Manager developed the following formal FET mission statement: "Female Engagement Teams are battlefield enablers that influence, inform and interact with the local population, primarily women, to achieve their COIN objectives and to build trust and confidence with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan." [43] This mission statement clearly emphasizes the importance of engaging with local women to build trust in the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). The overall US COIN strategy is based on supporting the host nation's, Afghanistan's, COIN strategy. Therefore, the COIN effort's primary goal is to "simultaneously protect the population from insurgent violence; strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of the host nation government; and isolate the insurgents physically, psychologically, politically, socially, and economically." [44]

In terms of policy, it is evident that FETs are striving to achieve a common goal as the overall COIN effort. Not only does the FET mission statement stress the importance of achieving COIN objectives, it acknowledges the common mission to strengthen the legitimacy of GIROA, a very specific and critical goal of the overall COIN effort. The FET mission statement stresses building 'trust and confidence in the GIROA' and the US COIN mission emphasizes strengthening the 'legitimacy and capacity of the host nation government.' Therefore, in this case, FET policy is consistent with COIN doctrine as FET policy clearly aims to achieve COIN objectives.

## 3. Are FETs' capabilities and activities synchronized with other COIN actors, such as their commanders?

It is essential for commanders to ensure that FETs are integrated with the BCT and other accompanying units. Therefore, commanders require training in understanding the purpose of FETs and how to utilize FETs to their utmost potential. According to *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams*, "commanders should provide directives and guidance on how FETs will fit into the organization's plans and operations and ensure the FETs are properly trained and resourced." [45]

The guide admits that there is a poor understanding of the capabilities and potential uses of FETs on the part of some unit commanders. To avoid this misunderstanding, the guide states that the FET officer in charge should coordinate the intentions and execution of the mission directly with the commander to clear up any misunderstanding of the FET mission objective. Furthermore, prior coordination with supported units must clearly articulate FET missions and goals. [46]

*The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams* stresses the importance of using FET staff planners to properly nest and synchronize FET efforts into a commander's plan. A FET staff planner must be able to understand a commander's overall intent within his or her operational environment and be able to fuse FET actions into their organizational strategy. A FET staff planner "should be knowledgeable of all the other efforts going on in the community by other agencies such as Department of State, USAID, international government organizations and nongovernment organizations, and, most importantly, GIROA, to synchronize their operations for the enhancement of all." [47] The FET staff planner plays a strong and significant role in the coordination of FET's activities with those of

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other units, personnel, and agencies.

Evidently, according to FET policy, and as consistent with COIN policy, FETs capabilities and activities are synchronized with other COIN actors, such as their commanders, through the role of FET staff planners.

#### 4. Do FETs collectively determine the resources, capabilities, and activities necessary to achieve their goal?

It is fundamental for FETs to have the ability and resources to address problems raised during engagements with the local population. Interpreters are an essential resource for female engagements. While language training is a minimal portion of FET cultural training, interpreters are always necessary to ensure the translations are flawless to avoid any miscommunications and mistakes in reporting. In policy and in reality, an interpreter always accompanies FETs during engagements with the local population.

*The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams* confirms "FETs will be augmented in theater with local Afghan females hired as translators and female medical personnel." [48] However, the guide goes on to declare, "A local Afghan male translator may be substituted when a local Afghan female translator is not available." [49] Female engagers determine that it is crucial to employ only female interpreters due to cultural sensitivities, particularly in the more conservative rural regions. Using a male interpreter when engaging with a conservative female population is unsatisfactory and inappropriate, as many Afghan females do not speak to males in certain circumstances due to cultural norms.

Yet, even *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams* recognizes the complications with using male interpreters when engaging with local Afghan women. The guide recognizes, "while male interpreters may be able to translate from behind a sheet during female-to-female engagements, it is not ideal and may diminish how open and honest females will be with FETs." [50] This scarcity of female interpreters does not allow for FETs to determine the resources necessary to achieve the mission goals of their engagements. Undoubtedly, this situation is not optimal for any FET member. The ability for a FET to determine the desired gender of an accompanying interpreter is fundamental for the FET to reach her mission goals. Nonetheless, the FET policy on the use of interpreters is not sufficient, as it should not permit the use of male interpreters during female engagements. The FET policy is inconsistent with the COIN requirement that FETs have the ability to determine, or receive, the resources necessary to achieve their goal.

#### *Results for H1*

Data shows that FET policies are consistent with FM 3-24's requirements one, three, and four, while FET policies are inconsistent with requirements two and five. The results show that by a slight majority, the requirements put forth by FM 3-24's integrated actor theory fit within the case of FET policy. Therefore, according to FET policy, FETs should be successfully integrated into the US COIN effort.

#### **H2: FETs were not successfully integrated into the US COIN effort because the policies were poorly implemented.**

The above section examined whether FETs were ineffective due to inconsistencies with US COIN doctrine and FET policy. In this section, the same five analysis questions from FM 3-24 are utilized to examine whether FETs were ineffective due to poor implementation of the policies. The data in this section was collected from narratives, assessment reports, and an interview conducted with Dr. Lisa Brooks Babin, a former FET trainer and current researcher at the U.S. Army Research Institute.

#### 1. Are FETs represented, integrated, and actively involved in the decision-making process and planning stages of operations?

As illustrated in the previous section, it is fundamental for FETs to be actively involved in the decision-making process and planning stages of operations. FET policy succeeds to ensure that FETs are represented in these



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processes. However, various reports by FET members note that they are not part of the planning process to determine how they can be efficiently employed. When fifty-three FET members were asked how well they thought they were integrated into the overall planning during their deployments, “35% said better than other units, 10% said about the same, and 55% of FET Soldiers said worse than other units.”[51] FET soldiers feel they are an afterthought, briskly incorporated into a mission because women may be encountered. Azarbaijani-Moghaddam recounts from her experience in Afghanistan as an ISAF gender advisor and FET trainer that “FETs were frequently not tied to operational planning and were therefore not mainstreamed into the central thrust of military activities.”[52] FETs were removed from the decision-making process and were consequently left without knowledge of the strategic plans for upcoming missions.

A failure to involve FETs in the planning stages of operations lead to poorly conceived missions. According to a FET, “my team gets a call from our unit asking if any FETs are available for a certain mission and they are placed on it without any idea of what it entails until they are there.”[53] Disconnecting FETs from the planning stages of operations distances them from the rest of the unit, as they are not informed of the procedures, goals, and strategies for a mission until the actual engagement, providing little time for the FETs to prepare. FETs were not represented, integrated or actively involved in the decision-making process or planning stages of operations because the FET policies were poorly implemented in practice. Therefore, the evidence for this requirement is consistent with H2.

## 2. Do FETs share an understanding of the situation and knowledge of the problem to be resolved?

As presented in the previous section, the FET Training Support Package (TSP) was deemed insufficient and inconsistent with COIN doctrine. However, further evidence shows that FETs failed to share an understanding of the situation and lacked a knowledge of the problem to be resolved not only from ineffective training policies and procedures, but also from poor implementation of the available policies.

First, selected FET soldiers did not have an acceptable amount of prior military experience. While 91% of Army FETs have deployed previously, 64% had been in the Army four years or less, making most FET soldiers relatively inexperienced.[54] Approximately half of the selected females were told to volunteer to be female engagers and did not receive the appropriate training prior to their employment. As a result, “the assessed FET members stated a lack of understanding of the benefit of their mission, were ineffective and missions goals were non-existent.”[55] When asked about FET selection, Dr. Lisare Brooks Babin answered:

Early on it could have been any rank, the only real criteria was that she was female... When the rule came out that every unit that was deploying to Afghanistan had to have two FETs, every unit got to decide how that was done. Some of them may have had restrictions for how long they’ve been in the military or what MLS they were from, but most of them were just looking to fill the slots.[56]

Due to the ad hoc nature of the program, the FET program severely lacked officers above the rank of Lieutenant, which suggests a scarcity of critical leadership to define goals and shape teams tactics.[57]

Azarbaijani-Moghaddam argues that US Marine Corps FETs initially lacked knowledge of Afghan government institutions and programs for women and had no technical knowledge on gender issues. There was little to no understanding of the intricacies of operating in a largely conservative, rural area. She recounts, “when reporting on their mission in discussion with me, hospitality, niceties, blessings and formal statements of gratitude from Afghans were presented as solid outcomes.”[58] The following case is illustrative:

A maulavi (religious leader) heading a community refuses a FET access to the village, citing security to get rid of the visitors. The report for a start states that maulavi is the man’s first name, showing lack of basic knowledge. He does not allow FET to contact local women in his village and asks the marines to leave, stating that he is responsible for village security and does not want them patrolling. The report is optimistically entitled ‘Event: Elders take responsibility for security in the area’ and turns the incident with one man into a counterinsurgency success for the community.[59]

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The basic lack of knowledge illustrated in this case is unacceptable as it leads to incongruities in reporting. This misunderstanding could have been avoided with adequate training on Afghan customs and social norms. Language proficiency is critical for female engagements in gender-segregated societies, given the lack of female interpreters in many locations. Language familiarization and proficiency was indicated by 32% of FET soldiers as a key competency for engagements.[60] “Even FET soldiers who received 10-16 weeks of Pashto language training prior to deploying felt that greater language proficiency would have contributed to greater mission success.”[61] The evidence shows that FETs did not have an adequate amount of previous military experience or enough knowledge on significant subjects, such as Afghan government and culture and gender issues. Not only were the experience and training policies of FETs inconsistent with COIN doctrine, FETs executed these inadequate policies imperfectly, resulting in disastrous outcomes.

### 3. Are FETs striving to achieve a common goal as the overall US COIN effort?

Although the mission statement of FETs was consistent with that of the overall US COIN effort, the FET mission became unclear to both FETs and commanders alike in practice.

### 4. Are FETs capabilities and activities synchronized with other COIN actors, such as their commanders?

Female engagement was supposedly integrated at each level of command from tactical battalion level to regional command level by including FET leaders in the planning of operations. Yet, FETs relayed to Azarbaijani-Moghaddam that, “US marine commanders also put a great deal of pressure on them to show real value added and potential to achieve, while simultaneously presenting them as ‘shining successes’ to the outside world.”[66] This imposing pressure from commanders to produce positive results is detrimental for the relationship of FETs and their commanders, as well as accompanying units. This tactic fails to recognize that success in COIN is not developed overnight, but rather takes patience and resiliency to achieve the goal of ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of local Afghan women. The effective use of female engagement teams is the principal concern reiterated by female engagers in all the regional commands. 45% of FETs feel that their underutilization by their commands is due to the commanders’ lack of understanding in how to use them and what their abilities are so they can accurately integrate them.[67]

Captain Jennifer Montgomery, a FET officer-in-charge, described her challenges with receiving support from her command in the training and employment of the FET. She stated:

I think the hardest fight with implementing FET in a unit is the buy in from commanders. Without support from the units and strong leadership, it is extremely difficult to work the FET into the team. We had a problem during training with infantry platoon leaders leaving the FET behind because they would react to contact, execute their tactics, techniques and procedures (which we didn’t know...) and end up leaving us behind.[68]

This shows that there was a severe lack of support, understanding, and respect of FETs from the units that FETs accompanied. The blame for this absence of awareness is to be put on the commanders and their inadequate integration techniques.

FET policy was consistent with COIN doctrine due to the mention of FET staff planners in *The Commander’s Guide to Female Engagement Teams*. Supposedly, the primary role of FET staff planners was to ensure that FETs capabilities were synchronized with their commanders and their operational plans. When asked about the effectiveness of FET staff planners in practice, Dr. Lisare Brooks Babin stated:

It depends on each command and how he or she developed his or her staff elements and how they were tasked... those with gender and cultural expertise would be tasked to sit in on working groups to provide that perspective and insight to whatever operational plans were being developed. Some units actually had gender advisors at brigade as part of the staff element and had the ear of the commander to talk about gender issues, but not every commander had that asset.[69]

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This evidence shows that there were inconsistencies in the effectiveness of FET staff planners and the availability of gender advisors. While gender advisors proved to be a desired asset, not every commander and FET had access to them. Regardless of whether the FET was accompanied by a staff planner or a gender advisor, FETs were irritated by the fact that very few military actors in the areas where FETs were deployed saw them as functional and knew how to employ them.[70]

Conclusively, there is a major lack of consistency in the synchronization of FETs with their commanders and accompanying units. While some FETs were successfully synchronized with the help of gender advisors or FET staff planners, the majority of FETs were left on their own to fight for the attention of their commander so they could be properly utilized to their utmost potential. Therefore, FET capabilities and activities were not synchronized with other COIN actors due to problems in implementation.

## 5. Do FETs collectively determine the resources, capabilities, and activities necessary to achieve their goal?

A lack of physically fit, female Pashto linguists was an additional limiting factor on the effectiveness of FETs. According to policy, each FET requires one female interpreter. However, female interpreters are not always obtainable so policy encourages FETs to make do with available male interpreters. One of the toughest challenges FET soldiers recounted in engaging with local females in a gender-segregated society was the scarcity of female interpreters. The majority of female engagers agree on the importance of employing only female interpreters due to cultural sensitivities, especially in the more conservative rural regions. Afghan females are often reluctant to converse with males. In a study of 53 FET soldiers, 48% stated they never or sometimes had a female interpreter, while only 22% said they always had one.[71]

A FET reported that they employed a male interpreter for several missions in their villages and believed they were making significant progress in building relationships with the Afghan women. Yet, when their male interpreter was replaced with a female interpreter, they discovered that the Afghan women had been dishonest with them due to the male presence.[72] Hence, FETs preferred to be accompanied by female interpreters so they can ensure that the local women are providing them with truthful information.

Moreover, the interpreter's status as contractors allowed them to leave whenever they wished or request to be reassigned to a different location.[73] This is extremely problematic because it is helpful for the local female to see familiar faces during an engagement in order for the FET and interpreter to establish trust with the women. If the FET must replace their interpreter periodically, they will have to rebuild the trust of the women, essentially starting the engagement experience over.

The interpreters, as civilians, were not held to the same physical fitness levels as the FETs, and were not always willing to "rough it" in the same way as the military. Some reports have noted that there have been instances of interpreters who were unable physically to maintain the pace of operations. One analyst witnessed the deployment of a Dari-speaking linguist to a Pashtun area, effectively rendering her incapability of translating. Similarly, another interpreter was unable to walk for more than 15 minutes without taking an extended break due to medical issues and age.[74] Not only can issues such as these be hindering factors in the FET's ability to conduct its mission, but they can cause cultural missteps or security liabilities should a patrol come under attack and thus require members of the patrol to move swiftly to safety. The importance of a qualified and committed interpreter cannot be overstated. Consequently, data suggests that resourcing the FETs was not a top priority.

Frequently, FET soldiers were unable to access local Afghan women as a result of lack of rapport or established relationships, as they often visited a specific village only once. [75] Access to local women is a necessary capability for FETs to carry out their mission. In some villages, particularly those with few foreign or Afghan security forces, local men had been disinclined to permit female soldiers to enter the community to meet and engage with women. [76] Due to this obstacle, the FETs could not achieve with goal of influencing, informing and interacting with local women to achieve their COIN objectives and to build trust and confidence with GIRoA.

Furthermore, FETs faced a shortage of qualified and dedicated female interpreters because higher commands often

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assumed priority and utilized the available interpreters. FETs were frequently forced to cancel missions because their interpreter was taken to support other command initiatives. [77] This resulted in a lack of synchronization with their commanders and a lack of established relationships with the Afghan females, as FETs often visited a specific village only once. [78]

When time and resources spent on the FET are taken from the brigade organically, the FET can be viewed as a distraction from the rest of the mission rather than an added capability. This creates a situation where the FET is fighting against every other unit in the brigade for resources. Ashley Nicolas, FET leader for the 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, recalls:

I specifically remember drawn-out fights over the assignment of M9 pistols to team members. Although it should have been obvious why there was a need, because the engagement team was not a line item listed on the brigade MTOE, the unit was seen as a logistical liability and not as an asset that needed to be equipped.[79]

Implementation of the flawed FET policy regarding the use of male interpreters led to problems in practice. The policy, detailed in *The Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams*, was primarily a problem due to its inconsistency with COIN doctrine, thus leading to inconsistencies in implementation. FET policy anticipates no issues concerning the inability to access local Afghan women or having to fight with commanders or other units over equipment, time, vehicles, and other valuable resources. These tribulations had arisen in exclusively FET implementation, however FET policy failed to provide instruction on how to handle them. In this case, the inconsistent FET policy is evidently responsible for the unsuccessful integration of FETs into US COIN.

## Results for H2

Data shows that FET implementation was inconsistent with requirements one, two, three, and four of FM 3-24's integrated actor theory. Therefore, the data is mostly consistent with H2, stating that FETs were not successfully integrated into US COIN due to inconsistencies with FET implementation.

## Findings

The previous evidence exhibits whether FETs were not integrated into the US COIN effort due to a problem in policy or a problem in implementation. For the first requirement, which asks whether FETs were represented, integrated, and actively involved in the decision-making process and planning stages of operations, the implementation of the adequate policies was poor due to inconsistencies in practice. The evidence for this requirement is consistent with H2, which states that FETs were not successfully integrated into the US COIN effort because the policies were poorly implemented.

For the second requirement, FETs failed to share an understanding of the situation and knowledge of the problem to be resolved due to inconsistencies of both the policies and implementation of such policies with COIN doctrine. Policy and practice of FET training and prior experience were inconsistent with COIN doctrine and insufficient to produce effective outcomes. Therefore, the evidence is consistent with both H1 and H2.

The evidence for the third requirement, which asks whether FETs are striving to achieve a common goal as the overall COIN effort, is consistent with H2, citing a problem in implementation of the FET mission. The FET mission, which was consistent with the overall US COIN mission, was not conveyed properly to the FET soldiers or their commanders, which resulted in a misunderstanding of the FET mission goals.

For the fourth requirement, which examines whether FETs capabilities and activities were synchronized with other COIN actors, such as their commanders, the evidence is consistent with H2, citing a problem with implementation. FET policy is consistent with COIN doctrine due to mention of the role of FET staff planners. However, evidence shows that there was a major lack of consistency with FET staff planners and with overall synchronization of FETs and their commanders.

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For requirement five, FETs did not collectively determine the resources, capabilities, and activities necessary to achieve their goal due to inconsistencies between FET policy and COIN doctrine. Therefore, the data is consistent with H1.

Overall, four of the five requirements are consistent with H2, which states that FETs were not successfully integrated into the US COIN effort because the policies were poorly implemented. Only two of the five requirements are consistent with H1, which states that FETs were not successfully integrated into the US COIN effort because policies were not consistent with COIN doctrine. As the COIN manual, FM 3-24, does not weigh one requirement heavier than another, evidence suggests more problems in FET implementation than FET policy and is consistent with H2.

## Conclusion

Female Engagement Teams were ineffective at achieving their primary goals of engaging the Afghan female population because they were not successfully integrated into US COIN doctrine due to inconsistencies in FET implementation. Integration and incorporation of FETs into U.S. COIN doctrine, policy, education, and training would benefit soldiers at all levels in understanding how to effectively employ FETs and what they can contribute. Therefore, it is important to analyze why and how FETs were not successfully integrated in order to improve the program for employment in future international conflicts. This thesis researched whether FETs failed to be integrated into the US COIN effort due to inconsistent and insufficient policies or poor implementation of such policies. Employing FM 3-24's integrated actor theory, it was found that the data was consistent with H2, stating that FETs failed to be integrated into the US COIN effort due to poor implementation of FET policies.

Evidence shows that FETs were not represented, integrated, or actively involved in the decision-making process and planning stages of operations due to poor implementation of the adequate policies in practice. FETs failed to understand the situation and knowledge of the problem to be resolved due to inconsistencies of both the policies and implementation of such policies with COIN doctrine. FETs did not strive to achieve a common goal as the overall COIN effort due to problems in implementation of the FET mission. Furthermore, FETs capabilities and activities were not synchronized with other COIN actors, such as their commanders, due to problems with implementation, as well. Finally, the evidence demonstrates that FETs do not exercise the ability to determine the resources, capabilities, and activities necessary to achieve their goal due to inconsistencies in FET policy.

It is evident from the data that FETs can be extremely advantageous if FET policies are successfully and consistently implemented. It was difficult to find concrete data on FETs due to many inconsistencies in FET selection, assessment, training and employment. Consistency in the implementation of the FET program is essential for continuation and replication of the program for future counterinsurgency campaigns. To further ensure that FETs are effectively employed in future conflicts, the FET mission must be clearly outlined and understood by all involved actors. Furthermore, exceptional candidates must be recruited and selected for an all-encompassing formalized training program. A regulated assessment and selection process must be enforced. Given the demands and security risks involved with female engagement, potential FET members must be screened for maturity, experience, morale, physical fitness, people skills and creative thinking.

Understanding of both the tribal networks operated by women and their capabilities to influence their communities while still acknowledging the restrictions and realities of gender seclusion are essential to apprehend the human and cultural terrain in Afghanistan. Therefore, best practices should be incorporated into standardized future training for both soldiers and their commanders. Training for commanders is crucial for the commander to know how to properly utilize the FET in their unit missions. In future engagements, the unit leadership must support the integration and employment of the FET. Properly employed FET staff planners should enforce this.

Female engagement should be institutionalized and incorporated into future COIN operations. Institutionalizing FETs would help achieve US security objectives in conflicts all around the world. While FETs should remain volunteers, to ensure motivation, it should become a full time career track within the military so that the FET soldiers can singularly focus on their mission goals. However, FETs will only be indispensable in regions of conflict with dissimilar gender and cultural norms. These suggestions for the organization and employment of future Female Engagement Teams

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have the potential to positively change the overall structure of the military by altering the actions and overall mission of FETs, as well as the units they accompany. Yet, it is important to consider that if the armed forces were to open all military positions to women, FETs may not be entirely necessary as more trained women will likely be available on the battlefield to engage with female counterparts during patrols, meetings, or after raids.

Future research on this topic may focus on the future of Female Engagement Teams and where they can be utilized next, as well as how they can be improved and updated to overcome the cultural restrictions of each host country. Similarly, future research may focus on the effectiveness of female engagement, as the boundaries of FM 3-24's integrated actor theory did not allow for assessment and analysis of the efficiency of the actual encounters and engagements with Afghan women conducted by FETs.

When FETs are successfully integrated into the overall United States military effort, units gain greater acceptance from the local population and collect information the unit can use to enhance their operations and provide improved security in their area of operations. Female Engagement Teams, despite initial complications with both policy and implementation, are, and will be, the most resourceful way to engage with the female population of a host nation with dissimilar gender norms.

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## Glossary of Acronyms and Abbreviations

BCT: Brigade combat team

COIN: Counterinsurgency

FET: Female Engagement Team

FM 3-24: Field Manual Number 3-24

GIROA: Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

ISAF: International Security Alliance Forces

MLS: Multi-Level Security

MTOE: Modified Table of Organization and Equipment

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PRT: Provisional reconstruction team

TSP: Training Support Package

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

## Footnotes

[1] See glossary for all acronyms used in this thesis on page 39.

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