NATIONAL DEFENSE
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

This electronic document was made available from www.rand.org as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Support RAND

Purchase this document

Browse Reports & Bookstore

Make a charitable contribution

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org

Explore the RAND National Defense Research Institute

View document details

Assessing Freedom of Movement for Counterinsurgency Campaigns

Ben Connable, Jason Campbell,
Bryce Loidolt, Gail Fisher

Summary

Freedom of movement (FoM) is the degree to which individuals or groups have—and perceive that they have—the ability to move from place to place within a given environment as well as into and out of that environment. While doctrine and professional literature on the subject of FoM is sparse and often inconsistent, there are some clear indications that FoM is an important consideration for COIN tactics, operations, and strategy. The purpose of this report is to examine the ways in which U.S. military staffs assess FoM to help commanders and policymakers determine the success or failure of the counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in Afghanistan. The information and findings are also intended to contribute to the broader COIN literature and might be generalizable to prospective or other ongoing COIN campaigns.

To determine how, why, and, in some cases, why *not* to assess FoM in Afghanistan, it is first necessary to both define the concept in the context of COIN and to understand how U.S. and coalition military staffs have considered FoM in operations and assessments in other contemporary operations. Official publications show that both U.S. and coalition military staffs have considered FoM to be an important facet of COIN operations in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Reports from all three conflicts describe efforts to improve FoM for friendly forces, to restrict FoM for insurgents, and alternatively improve or restrict FoM for civilians, depending on the circumstances. Examples of the U.S. and coalition focus on FoM can be found in the analysis of FoM in Vietnam War–era assessment reports, official reports on Iraq, and reports that focus on several types of FoM in Afghanistan. Senior military officers and defense officials often discuss FoM in the context of intermediate and long-range COIN strategy. However, FoM is mentioned only occasionally in COIN literature and in U.S. military doctrine. Descriptions of FoM tend to be made either in passing or with insufficient context. To date, there have been few efforts to clearly define FoM or explain how it fits within the context of campaign end state or campaign assessment.

In part because FoM is not precisely defined in the literature, neither U.S. military doctrine nor U.S. government publications on COIN provide clear instruction on how to assess FoM. Research for this report, which included an examination of assessment processes and reports, showed that most efforts to describe, develop, and assess FoM have been inconsistent and poorly aligned with one another. This general inability to successfully assess FoM within the framework of campaign assessment has undermined the ability of military commanders and staffs to determine progress or lack of progress toward national strategic end states and termination criteria.

This report examines the roots of the FoM concept in the literature, efforts to collect data to feed FoM assessment, and efforts to analyze FoM data through centralized assessment. The purpose of the analysis was as follows:

1. Describe what FoM is in both a very broad context and within the context of COIN.
2. Explain why FoM matters to counterinsurgents.
3. Describe the various aspects of FoM and explain how they might be assessed.
4. Analyze past and current efforts to assess FoM in Afghanistan.
5. Identify challenges that a theater assessment staff is likely to face when assessing FoM.
6. Recommend an approach to FoM assessment that will assist a theater assessment staff in developing a realistic and effective assessment process.

While the question of whether or not FoM matters for COIN was incidental rather than central to this study, research for this report revealed that the ability of civilians and other groups to move freely within and through the operating environment is relevant to COIN operations. It is also relevant for end-state considerations for Afghanistan, as well as for prospective COIN operations. This finding, which reflects an analysis of the literature, interviews, and direct observation, supports the notion that COIN campaign assessment would benefit from an analysis of FoM.

Theater assessment staffs in Afghanistan have few resources to guide their conceptual planning or to help them collect and analyze information that might help them explain FoM to the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or senior policymakers. However, despite this lack of clear guidance, both military and civilian leaders from the policymaker to the tactical operator level have identified a number of clear concepts and objectives for FoM in Afghanistan. They place a strong emphasis on improving FoM for civilians and reducing FoM for insurgents. These objectives are typically linked to the belief that FoM is a human right and a means for economic development and that improving FoM will improve the lives of Afghans to the point that they will not want to join or support the insurgency. Whether or not these assumptions are valid, they at least provide a framework for campaign assessment.

These assumptions and associated operations do not, however, indicate a clear and direct connection between improved civilian FoM, reduced insurgent FoM, and campaign end-state (or terminating) criteria that might be assessed by a theater assessment staff. Nor do these assumptions reflect the complexities or inherent contradictions in FoM. There has been insufficient effort to determine how perception and actual FoM are linked, how they might be correlated for assessment, or how some of the other factors identified in this report might affect FoM assessment. Furthermore, the linkage between what is perceived to be an adequate and sustainable level of civilian FoM and subsequent support from the government toward this end is tenuous at best. However, fostering FoM in government-controlled areas may influence Afghan civilians to support the government because increased FoM may give them faith in the ability of the security services to protect them from physical and economic harm. Assessing the relationship between the existence of FoM, indicators of popular satisfaction with FoM, and real, sustainable support for the government will require comprehensive and contextual analysis of a number of different variables.

An analysis of historical cases sheds some light on the ways in which counterinsurgents have attempted to address FoM. These cases, including Malaya, Thailand, Vietnam, India, and

Iraq, show that counterinsurgents have focused on ensuring FoM for friendly security forces, controlling civilian movement to isolate insurgents, and reducing FoM for insurgent cadres. In a few cases, counterinsurgents also focused on improving civilian FoM, but it is not clear that any counterinsurgents have considered civilian FoM in the context of the strategic end state. Although information on how counterinsurgents have assessed FoM in non-U.S. cases is limited, it seems that, at least in some examples, the host-nation government focused on developing civilian FoM in order to develop a sense of normalcy.

In contrast to other campaigns, ISAF has focused on developing civilian FoM as a strategic end-state condition. Past and current FoM assessment at ISAF and ISAF Joint Command (IJC) reflects a mix of approaches that rely on either a small set of proxy metrics or generalized reporting requirements that allow subordinate staffs to develop and report FoM metrics based on locally available information and local standards. Neither of these approaches has been optimal; both represent best efforts in the absence of greater resources and a more complete understanding of FoM and its relevance to ISAF strategic objectives. The nature of the FoM data collection and assessment efforts also reflects the lack of available data, difficulty in collecting relevant data through technical means, and, possibly, a reluctance to place undue collection and reporting burdens on subordinate commands.[1]

The lack of a *precise* and broadly agreed-upon definition of FoM for all circumstances makes it difficult to task data collection: It is hard to collect information on something that is poorly defined and that changes unexpectedly and unevenly from place to place. Technical and other physical collection solutions can provide some insight into actual movement, and they can also show chokepoints that might restrict FoM. Some types of technical collection and assessment (of imagery data or ground moving target indicator data, for example) can be accomplished at the headquarters level, while other collection requires physical action on the part of tactical units. Physical collection may induce risk at the tactical level, so collection requirements deserve careful consideration. Technical and physical collection is most effective in assessing physical infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, and it can be very useful in assessing the ability of ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to move throughout the area of operations. It may be least useful in assessing combined perceptual and actual aspects of civilian FoM.

Collecting perception data is a seemingly straightforward task, and a number of polls already capture some of these data. However, some polls do not have sufficient granularity to show context. Few of the polling questions are precisely tied to a clear definition of FoM for the purposes of ISAF strategic assessment, and concerns the polling methodology may limit the overall utility of these data for assessment. There are a number of other resources that could help ISAF assess the perception of civilian and insurgent FoM, but these resources are not necessarily structured to fit into existing assessment processes.

The use of proxy metrics to determine FoM is a logical practice in the absence of better information. Because the concept of FoM is nebulous, most metrics might be described as proxy metrics to some extent: Every metric (or indicator) provides insight into the undetermined variable of FoM. If a proxy metric can show correlation with an agreed-upon standard for FoM, then it might be useful for assessment. However, in practice, it will likely show something less: The assessment staff will probably have to make some kind of subjective judgment

---

[1] This last point is not empirically proven, but this sentiment was reflected in numerous conversations and interviews with ISAF and IJC staff members between late 2009 and early 2011.

as to how the metric does or does not provide insight into FoM. There are some conceptual problems with applying proxy metrics, such as attack reporting, to FoM assessment, and any proxy metric must be reported with clear caveats.

Third-party reports provide good insight into possible collection and analysis methods for FoM assessment. An examination of reports by the U.S. Agency for International Development and Cooperation for Peace and Unity show that they were not designed to meet ISAF standards or to match up with ISAF objectives, but they do indicate how the physical collection process of click-counting (counting individual vehicle movement) can provide potentially useful data and how physical collection is limited by the COIN operating environment. Perception polling at the village level might also be useful in providing local context, but using samples to represent areas not covered by polls is problematic in COIN because security situations and perceptions can vary greatly from village to village, depending on the relative presence of ISAF, ANSF, Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and insurgents.

An analysis of past and current efforts to assess FoM revealed some innovative assessment efforts. It also revealed inherent limits in the ability to assess FoM through centralized theater assessment processes:

- It is difficult to find a metric or set of metrics that captures FoM cleanly and precisely.
- Efforts to gather more information can unduly burden subordinate commands.
- A lack of data undermines centralized assessment.
- Finding an effective, structured approach to FoM assessment will require some cost-benefit analysis and a balance between context and aggregation.

Assuming that ISAF will continue to assess civilian FoM as a strategic objective, or as an indicator of strategic progress, assessment staffs will have to determine how to reconcile the dichotomy between increasing civilian FoM as a strategic objective and controlling civilian FoM as an operational objective. Further, staffs will have to determine how to differentiate between the effects of purposeful control of civilian FoM and environmental or insurgent restrictions on that freedom. Contextual analysis will probably be necessary to unravel these complexities.

Definitions of Freedom of Movement

Although a general definition of *freedom of movement* is possible, as mentioned earlier, the lack of a precise and broadly accepted definition that is applicable in all circumstances poses a challenge to data collection. In Afghanistan, coalition assessment staffs tend to focus on the degree to which civilians have more or less FoM. Because the purpose of this report is to support military assessment and decisionmaking in the context of ongoing operations, assessment of civilian FoM was at the center of this research effort. However, our analysis indicates that it is difficult and unhelpful to consider civilian FoM in a vacuum, and FoM for a range of actors must necessarily be factored into any assessment. The following definition of civilian FoM is derived from an analysis of the available literature on FoM, interviews conducted with tactical and operational staff officers, and interviews with assessment staff officers.[2]

---

[2]   All definitions should be considered tentative proposals, and they are presented here to help guide the discussion in this report. The definitions are presented as formal recommendations with caveats in Chapter Four.

FoM for civilians: The ability and the perceived ability of Afghans (who do not work for the government, security forces, or NGOs or belong to insurgent groups) to move to and from a desired location at will and without undue danger, physical restriction, or economic burden in order to meet their needs.

Research for this report revealed that, in Afghanistan, FoM is also relevant for (1) ISAF, (2) ANSF, (3) Afghan government officials, (4) NGOs, and (5) insurgents. As with the definition of civilian FoM, these definitions are derived from the research for this report:

FoM for ISAF and ANSF: The ability and the perceived ability of ISAF and ANSF personnel to move to and from a desired location to achieve mission objectives without undue threat of attack or physical restriction.

FoM for GIRoA officials: The ability and the perceived ability of government officials to move to and from their residences or offices to any area necessary to fulfill duties without undue threat of attack or physical restriction.

FoM for NGOs: The ability and the perceived ability of NGO staff to move to and from an area requiring services at will and without undue danger, physical restriction, or economic burden in order to meet needs.

FoM for insurgents: The ability and perceived ability of insurgents to move to and from an area to transport supplies, conduct attacks, collect intelligence, or engage contacts without threat of attack, detention, or physical limitation.

Considerations for Building an Approach to Assess Freedom of Movement

Separating the freedom to move of any these various groups from that of the others presents substantial challenges. The assessment staff must weigh its capabilities and must recommend to the commander what it should and should not try to assess. However, this delineation of groups that need to move, and the different implications that their respective FoM can have for COIN objectives, should inform both the decisionmaking process and the analysis of information collected.

FoM has both perceptual and what this report refers to as physical or "actual" aspects. It is possible to have the perception of FoM when movement is physically or actually restricted, and it is also possible to have the ability to move but be too fearful to do so. FoM assessment has implications for—and is informed by—the assessment of security, economic development, and infrastructure. In theory, assessment should capture and analyze a mix of both perceptions and actual FoM information and determine how these two aspects of FoM differ or are interdependent. But the complexity of FoM makes it difficult to develop definitions, select metrics, and establish thresholds for FoM assessment; it is probably not possible to know how much FoM is necessary or sufficient for any given individual, from area to area, or over time. This means that establishing centralized time-series thresholds for any type of FoM would be particularly difficult, if not counterproductive and misleading.

Commanders and assessment staffs should consider the following points when developing an approach to FoM assessment and an assessment method:

- How should assessment differentiate between the five types of FoM identified in this report, if at all? Which data are useful for which type of FoM assessment, and which are useful for more than one type?
- What constitutes "normal" or (perhaps) "desirable" FoM from area to area? What do civilians want? Is it sufficient to be "satisfied" with security, or do they also want more? It is difficult, if not impossible, to assess civilian FoM without first understanding local needs.
- How can perception information be captured in a way that reflects local conditions and local needs (i.e., context), but in a format that can be aggregated?
- What are the various characteristics of physical threats, and how can information on these threats be captured?
- What is the confluence between perception and actual FoM in a specific area and across the theater?
- How can perception data be compared with actual reporting data in a way that produces an accurate, holistic picture of FoM?
- Are there elements of FoM that it is not possible to assess? Why?
- How should caveats be applied to FoM assessment to ensure that findings do not exceed the available data or methodology?

Considerations for Collecting and Assessing Freedom of Movement Data

Commanders and assessment staffs should consider the following points when developing and executing collection requirements for FoM assessment, as well as during the assessment of FoM data:

- There are at least five categories of FoM, each of which may complement or confound the other.[3] These categories are distinct but not necessarily independent.
- Issues of scope and scale will make it difficult to collect information that accurately reflects FoM for civilians and insurgents across an entire theater; context matters.
- The fluidity of the COIN environment means that both the perception and reality of FoM can and will change often, quickly, and unexpectedly. Reporting will contain leading and lagging indicators and may not reflect ground truth by the time it is assessed.
- To assess FoM, it is necessary to measure both perception and reality, because perception might not match reality and reality might not match perception. Willingness to move, the ability to move, and actual movement might be considered as three separate variables or values in an assessment. It is possible to see actual movement coupled with a widespread perception that it is unsafe to move. In this way, improvement in actual movement might not benefit coalition objectives or improve perceptions of government legitimacy.

---

[3] ISAF's Afghan Assessment Group could also determine that one or more of these categories should be eliminated or combined. For example, it may view the NGO category as extraneous. It is listed here because it is mentioned fairly frequently in the literature and it seems to affect COIN outcomes. Other categories not considered in this report might also be useful for operations and assessment.

- The convergence of a purposeful coalition reduction of FoM and reports of high levels of FoM in insurgent havens can play tricks on time-series assessments of FoM indicators. It would be conceivable for an insurgent-held or -influenced area with high levels of FoM to see a drop in FoM as coalition forces clear and stabilize the area, and then a subsequent increase in FoM after the operation.
- Civilian FoM is not always desirable; in some cases, it is necessary to restrict FoM for operations (an important element of population control) while retaining the goal of improving overall FoM at the strategic level. Efforts to restrict FoM will shape reporting and assessments and must be carefully monitored.
- It is possible to have a high degree of civilian FoM in insurgent-held areas: Civilians can be happy with FoM in a way that does not support ISAF or Inteqal objectives.[4] It is not easy—and in many cases not possible—to identify differences between civilians and insurgents for the purposes of FoM assessment.
- Increasing FoM for civilians may also increase FoM for insurgents and criminals: Improving infrastructure, reducing roadblocks, and taking other steps to improve civilian FoM may improve insurgent FoM because Afghan insurgents tend to blend in with the population.
- Efforts to gather more information can unduly burden subordinate commands, but a lack of data undermines centralized assessment. Finding an effective, structured approach to FoM assessment will require some cost-benefit analysis and a balance between context and aggregation, as well as a collaborative risk assessment with subordinate commands.

Recommendations

Chapter Four of this report expands on the proposed definitions for the five distinct categories of FoM, discussed earlier, and provides a step-by-step guide intended to help shape the development of a new assessment process or to improve FoM assessment processes already in use. Building an FoM assessment process requires a comprehensive analysis of national strategic end-state and termination criteria, the ISAF and Inteqal campaign plans, input from a number of ISAF staff sections, and a thorough cost-benefit analysis that takes into account detailed and up-to-date theater and unit collection capabilities. Therefore, by necessity, this is an internal process that should be conducted by a theater-level staff. The following recommendations for building an FoM assessment process are derived from research conducted for this report, as well as 16 months of research conducted on Afghanistan assessment processes for the U.S. Marine Corps Intelligence Activity:[5]

- Divide FoM assessment between a bottom-up contextual and a centralized process to address the simultaneous but somewhat paradoxical requirement for contextual understanding, which will help determine whether more or less FoM is needed in particular circumstances and will help provide the holistic understanding required for the commander and staff to determine whether progress is being made countrywide.
- Reevaluate and reconstitute the centralized assessment of FoM to better link FoM assessment to objectives. Clarify collection and reporting requirements for subordinate

---

[4] *Inteqal*, the Dari and Pashto word for *transition*, is the designation used to identify the official transfer of security responsibilities in Afghanistan from ISAF to GIRoA.

[5] For Connable, forthcoming.

elements, better analyze cost-benefit and risk calculations for tactical collection require-ments, determine how assessment might address operational efforts to develop FoM, and effectively divide the focus between a bottom-up and a centralized assessment process.

- Accept that all FoM metrics are, to varying degrees, proxies for better, more accurate measurement and assessment. Attempt to tie metrics more closely to desired objectives and conditions.
- Reevaluate polling questions in official polls to ensure that questions related to FoM are directly linked to ISAF and Inteqal objectives and adequately inform theater assessment. They should also meet local and seasonal conditions and reflect local context in each area of interest to the greatest extent possible. Some collection should focus on what civilians want and need from FoM in each area.
- Separate the different types of FoM for assessment. Develop ways to assess ISAF/ANSF, GIRoA, NGO, and insurgent FoM (as needed by the ISAF commander) as enabling con-ditions or enabling indicators to better support and assess civilian FoM.