Muslim Masculinities
one of the battlegrounds for understanding and subverting terrorism

Jacqueline B Littleton
**Introduction**

The years since the start of the new millennium has seen an explosion in the number of terror attacks by Muslims. In response to the attacks on September 11th 2001 led by Al-Qaeda, United States President George Bush declared the start of the now-infamous “War on Terror,” waging war on a feeling rather than a state. It soon became apparent the sites for the this war would be Iraq and Afghanistan, but despite a “Mission Accomplished” announcement by President Bush, terror attacks have not ceased. Most recently, terrorist group DAESH has dominated the airwaves for seizing Middle Eastern territory in Iraq and Syria and spearheading attacks in places like Paris and Brussels. Lone terrorists who are not officially affiliated with any group are common too, detonating car bombs or engaging in mass shootings.

It would be unfair to describe these individuals without also mentioning the number of mass shootings committed by white men in America, as terrorism is not something only Muslims can do. However, the sheer numbers of Muslim men acting as terrorists or suicide bombers suggests a shift in values in some masculine Muslim societies, since this was not always the case. Violence should not be connected wholly to masculinity, as violent behaviors in individuals is caused by more complex factors such as world history, religion and socio-economic factors. However, masculinity is born at the intersection of all these factors. When violence and aggression are considered masculine social norms, these attributes are practiced on the large scale by groups looking to assert their masculine identity and exert power, causing harm both to themselves and to others. This can be seen clearly in radical Islamist factions like DAESH and al-Qaeda who have adopted an aggressive hyper-masculinity in addition to a literalist interpretation of Islam, in response to hundreds of years of colonialism and Western oppression.
Consequently, defeating toxic masculinity and its root causes may be an uncharted territory which could bring about the end of terrorism and the oppression of women by these groups.

An important modern stance in Islam, to note for the purpose of my hypothesis, is that it is generally agreed upon by establishment Muslims and the heads of Islamic institutions that homoromantic relationships are permitted, but homosexual acts are seen as highly degrading and haram, or sinful. Homosexuality is especially sinful for those who are sodomized as it is considered emasculating. Sex is seen as an exercise of power, and so a man exercising his power over another man through sexual acts subverts the acceptable power dynamic is therefore subjugating the hierarchies of men.

This fear of a loss of power through sexual domination can be seen on a larger level through political domination and loss of territory. If the concept of the masculine is tied to the concept of possessing political prowess and holding territory, invasion and loss of territory can result in both personal and cultural shame as well as the loss of masculine status. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, arguably since the advent colonialism, Muslim manhood is shaped by a cross-section of domination by Western powers and deprivation by capitalistic forces. If political subjugation can be seen as an assault on the Arab construct of masculinity, how can this construct be upheld despite the recent and ongoing assaults of Middle Eastern territory from foreign powers and despite the last few hundreds of years of colonialism?

Masculinity is built off the idea of providing for oneself and for one’s family, and the mark of a “successful” man is often his ability to acquire and maintain a home, a secure career and a stable family. Colonialism and imperialism threatens all of these successes. The possibility for a secure career was deprived of Iraqi Ba’athists, all of whom lost their jobs during the
de-Ba’athification of Iraq after Saddam Hussein was deposed. Many of these Ba’athists have gone on to join DAESH even though DAESH, a literalist Islamic group, shares virtually no values with the secular Ba’ath party. Perhaps this can be explained in part by a desire to reassert their masculinity and worth as men in the face of a circumstance which rendered them powerless.

“Marginalization challenges core attributes that define the masculine gender. This either infuriates men, sending them on trajectories that are regressive, aggressive and reactionary, or emasculates them severely.” (Aslam 75) Keeping all this in mind, if this notion of masculinity is to be recaptured in the face of foreign domination and humiliation, the paradigm of subjugation must be sustained. Masculinity must then be pursued aggressively through the subjugation of other less powerful men and women, transforming the concept from inward strength stemming from the virtues of integrity and honor to a form of self-defense derived from fear and insecurity over imperialism.

Saddam Hussein’s actions during the Iran-Iraq war and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait exemplify this new paradigm. Hazim Saghieh noted, in relationship to Saddam Hussein, “Saddam’s machismo can be seen most glaringly in his attempt to penetrate neighboring countries: Iran and Kuwait. By the same token the last war changed Iraq (and Saddam) into a totally feminine (submissive) entity in confrontation with the totally male (dominant) who tortured her and brought her suffering.” This cycle of the tortured becoming the torturer and then tortured again repeats itself within the confines of hegemonic masculinity.

R. W. Connell popularized the concept of hegemonic masculinity, meaning there are a set of proposed practices which promote the domination of men over women and weaker men as a means to assert power. A hegemonic masculinity is often provoked by a crisis, which prompts
the desire to maintain a dominant personality and impose it upon another. The military operations of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan were provoked by a neoconservative desire to spread democracy, but fueled almost entirely by anger over the terrorist attacks conducted by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001. The tactics of discipline and torture used against Iraqi prisoners by the United States military at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo were developed by our own binary understandings of gender, posing the United States as a hyper-masculinized hegemonic force against its feminized Middle Eastern victims. Hegemonic masculinity is a kind of gender performance, of course, but less of a construct than it is a production, as it is always acting from a place of tension and serves as a site of negotiation for achieving one's’ goals. (Aslam, 84)

There is not one sole form of masculinity practiced at a given time, but instead multiple forms of masculinities present in any setting. There are a hierarchy of masculinities among men: hegemonic, marginalized, protest and complicit. Although this hierarchy does not refer Muslim men specifically, it has made itself apparent within Muslim societies, most notably the “protest masculinity” which is an active response to situations and is built off solidarity, usually among working-class or otherwise marginalized men. In this case, post-colonial Muslim men share the collective experience of both oppression in their own countries as well as degradation from the global community. Connell theorizes that men who have their economic power, or other forms of authority, taken away from them often align themselves with political movements operating with the intention to restore lost honor.

The term “protest masculinity” refers to what researchers describe as instances of extreme forms of sex-typed behavior on the part of some men. Key to the concept of protest of masculinity are high levels of physical aggression...protest masculinity represents an unconscious defensive maneuver on the part of males who are in conflict about or who are insecure about their identity as males. (Broude, 1)
Protest masculinities generally denote extreme displays of sex-typed behavior on the part of men, and is marked by destruction and physical aggression. Outward displays of hyper masculine behavior can often be attributed as a form of protest masculinity. Psychologists and social scientists have explained these behaviors as an active response to situations where men would feel weak or vulnerable, as well as a result of status envy. Status envy refers to the phenomena in groups of people where the common denominator is poverty but are surrounded by displays of wealth and power and covet what is demonstrated in these displays. In today’s highly globalized, social media saturated world, it would be difficult for any person of any class to not be witness to the inequities apparent in today’s society. Resentment at these inequities is the cause for status envy which in turn is a factor in forming protest masculinities which adopt shows of aggression to those who are culturally or economically more secure. (Aslam, 86)

Society treats gender performances as legitimate expressions deriving from biological factors which in turn does legitimize these expressions and gives gender roles more authority, but gender expression is wholly derived from societal factors. When these gender expressions are violent and aggressive and society authorizes them, it ignores the underlying factors which inform gender and also prevents opportunities for finding solutions to this violence through structural change.

In her journal “Protest Masculinity: A Further Look at the Causes and the Concept,” Gwen Broude attempts to explain the underlying reasons one, or a group, would adopt a protest masculinity. She establishes a statistical association between displays of hyper masculine behavior and father absence. Additionally, the effects of growing of motherless can be
profoundly negative, perhaps even more so in Muslim households when such major significance is placed on the role of the mother in Islam.

**The Subjugation of Muslim Men**

In the recent history of the Middle East, Muslim men have experienced attacks on their male identity as a device of war. Sexual exploitation as a tactic of war is not new, but it a tactic generally reserved for women. Historically, women have been the victim of all wars, as their bodies are subject to violation by occupying forces, who see women’s bodies as one of the spoils of war. They are also dehumanized as mere connections to the soldiers in wars being fought; the mothers, sisters, daughters and wives of the enemy are raped and otherwise attacked in an attempt to express control over this enemy by occupying forces. Rape, in these situations, and other forms of sexual assault are used to dominate the enemy, and when sexual violence is performed against men directly, it is often done with the express intent to feminize and therefore, humiliate the enemy.

When the sexual humiliation and other torture of the male prisoners of Abu Ghraib by the United States military was exposed to the world, it received international attention for the unique cruelty performed. Although the torture was widespread and took on many forms, it was done with the specific intent of emasculating the prisoners, and the modes of torture used were generated based on knowledge American soldiers had regarding Middle Eastern masculinity.

In her article “Torture Culture,” Dora Apel writes that the forms of torture the Abu Ghraib detainees faced was “an attempt to ‘feminize’ Arabs and Muslims as a whole through their subordination to American dominance.”
What shocked the world most about Abu Ghraib, at the time of the scandal’s outbreak, was that many of the main perpetrators of this appalling violence were women. Specialist Megan Ambuhl, Specialist Sabrina Harman and Private Lynndie England can all be seen in the photos which were widely circulated after news of the torture reached the media; in these photos they are shown smiling, pointing and giving the thumbs-up signal while naked prisoners are piled on top of each other in the background or while men masturbate and perform sexual acts to each other. Despite being women, they were filling in a traditionally masculine role of militaristic aggression.

Susan Sontag defines torture as “any act by which severe or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession.”

As New York University Professor of Middle Eastern Affairs Bernard Heykel explains, “Being put on top of each other and forced to masturbate, being naked in front of each other, it's all a form of torture.” Of course, coercing anyone to perform acts generally reserved for privacy would be considered unethical and humiliating in all situations, but the choice of sexual acts for this humiliation speaks to a pointed goal. With the goal of asserting dominance over the prisoners, and by extension the Middle East, guards attempted to strip prisoners of their masculinity and weaken their constructs of self. This seems to be saddeningly in line with the notion of enforcing submissiveness through the degradation of the male body, an idea that the United States service members present at Abu Ghraib seemed apparently comfortable with using to their advantage.
Abuses included: pouring cold water over naked detainees, sodomizing a prisoner with a chemical light, forcing detainees into embarrassing, sexual positions and threatening prisoners with rape. (Hersh, 2) Retired Major General Antonio Taguba gave a further account in his “The Taguba Report” where he states that “numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees.” He elaborates that these sadistic abuses included forcing several male detainees to have sex while female guards photographed the acts, other male prisoners were stripped naked and made to wear women’s underwear as guards mocked them and called them “faggots.” The violence did not end there, as one former detainee Kasim Mehaddi testified to witnessing a prisoner no older than eighteen be brutally raped by his male guard. (Taguba, 1)

One photo in particular demonstrates the components which make up the abhorrent crimes committed against the male Arab body at Abu Ghraib. This photo depicts Private Lynndie England carrying a leash which is wrapped around the neck of a naked male detainee. The torture in this photo is evident, as the victim has already undergone physical suffering, shown by the bruises on his body, but he is continuing to undergo severe mental suffering at the hands of England. England’s displays no emotion in the photo, assuming the masculine role of emotional detachment, as the male detainee wears a visibly pained face. He is forced on the ground by the leash, and is positioned by England in such a way that he literally has no dominance over his own body. He is deprived of access to his masculinity through physical and mental torture where the markers of his masculinity are stolen from him, by the removal of his clothes and being restrained by an object reserved for animals. He is dehumanized by this comparison to an animal and is mentally degraded by the physical torture he is put under.
Susan Sontag argues this in her article “Regarding the Torture of Others” that “most of the pictures seem part of a larger confluence of torture and pornography; a young woman leading a naked man around on a leash is classic dominatrix imagery.” The torture has an underlying sexual component, furthering the inversion of the feminine and masculine roles of the participants in the photo and further humiliating the victim by placing him in a submissive role without his consent. "Yeah, I thought it was weird," said Lynndie England about the acts she was photographed committing "We were told we were supposed to do those things. They said, 'Good job. Keep it up.'" (McKelvey, 2)

Abu Ghraib is an extreme and horrifying example of the way Muslim men have been emasculated by the West, but not all the damage inflicted on Muslim masculinity has been as obvious as this.

The United States has had a massive military presence in Iraq since the war began in 2003, and although military presence was scaled down with the official “end” of the war in 2011, the landscape of Iraq has changed drastically. Over the course of the war, over 100,000 Iraqi civilians were killed and the war saw the destruction of homes, buildings and major cultural landmarks. There were only a few years between the end of the war and the invasion of DAESH into Mosul, Iraq in 2014, and those years, rather than peaceful, were marred by sectarian conflict between the newly elected Shi’a President Maliki and his Sunni constituents. For the past thirteen years, this region has been characterized by instability and uncertainty, with an estimated ten million Iraqis living in poverty, 68% of whom have limited access of clean drinking water and approximately one million Iraqi children orphaned by one or both parents. These seems like the perfect environment to form a protest masculinity, especially for the sixteen to twenty-five
year olds who spent their formative years in these conditions and would therefore be more susceptible to the psychological damage it could cause.

**Masculinity as Gender Performance**

Manhood and masculinity are two separate concepts, despite their shared etymological roots. The criteria for what exact traits constitutes a man or woman are largely arbitrary and evolve from generation to generation, as well as differing from culture to culture. Manhood is a gender identity, but masculinity is a role with values ascribed to it based on a social and cultural context. Critics of feminism often argue the idea that the behaviors men exhibit can be attributed to biological factors, but this is a false argument. It ignores the existence of men who were not assigned their gender identity at birth, but nevertheless identify as such, and also suggests that anger and the oppressive traits that make up misogyny are inherent and irrevocable to men. Masculinity is a characteristic separate from gender, and while it often makes up the basis of gender identity in many contexts, masculinity can and should be critiqued without being seen as a blanket condemnation of the male gender. The standards for masculinity can be breeding grounds for regressive behavior, if the prized traits are ones which rely on controlling others.

In the modern era there has been a demand to accept the notion that people from any gender can exhibit both masculine and feminine traits, but this is not always a commonly held belief. Judith Butler, in her seminal text *Gender Trouble*, posits the theory of gender performance in the context of queer theory, defining gender as an identity which is informed by the rigid actions of its so-called binary members rather than a fixed identity based upon genitalia. The performativity, Butler theorizes, is not a singular act or an isolated series of acts, but
repetitive and ritualistic acts which achieve normative status through this repetition. Gender, then, is informed by a series of performed acts which produce the effect it names. (Butler, 2)

With this theory in mind, the performance of gender can be seen a foundation for violence and a system in which radicalism is honed, especially in the case of toxic masculinity, if the series of acts performed promote aggressiveness. The literalism and aggressive performance of Islamism is rooted in the gender performance of masculinity, creating a system which validates attacks against threats to the identity of the masculine gender as well as the subjugation of women. Militant jihadist Islam is another form of gender trouble. In other words, it is important to deconstruct and analyze the man behind “Islamist” or “militant” or “jihadi” because the identity of man is just as invented, and equally as derived from its socio-economic context, so being a militant Islamist can be another kind of gender performance.

“This performance always and variously occurs and is a strategy of survival within compulsory systems. Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences.” (Butler, 4) Masculinity is always built against an “other,” namely women, and masculinity serves to fill the role of the opposite of whatever the understanding of femininity and womanhood is. As can be seen in the West, social progress focusing on women can provoke anxiety and outrage from men. In some Muslim societies this outrage is doubled down because feminism is seen as a construct of the West by some, despite the outstanding feminist scholarly work of Muslim women. In Middle Eastern societies, masculinity is also constructed against the idea of the West. It serves as a framework of resistance against the stereotypes of most Western masculinities and femininities. Muslim masculinities have been shaped by history, the legacy of colonialism,
cultural and religious practices and the current political and economic state of the Muslim world.

(Aslam, 78)

**Islamic Masculinities**

Throughout the history of the Middle East, and the integration of Islam into Middle Eastern society, there have been codes of conduct surrounding how the ideal man should behave, rules which in turn defined the terms of “masculinity.” These rules have evolved over time, adapting to Eurocentric notions of the gender binary, and shifting in reaction to colonialism.

*The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* by Amanullah de Sondy presents the argument that masculinity in the Muslim world is currently in crisis, a crisis caused by the existence of multiple masculinities in Muslim societies at odds with the influential narrative of one singular accepted masculinity. De Sondy notes that many Muslim men struggle to fill in the gap between their actual lives and the live they are supposed to lead as an ideal Islamic man, but where does this ideal come from and what causes it to be influential?

De Sondy traces the history of this ideal back to the Prophet and influential Muslim thinkers and writers, referencing the works of Syed Abdul A’la Mawdudi, a 20th-century Pakistani theologian, who presented the family as the only basis of social structure with the man living in the archetypal role of breadwinner and the woman as a housewife. This view is not unique to the Muslim world, but since it has been emphasised and disseminated by Islamist scholars into the modern day, and the sex segregation and traditional gender relations have been particularly harmful to men who wish to be pious but exist outside of this structure.
He finds many examples of different masculinities in Muslim men in the Qu’ran, and in Islamic history. Sufism, a sect of Islam which emphasizes mysticism, provides further grounds for questioning a single Islamic masculinity. It often defies culturally accepted conventions and ideals like the family, and emphasises the relationship with God above all else. He also cites the life of 19th century Mughal poet Mirza Ghalib as an example of the struggle Muslim men must face today: although Ghalib did not feel his hedonism interfered with his religious beliefs, his fellow Muslims believed his lifestyle rendered him un-Islamic. De Sondy believes this is the same situation Muslim men must grapple with today, one where their lived experience of masculinity cannot fit in with the dominant discourse because of new problems unique to modernity to which they must adapt.

Terrorists have adapted to modernity by acting volatile towards other men and women, using their own interpretation of Islam. These Muslim men are able to justify their violent actions and the strict regulations they have for women with religious texts, popularized through Islamist ideology. Islamic masculinity can also be re-addressed through Qu’ranic verses, which at times oppose the dominant male narrative.

Islam began in the year 600, and the time before it was introduced to the world is known as *jahaliyya* or the time of ignorance. The religion began its spread by Muhammad and his followers reciting the Qur’an and proselytizing the Middle East. As a result, a source of what it means to be masculine is derived from 7th century Arab life. *Muruwwah*, a word for a pre-Islamic Bedouin virtue which roughly translates to manliness, encompasses integrity, honor, fidelity and chastity, informed the values which men in Muhammad’s time were expected to have.
It is important to note that there is no single definition of masculinity under Islam and the Qu’ran itself does not specify any strict gender-based roles for men or women to perform. Qu’ran 4:124 states that “If any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them.” The focus, in Islam, is on the \textit{amal} (deed) and not the gender of whoever commits the deed.

However, different interpretations of the Qur’an and various hadith, as well as already existing cultural practices in nations that have adopted Islam, have allowed for varying religious stances regarding gender roles. Asymmetry in Muslim cultures is a result of existing gender roles, as well as those imposed by Eurocentrism. Additionally, of the 124,000 prophets sent to earth, only 25 are mentioned in the Qur’an, all of whom were men. Most important of these prophets is Muhammad, whom the Qur’an was transmitted to by Allah. Qu’ran 68:4 states “And you [Muhammad, stand] on an exalted standard of character,” his behavior provides “a beautiful pattern of conduct.” (Ibd: 33:21) The standards set by Muhammad are supposed to be exemplary actions for all Muslims to look towards for guidance, but his life and actions take on a greater significance for Muslim men on the basis of their shared gender. I posit that some of the construct of “ideal masculinity,” before it was radically warped by the effects of colonialism, come from using Muhammad as an example.

Muhammad is sometimes characterized as “hyper-masculine” both by believers of Islam and the West due to misconceptions about his sexuality. This is rooted in some truth, as eight traditions of the Hadith contain feats of superior sexual performance by the Prophet, sparking a connection between virility and fertility as indicators of manhood. The Prophet also led a polygamous lifestyle after the death of his first wife Khadija, and as a result his sexuality has
been the subject of much Western scrutiny and male-dominated Islamic exegesis. However, the focus on Muhammad’s sexual prowess without also making note of the relationships he had with women paints an incomplete picture of the Prophet’s personality. The Prophet was not revered most for his sexual relations with women, his skills on the battlefield or any other ultra-masculine attribute, but instead characterized by his fellow Mecca’ites for his compassion and mild nature. He was known as Saadiq (the honest) and Amin (the trustworthy). In fact, Muhammad was not the Prophet’s name at birth, but one given to him by Allah meaning “the praiseworthy.” (Aslam, 98) Discovering what exactly made Ahmed worthy of title of name Muhammad can give some insight into what the ideals for masculinity are as provided by Islam.

Muhammad routinely subverted the gender norms of his time and many of the hadith attributed to Muhammad display him rejecting male-dominated Arab traditions. In the 7th century, Arab men often engaged in all-male activities, retiring the desert in gender segregated groups for long periods of time. Women held a degraded caste in society because menstruation rendered women dirty, and they were prized mostly for their ability to produce (male) children. “The tradition prevailing in Hijaz at the time time took patrilineal masab or lineage and men’s martial competency as major proof of their authentic manhood.” (Roded, 34) Muhammad, on the other hand, spoke highly of his daughters and meditated with women. He helped with chores that are traditionally associated with femininity such as cooking, cleaning and sewing. (Aslam, 99) He also elevated the status of women by stressing the importance in treating one’s wife with respect, and speaking out against domestic violence.

In Islam, the respect with which Muslim men should treat women is not just encouraged, but mandated by the precedent set by the Prophet. Muhammad outwardly rejected the traditions
of Arab male supremacy in his relationships with women, and took his followers to task for how they treated their wives. He is quoted as saying, “the best man among you is best to his wife,” and “not one of you should fall upon his wife like an animal.” Muslim men are the qawwam of women, meaning they are the “protectors and maintainers of women.” Some Islamic scholars and men interpret this to mean men have the right to subject women to their will and suppress her individuality, but since that is not the example explicitly set by the Prophet, this interpretation could be based in these men’s personal perspective. The man’s status of protector could also be seen as a responsibility and liability “...because of what Allah has preferred one with over the other…” (Qur’an 4:34) which could mean a number of things, including the economic freedom that men enjoyed disproportionately over women during 7th century Arabia.

The lives of three women, Khadija, Aisha and Fatima, are well-documented in scholarship and considered important to understanding the Prophet. Muhammad held these women as advisors, at the same level of influence to his male advisors. For example, many of the hadith considered most accurate can be attributed to Aisha. She is also a main source of sexual rights in the Islamic tradition, and one source reports Muhammad reciting the Qu’ran while holding her head in her lap during her time of menstruation.

Muhammad’s relationships with women are integral to deconstructing his own performance of masculinity. He did not exist in opposition to women, but in conjunction with them. Valuing strength of moral character above all else, the Prophet rejected displays of one’s dominance, remarking, “Powerful man is not one who throws another on the ground but one who defeats his nafs. [inner temptations]” (Aslam, 98) His personality portrays something fundamentally human, not necessarily masculine, and can provide a positive example for men
who do not wish to perform their gender identity through feats of physical strength and dominance.

This is not to say there is no place for men who like to express their gender through high-powered behavior. Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law Ali was given the titles *Saif’ullah*, sword of Allah, and *Zilfiqar*, sword, two adjectives associated with military prowess, a stereotypically masculine pursuit. (Al-Islam.org) However, Ali followed the example set by Muhammad of balancing logic and the desire for justice with intellect and spiritualism.

During the Battle of Trench in 627 in 627, Ali overpowered a tough rival and was about to kill him when the latter spat in his face. Ali stood up and walked away from his enemy. He returned after a while, his anger subsided, and told the opponent, “When you spat at me, my ego usurped and I wanted to kill you instantly. Had I killed you then, the action would have not been in service of God but my personal ego. (Aslam, 104)

Ali ultimately killed his enemy, but only after his anger subsided. Although he appeared an unstoppable force, he was capable of stopping himself and taking stock of his actions. His gender performance was seemingly zealous and aggressive, but his actions at the Battle of Trench prove he was also capable of introspection and restraint and a willingness to put off self-gratifying action to contemplate his ego about his manhood and warrior status.

Many Qur’anic verses also reject the performance of ego-centric masculinity. Al-Qur’an states 25:63: “the servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth easily, and when the ignorant address them [harshly], they say [words of] peace,” and the Qur’an asserts the most important principle for men to follow is *husn iklaq* meaning beautiful character, and the attributes of beautiful character are *hikmat*, wisdom, and *eh’sun*, excellence.

The accomplishments of warriors are held in high regard under Islam, but conquests and revenge are far from the only ways a man can prove his worth in his religion. Vengeance when
one has been wronged is allowed, but patience and mercy are virtues held in high esteem. Some may perceive a man enduring being wronged without any outward signs of retaliation as a kind of weakness, but Al-Qu’ran 16:126 states “And if you punish [an enemy, O believers], punish with an equivalent of that with which you were harmed. But if you are patient - it is better for those who are patient,” proving the sensitivity to look beyond immediate ramifications should be equally respected under Islam. “Those who remain patient have the same status as that of martyrs and enter paradise without accountability. This is because martyrs die once, but those who are patient die a number of times everyday on facing insults and oppression - and yet remain forbearing.” (Aslam, 107)

Additionally, Islam (Al-Qu’ran 3:134) condemns ghaziz and bad-temperedness, instead asking its followers to act patiently and empathetically. Punishing an enemy is permissible, but one is also encouraged to “bear patiently with what they [enemies] say, and part with them in a gracious manner.”

However, in the 20th and 21st century, the number of Muslim men who practice ego-based displays of masculinity and aggression in the name of their religion, and use their qawwam over women as a justification for abuse have increased. This is not because of inherent oppressiveness or violence in Islam, as some Islamophobes have suggested. As evidenced by the examples above, the ideals of Islam can be linked to patience, justice, forgiveness and mercy and live little room for men to indulge in sex-typed behavior derived from egotism. These ideals have been moulded by some to reflect patriarchal values and assert male supremacy, and the historical and current events in the Middle East can provide some insight for why this is.
The growing influence of Wahhabi Islam, and the trauma inflicted by Western imperialist presence (which grows each day and is passed down generationally) intersect in the form of an aggressive and toxic performance of hyper-masculinity. The Prophet chastised men a number of times for unkind behavior towards women, saying on one occasion “How can any of you beat his wife as if she were a camel or a slave, and then try sleeping with her?” (Aslam, 101) Despite this, a staggering thirty-seven percent of women in the Middle East reported experiencing domestic violence (Cheng, 2). This demonstrates a clear disconnect between the lessons taught in Islam and the way some Muslims choose to act. Therefore, these actions can not be simply attributed to a problem with the religion of Islam, but with something else entirely.

**The Origins of Islamism**

The rules of masculinity are not the only systemic axiom which has changed over time; Islam, though based around the unchanging text of the Qur’an, other Abrahamic texts, and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, is not a “fixed” religion. That is to say that the interpretation of Islam by its followers has changed and continues to change based on their needs, location and place in time. Over the past two-hundred years a certain interpretation of Islam known as Islamism has been on the rise, and its unique ideology has been adopted by groups of varying natures, from governmental organizations like the Saudi Arabian ruling class to political agencies like the Muslim Brotherhood to terrorist factions such as Al-Qaeda and DAESH.

Religion and gender have a symbiotic relationship, it is religion which provides a guideline for how its followers should act, and those guidelines create the practices which inform gender. Therefore, when the interpretation of a religion undergoes major change, so does the
interpretation of gender. Understanding Islamism and why this particular understanding of Islam has become so popular and prevalent in the Muslim-majority world is important to understanding the form of masculinity which is currently practiced by its members.

To understand Islamists, their organizations, operations and motives, a working knowledge of Islam and history in the Middle East is necessary. Also known as political Islam, Islamism is exactly that. It is a movement that employs theology and religious doctrine and beliefs to inform its actions, and creates the foundation for a political structure. Islamism as it is practiced today has its roots in the Wahhabi movement, which became popularized due to Saudi Arabia’s monetary influence.

Around the eighteenth century, the Muslim world was in the midst of a period of great destabilization, at odds with the impact of modernity, European contact and colonization, and as a result Muslims needed a way to synthesize or reconcile their traditions and beliefs with the changing times. Some embraced Westernization and moved away from traditional Islam while others rejected Western culture completely. This rejection took on two distinctly different forms: one was the assertion that scientific belief and rational thought were inherent in Islamic culture and not the result of European influence while the other vehemently discarded any aspect of life that was not purely Islamic. (Fadl, 46) The concept meant spurning anything that did not come directly out of the Qur’an or certain hadiths or that were not a traditional part of Arab culture. The pioneer of this philosophy, which provided the backbone for Islamism, was Abd al-Wahhab, and the people who follow his brand of Islam are called Wahhabis.

Islam, as previously stated, is based upon interpretations of the Qur’an which is derived of all the verses the Prophet Muhammad received from Gabriel, which he recited and shared with
others. Though Muhammad was illiterate, others memorized his recitations and eventually recorded them. Additionally, the life of the Prophet Hadith is made up the sayings and actions of the Prophet. Shari’ah comes from the Qur’an is translated as Islamic law, and it means God’s law, but it is not understandable or knowable by humans. Fiqh is the attempt by humans to translate Shari’ah into knowable terms and makes up Islamic law, and hadith is the foundation for fiqh.

Hadith requires clarification because not everything in it is unanimously agreed on with the notable exception of the five pillars of Islam, and the Qur’an does not have many explicit laws in it. This posed some obvious problems for early Muslims who needed to know how to practice their religion in accordance with the Hadith which is why these Muslim communities set out to codify a school of law. In order to contest or understand laws, there are ways of interpreting Qur’anic or Hadith material: analogy (Qiyas), Ijma (consensus) or urf (tradition) are all important methods for jurisprudence. (Schimmel, 39) Hadith are not infallible; they are subject to interpretation by jurists and can also vary sometimes based on location as Islam is a proselytizing religion which allows for peoples to retain their cultural practices, so long as they are not at odds with the greater ideals of Islam. As a result, Islamic law consists of rich, storied and varied tomes and debates which are sometimes at odds with each other and is open to further interpretation and scholarly work.

al-Wahhab compiled lists of beliefs and acts which would make a Muslim a heretic, and unlike in previous Islamic scholarly tradition, these lists were not up for debate and criticism as al-Wahhab had only contempt for Muslim scholars. He believed they added an unnecessary level of elitism to the religion. Acts like adopting the customs of non-Muslims, enjoying nonreligious
art, music or poetry, and associating with non-Muslims were all heretical in the eyes of al-Wahhab. In previous Islamic tradition, scholars would dedicate their lives to help Muslims practice their faith by interpreting the Hadith, an additional body of work separate from the Qur’an which outlines the actions of the Prophet Muhammad. (Schimmel 5) al-Wahhab would often reach into unvalidated or disproven hadith or justify extreme violence as punishment for heretics, and with the system of checks and balances via Islamic scholars removed, there was no space for contesting this violence. When al-Wahhab and his followers conquered villages, they demanded all inhabitants promised to live in accordance with Wahhabi beliefs, and those that did not were massacred. (Fadl 57)

Wahhabism was not particularly popular during al-Wahhab’s lifetime. In fact, al-Wahhab’s brother and father not only both rejected his religious philosophy, but also wrote separate documents criticizing him. (Fadl, 56) To many Muslims of his time, the beliefs that al-Wahhab espoused were at direct odds with their culture; he regarded any practice that did not come out of Bedouin life as an innovation on Islam. (Fadl, 46) These innovations included respect for gravesites, belief in saints, or even rationalism and philosophy which Wahhabis considered a Greek import and therefore at odds with Islam. al-Wahhab conflated Arab culture with Islam, which ironically is at odds with Islam’s message of universalism. However, al-Wahhab, who did not finish his Shar’ia teachings and may have been expelled from law school or had dropped out, was of the mindset that the juristic tradition of interpreting the Qur’an and validating hadiths (the saying and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) was unnecessary. In his opinion, all jurists who did not interpret texts literally were heretics. (Fadl, 48) Wahhabis do
not believe any training in Muslim law is necessary to interpret the hadith, nor is it important to validate those interpretations. This laid the groundwork for further radicalization.

Beliefs and acts which would make a Muslim a heretic put into many various lists by al-Wahhab, and there was no room for debating these points as was traditionally done by Muslim scholars, as al-Wahhab only had contempt for Muslim scholars. Acts like adopting the customs of non-Muslims, enjoying nonreligious art, music or poetry, and associating with non-Muslims were are heretical in the eyes of al-Wahhab, and al-Wahhab would often reach deep into unvalidated or disproven hadith to justify extreme violence as punishment for heretics. (Fadl, 49)

When al-Wahhab and his followers would conquer towns and cities, they would demand all inhabitants promise to live in line with Wahhabi beliefs, and those that did not were massacred. (57, Fadl) They also reinstituted the takfir, or accusing other Muslims of being infidels, which had gone out of practice as the penalty for takfir means the death of either the accuser or the accused.

A similar destabilization of the Muslim world occurred in 1921 after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. After World War I, acting in the interests of the British and French respectively, Mark Sykes and Francois Picot drew up a treaty which formed the borders of nation-states in the modern day Middle East. (Beloff 4) These borders largely disregarded natural border identities and split up ethnic groups, but allowed European countries to exercise control efficiently. Various European powers trained natives of these new nations to enforce these borders, so as to establish a sense of national pride, which was passably effective, but entire or even partial success in establishing these arbitrary identities in Middle Easterners went overall unaccomplished. This failure set the stage for sectarian and cultural conflicts, which were often
exacerbated by Western powers throwing support to whichever side appeared to be most ideologically useful to their interests. The consequences of western imperialism, combined with crises in Islamic ideology after the Ottoman Empire’s end, have been largely violent and damaging to the cultural landscape of the Middle East.

Various European powers trained natives of these new nations to enforce these borders, so as to establish a sense of national pride, which was passably effective, but entire or even partial success in establishing these arbitrary identities in Middle Easterners went overall unaccomplished. This failure set the stage for sectarian and cultural conflicts, which were often exacerbated by Western powers throwing support to whichever side appeared to be most ideologically useful to their interests.

Despite Wahhabism being a belief system reactionary to European influence, Wahhabis received support and funding from English colonialists to incite rebellions against the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire was Islamic, but Wahhabis viewed them as infiltrators to the religion, playing into the idea that non-Arabs cannot practice true Islam. Wahhabis also formed a power alliance with the al-Saud family, granting them their staying power. The combination of British and al-Saud wealth with Wahhabi ideological extremism proved to be very powerful. During the al-Saud family’s rise to power, they made use of Wahhabi endorsement of violence and executed an unestimated number of people (likely in the tens of thousands), and once they took hold of oil-rich land, Saudi Arabia possessed enough wealth to ignore criticism from other Muslim countries. (Fadl, 69)
Wahhabism began to spread throughout the Middle East and other parts of the world because Saudi Arabia was in a unique position: two of the most important cities to Muslims, Mecca and Medina, are located in Saudi Arabia, and the country is extremely wealthy from oil production. Tacit approval and acceptance of the Wahhabi way of life has become necessary for the entry to these holy cities. By providing funding for a number of Muslim organizations, such as the Muslim World League, and requiring people to abide by Wahhabi rules when making the hajj, Wahhabism easily had a wide audience for spreading its ideology. (Fadl, 70) Speaking out against, or disagreeing with Wahhabism could result in a lack of funding, or if a person lived in Saudi Arabia, retaliation from a religious police force. Saudi influence only continues to grow with time; women Pakistani pilgrims arriving at Mecca are now required to wear burqas for the hajj, the traditional wear of South Asian Muslims is no longer acceptable to hajj authorities. (Aslam, 13)

*Islamism in the 20th Century*

Wahhabism was not the only form of resistance against the lingering and ongoing actions of western imperialism. A movement sprang up around the 1950s in the Middle East, al-Nahda, in order to combat this. al-Nahda, meaning renaissance, began with the intention to unite Arab people within the middle east. While some people migrated towards finding a new leader for the Muslim world, others looked towards Arab nationalism. Before this time, the concept of an “Arab” person did exist, but this secular political construction intended to unite all people within the Middle East. Unlike Wahhabism, it was not religiously motivated, but a secular political
construction, and so both Muslims as well as religious minorities became proponents of this alternative route to unification.

Gamal Abdul al-Nasser was the most famous Arab nationalist, and first president of Egypt after the British takeover of the region. He overthrew British-selected King Faruk in a bloodless coup in 1954, and was extremely popular with the Egyptian people. He espoused Arab nationalist ideals, and put them into practice when he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and attempted to unify Syria and Iraq in 1963, resisting Sykes-Picot borders. He served as president in Egypt until his death in 1957, a year after his failed invasion of Israel which resulted in the Israeli capture of the Sinai. He was an incredibly popular figure during his time in office, but he made many political enemies along the way, who were opposed to his secularization of the country. His successor, Anwar Sadat, reaped the effects of these anti-secular sentiments when he was ultimately assassinated in 1981 at the hands of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, an Islamist group, sparking the thirty-year reign of President Hosni Mubarak. One of Nasser’s most notable Islamist political enemies were the Muslim Brotherhood, a group which counted Sayeed Qutb as one of its members.

Sayyid Qutb, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist writer, published many influential books featuring his beliefs on the social and political role of Islam before he was convicted and executed for plotting to assassinate Egyptian President Gamal al-Nasser in 1966. Qutb is most infamously known for his belief on jihad, where he elevates the “smaller jihad” (a military struggle, holy war or other form of outward fight for one’s religion) to a status of higher importance. The smaller jihad is supposed to be a defensive tool for a Muslim to protect oneself from external assault but an outside force, but in Qutb’s view, even when jihad is seemingly
unprovoked, it is still defensive and therefore theologically permissible as the Islamic world is currently experiencing an ongoing attack from the lasting effects of colonialism and modern Western oppression.

Qutb’s interpretation of Qu’ranic verses ignores existing scholarship on the subject of jihad, and functions to fit his particular ideology. Al-Qu’ran 2:193 is an oft-quoted verse to justify violent jihad, and does state “Fight them until there is no [more] fitnah (or strife) and [until] worship is [acknowledged to be] for Allah,” but violence against one’s enemies is supposed to be a last result, and the Qu’ran has a number of other verses which explicitly condemn killing opponents unless there is no other option available. In fact, Al-Qu’ran 2:193 is usually not presented in it’s entirety, and it, too, condemns unnecessary violence: “But if they cease, then there is to be no aggression except against the oppressors.”

One can not have an agenda of murder and claim to be a mujahid, or someone that engages in jihad, according to most Islamic scholars. A mujahid, which is a role only men can play in Islam, may be expected to fight on the battlefield, but he must also always be fighting against inner temptations to serve his own ego.

Through love and wisdom, a mujahid is expected to convince people to declare faith in Allah. He should have the capacity to do so with perfection and an impressive personality. He cannot invite dead bodies to the way of Allah. His aim should not be to fight and kill. However, if he is attacked he has no alternative but to fully defend himself. (Aslam, 108)

Regardless of the debate surrounding the use of jihad, Qutb’s philosophy became very pervasive and influential. After Qutb’s execution, his brother Muhammad moved from Egypt to Saudi Arabia where he became a professor of Islamic studies and edited and published his brother’s writings. (Kepel, 174-175) One of Muhammad’s students, who cited Qutb as a major
influence, was Ayman Zawahiri, mentor to Osama bin Laden and leading member of al-Qaeda. Bin Laden also influenced by Qutb’s ideology; Bin Laden visited King Abdulaziz University weekly to sit in on public lectures by Muhammad Qutb. On Bin Laden’s relationship with Qutb’s writings, his college friend Mohammad Jamal Khalifa is quoted as saying they “both read Sayyid Qutb. He is the one who most affected our generation.” (Wright, 79)

**Masculinity in Islamist Groups**

Given that Qutb’s beliefs on offensive jihad were so influential to Bin Laden, Zawahiri and their followers to form insurgent groups and commit acts of violence, it seems fair to also assume Qutb’s beliefs on gender roles were also adopted by Bin Laden and other ardent followers of Qutb’s philosophy. According to Qutb, the Qur’an “gives man the right of ‘guardianship’ and ‘superiority’ over the family structure in order to prevent dissension and friction between the spouses. The equity of this system lies in the fact that God both favoured the man with the necessary qualities and skills for the ‘guardianship' and also charged him with the duty to provide for the structure's upkeep.” (Haddad, 37-38) Qutb is referring to qawwam which is a controversial subject over which much debate is held, so to give a definitive answer to the meaning of qawwam is misleading and strict interpretation.

The idea of “man’s right of guardianship” seems in line with the form of masculinity permitted in Islamist societies, jihadi groups and other places where Qutb’s teaching has been most popular. It is not dissimilar to what is taught and practiced by members of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Pan-Islamist social and political organization.
The Muslim Brotherhood came into international prominence after member Mohamed Morsi became Egypt’s first elected president after the Arab Spring in 2011, but had been an active organization in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, since its founding in 1928 by Egyptian Hassan al-Banna. The Brotherhood strives to instill their interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunnah within the Muslim family, community and state, and seek to do so through their multi-tiered fraternal structure as seen through their most frequently used slogans such as “the Qur’an is our constitution” and “Islam is the solution.”

The beginning of the Muslim Brother hierarchy places men in a position of guardianship above women. Hassan al-Banna called for "a campaign against ostentation in dress and loose behavior", "segregation of male and female students", a separate curriculum for girls, and "the prohibition of dancing and other such pastimes ..." The Muslim Brotherhood itself is gender-segregated, with a separate faction known as The Muslim Sisterhood. For women, the Brother places particular emphasis on veiling, and reportedly requested Egyptian President Nasser make requiring women don the veil a part of his platform, which he denied. There are many reasons a woman might choose to wear the veil, from cultural importance, an expression of religion, to modesty, pressure from one’s family or personal preference. However, centering the discourse around the veil and requiring women to wear it removes their agency from a choice they might have willingly made themselves. Malak Hifni Nasif, an Egyptian feminist from the early 20th century, opposed the mandatory de-veiling movement that marked Egypt’s separation from colonial powers, viewed “male domination being enacted in and through the then contemporary discourse of the veil.” (Ahmed, 179) As of 2007, ninety percent of women are reported to wear the veil (Slackman, 3), a drastic change from 1958 when an article from the
United Press reported “the veil is unknown here.” (Sarasota-Herald Tribune) This issue is not unique to Egypt, with the statistics of women who veil rising in all Muslim-majority countries. Although the situation has been reversed, the sentiment behind Nasif’s statement remains: the conversation surrounding the veil is an exercise in male dominance and not a concern for women’s freedom or expression of religion.

This is in line with Lahoucine Ouzgane’s suggestion in his book *Islamic Masculinities* that Muslim masculinity, although seemingly centered around the man’s actions with women, is in fact based in the exchanges and experiences between Muslim men, and the fear of emasculation by other men. The relationship men have with women can either be viewed in a protective or conquering context; men are either protecting their wives, sisters and daughters from other men or conquering the sisters and daughters of other men. Both the protection and conquer contributes to masculinity. Therefore, this containment of female sexuality seems done with the intention of protecting women, but actually be something which contributes to building the status of the Muslim Brotherhood as a dominant male group.

This is not something unique to the Muslim Brotherhood, however. Since men are often, if not always, at the heads of these Islamist groups, and do not issue too many rules policing their own gender expression, it is sometimes the treatment and rules regarding women which are most indicative of their own views of how masculinity should be performed.

Al-Qaeda, led by the now-deceased Osama Bin Laden, has similarly strict rules for how women should behave, which can be used to understand their own brand of masculinity. Women are, of course, required to veil and men such as Bin Laden took multiple wives. A contributor to an Al-Qaeda’s women’s magazine outlines the role of women as such:
A Muslim woman is a female Jihad warrior always and everywhere. She is a female Jihad warrior who wages Jihad by means of funding Jihad. She wages Jihad by means of waiting for her Jihad warrior husband, and when she educates her children to that which Allah loves. She wages Jihad when she supports Jihad when she calls for Jihad in word, deed, belief, and prayer. (Von Knop, 397)

For those engaging in protest masculinity, women are more than people, they are public symbols that must be controlled in order to maintain power for the performance of masculinity to be equally public. The “female Jihadi” waiting dutifully for her husband is necessary for members of Al-Qaeda to construct their own masculinity.

DAESH is the news-making Islamist terrorist group of the moment. It was founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a militant Islamist who was once a member of al-Qaeda, and therefore shares some similar ideologies, but is unique in other respects.

DAESH is the acronym for the Arabic translation of “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.” Members of the Islamic State prefer to represent themselves as the modern day Holy Caliphate, an empire home to all Muslims. They deploy a strategic combination of modern warfare, technology, advertising tactics, and terminology with 7th century punishments and philosophy which, along with a multitude of other factors, make DAESH simultaneously alluring to possible enlistees and a formidable threat. The terrorism carried out by the Islamic State has deep religious roots, as evidenced by their name, and attacks are specifically directed at apostates or Muslims who have committed unforgivable sins. This includes any Muslims who do not fall in accordance with ISIS understanding of Islamic law and all Shi’as, since DAESH is a Sunni organization. ISIS employs takfir, which allows them to seize the land of any infidels excommunicated and expand their territory (Hassan 13).
The beheadings, stonings and other violent actions carried out by DAESH are horrific, and when examined through the lens of their expression of masculinity, are in line with theories of gender performativity. DAESH’s violent actions “seek to produce social transformation by staging symbolic rituals of confrontation” (Juris, 30) The beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, Alan Henning and David Haines were obviously done with the intention to shock, as their were staged and filmed with careful planning. They were also obviously intended as acts of retribution against the United States and the West, as shown by the monologues these captives were forced to recite before their deaths.

“I am Alan Henning. Because of our parliament’s decision to attack the Islamic State, I as a member of the British public - will now pay the price for that decision.”
- Alan Henning, British DAESH captive (Haberman, 1)

“Our government, for the last 13 years has stretched our military around the Muslim world to interfere in their affairs. They have killed in the name of 'preserving life,' tortured and raped in the name of 'humanity,' destroyed in the name of 'rebuilding,' and ruined the lives of millions of people. They have incurred a great debt of blood and wealth and it will be you and me, the average citizens, who will inevitably pay the price of their crimes.”
- James Foley, American DAESH captive (Masi, 2)

This resistance to the emasculation perpetrated by the West is where DAESH has an allure for their many recruits (the estimated numbers for which are always growing). The last count also had approximately four thousand Europeans believed to have left their home countries for the Islamic State. It is important to note these causal factors for protest masculinity, a perceived attack on one’s status or a loss of a parent, corresponds with the average ages of DAESH recruits, which are somewhere between sixteen and twenty-five. (Tawfeed, 1) The total number of people who have left their home countries to become a part of the Islamic State is unknown, but estimated to be over 20,000. (Neumann) Most, approximately 11,000, of the recruits have come from states in the Middle East, with some of the highest numbers being
attributed to Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. The United States has had a massive military presence in Iraq since the war began in 2003, and although military presence was scaled down with the official “end” of the war in 2011, the landscape of Iraq has changed drastically. Over the course of the war, over 100,000 Iraqi civilians were killed and the war saw the destruction of homes, buildings and major cultural landmarks. There were only a few years between the end of the war and the invasion of DAESH into Mosul, Iraq in 2014, and those years, rather than peaceful, were marred by sectarian conflict between the newly elected Shi’a President Maliki and his Sunni constituents.

As DAESH proclaims their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to be their caliph, the political and religious successor of Muhammad, they can present a very attractive image to Muslim men who feel oppressed by Western powers, and yearn for a future of Islamic dominance. DAESH puts themselves in direct odds with the Western imperialism which has torn so many Middle Eastern countries apart. The Islamic State presents itself to be a perfect utopia where every (Sunni) Muslim can be free from any constraints and can practice their religion openly.

These countries, as a result of the War on Terror and many ongoing sectarian divisions, have many citizens who have not been given adequate educations, healthcare or housing. In accordance with Islamic Law, DAESH promises free healthcare, food and provisions for the poor, housing and two years maternity leave for women under the Islamic State. (Wood 20) This promise is more than enough for many people who have never had the opportunity for such things in their home countries.

Everything DAESH portrays themselves to be denotes a particularly over the top form of masculinity. Their training and recruitment videos feature men holding large guns and
accomplishing feats of physical strength. The posters they release are in eye-catching colors and use wild graphics reminiscent of a Michael Bay action movies. Their executions are cruel and brutal; DAESH crucifies, beheads and shoots en mass their victims, often after requiring them to dig their own graves. The images they release of these atrocities participate in a larger “war of images,” as coined by W. J. T Mitchell in *Cloning Terror*, where these images act as a counter to the atrocities portrayed in the leaked Abu Ghraib photos. The United States and the West engaged in public humiliation and violence in additional to conventional warfare, through the highly publicized toppling of Saddam Hussein to the aforementioned Abu Ghraib depictions of torture. DAESH appears to be interested in replicating these images, as a means of asserting their own dominance.

It certainly seems as though DAESH, and groups like them, is motivated by a protest masculinity mindset, but I would go even further to argue that being a member of a group like DAESH is a kind of gender performance on its own, and without the gender performance they exhibit, DAESH would cease to exist.

Gender is an “active process of grappling with a situation and developing the means to survive them.” (Aslam, 86) In this case, the situation is the lasting effects of colonialism as well as the ongoing damage of the Middle East by Western powers. In the Vice documentary “ISIS” which takes a reporter inside the Islamic State and tracks the daily activities of DAESH and gives voice to their goals, a DAESH member can be heard saying, “We do not believe in Sykes-Picot,” as they break down the Western-created border between Iraq and Syria. The atrocities which took place during the Iraq war are also used as justification for their actions. Modern and historical imperialism intersect as motivation for DAESH’s violent actions which do
indeed subjugate women, such as the Yazidi women they have taken as sex slaves, and other men, namely men from other faiths.

This should be understood as both a class resentment and a display of collective masculinity. Many members of DAESH experienced years of deprivation of essential resources such as water, housing and education, and many others experienced what they perceived as attacks on their culture and Islamic way of life. The desperation and anger this caused generated their rejection of imperialism, nation-states, secularism and religious pluralism, taking on the form of the highly masculine terrorist faction DAESH. The terrorist actions led by DAESH and other violent Islamist groups are a manifestation of their performance and assertion of their masculinity.

DAESH is reprehensible and there should be no condoning of their actions, which have caused much harm to Syria and other parts of the world, understanding their tactics as a form of protest masculinity and response to years and decades of Middle Eastern and Muslim repression will better the chances of anyone looking to defeat them in a sustainable way. Gender performance is born from a need to survive, and gender roles are derived from the need to allocate specific modes of survival to specific groups. However, if gender performance creates an actual threat to survival, both the system of gender and the society it exists in need to be restructured around less harmful and more lasting models.

**Conclusion**

Groups like DAESH have plenty of ideological extremists in their camp; they have attracted and will continue to attract bloodthirsty people, but a desire to commit violence is not
the only factor in pulling recruits. The Islamic State would be disempowered if their citizens were taken away from them, but not through retaliated violence which would only serve to fuel more extremists, as history has proven. As shown through the examples above, blanket violence against terrorists and perceived enemies, affect more than the groups targeted. Violence, and its after-effects, create a feeling of mass anxiety amongst men.

If the Islamic State could become less attractive through competition, they would lose the massive appeal they currently have with those who join out of desperation. This can be done by reducing and eventually removing imperialist presence in the Middle East, promoting social programs which provide basic services such as clean water, education and housing and empowering positive gender expressions. If male anxiety over an inability to take care of oneself and one’s household is less present in the Middle East, and men do not have to worry about ongoing attacks against their nations and homes, protest masculinities will diminish as well, because there will be less to protest. If education is more readily available, meaning men and women have the safety to pursue an education, more people will have the opportunity to develop nuanced understandings of their own religion, rather than having to take the word of any influential Islamist at face value.

Gender is a human-created device intended to solve problems, but if the expression of gender creates more crises than it solves, the system it operates in needs to be restructured to solve the problems it created. These crises need to be solved by Middle Eastern Muslims, for Middle Eastern Muslims, but can only be done by first removing the catalyst for these crises which is colonialism. How best to dismantle the effects of colonialism is a complicated subject.
which deserves to be debated in a separate and more extensive arena, but is a conversation that can be begun by Western powers consulting Middle Easterners and Islamic scholars.
Sources


