

(En)Gendering the Dead Terrorist: (De)Constructing Masculinity in Terrorist Media Obituaries

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This article contributes to contemporary scholarship on gender, violence, and global politics by exploring how the figure of the terrorist is produced within mainstream media obituaries. It offers three arguments. First, the genre overwhelmingly positions the terrorist as a masculine figure. This positioning takes place, we demonstrate, in a variety of ways including through constructions of the character, family life, and “career” of those designated terrorist. Second, this masculinized figure is, importantly, a heterogeneous one that negotiates “fighter,” “strategist,” and “leader” archetypes. These templates can co-exist, we argue, because of their common structural differentiation to the feminine: a position inhabited by supporting characters including wives and other male terrorists. The article’s third argument is that the stability of this dominant figuration of the terrorist is also disrupted in obituaries via juxtaposition to more masculine figures, and through feminization of the deceased through constructions of cowardice, passivity, and vanity. In making these arguments, the article offers the first analysis of the masculinized storying of terrorism and terrorists in this almost entirely neglected genre. In so doing, it sheds new light on the obituary as an important mnemonic site for the everyday reproduction and problematization of global politics.

Este artículo contribuye al estudio académico contemporáneo en materia de género, violencia y política global estudiando cómo se crea la figura del terrorista en los obituarios de los medios de comunicación más habituales. El artículo ofrece tres argumentos. En primer lugar, el género posiciona abrumadoramente al terrorista como una figura masculina. Demostramos como este posicionamiento tiene lugar a través de una variedad de formas, incluso a través de construcciones relativas al carácter, a la vida familiar y a la «carrera» del designado terrorista. En segundo lugar, esta figura masculinizada es, de manera relevante, una figura heterogénea que combina los arquetipos de «luchador», «estratega» y «líder». Argumentamos que estos patrones pueden coexistir debido a su frecuente diferenciación estructural respecto a lo femenino: una posición formada por personajes secundarios que incluyen esposas y otros terroristas masculinos. El tercer argumento de este artículo es que la estabilidad de esta figuración dominante del terrorista también se ve interrumpida en los obituarios a través de su yuxtaposición a figuras más masculinas, y a través de la feminización del difunto mediante representaciones de cobardía, pasividad y vanidad. A través de estos argumentos, este artículo ofrece el primer análisis de la historia masculinizada del terrorismo y los terroristas dentro de este género, casi completamente descuidado. Al hacer esto, también arroja nueva luz sobre los obituarios caracterizándolos como un importante sitio mnemotécnico para la reproducción cotidiana y la problematización de la política global.

Cet article contribue à la recherche contemporaine sur le genre, la violence et la politique mondiale en s’intéressant à la production du portrait du terroriste dans les nécrologies des médias traditionnels. Il propose trois arguments. D’abord, le genre présente quasiment toujours le terroriste comme un personnage aux traits masculins. Nous démontrons que cet état de fait transparaît de différentes façons, notamment par la définition de la réputation, de la vie de famille et de la « carrière » du terroriste désigné. Ensuite, ce portrait masculinisé se caractérise surtout par son hétérogénéité ; il combine les archétypes du « combattant », du « stratège » et du « leader ». Selon moi, ces modèles peuvent coexister, grâce à leur différenciation structurelle commune par rapport aux traits féminins : un rôle endossé par des personnages secondaires, notamment les épouses et d’autres terroristes masculins. Enfin, la stabilité de ce portrait dominant du terroriste est aussi remise en question dans les nécrologies par la juxtaposition de portraits plus masculins et la féminisation de la personne décédée en la taxant

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de lâche, passive et vaniteuse. En formulant ces arguments, l'article propose la première analyse de la narration masculinisée du terrorisme et des terroristes dans ce genre en grande partie ignoré. Ce faisant, il place les nécrologies sous une lumière nouvelle et les présente comme un important site mnémotique pour la reproduction et la problématisation quotidiennes de la politique mondiale.

Introduction

Terrorism, one might intuit, is a fundamentally masculine pursuit. In a purely quantitative sense, men remain significantly over-represented as perpetrators of violence (e.g., [Institute for Economics and Peace 2016](#), 45) and as members of organizations designated “terrorist” (e.g., [Bloom 2017](#)). The world’s most prominent, most notorious, terrorists—think Carlos the Jackal, Ted Kaczynski, Abdullah Öcalan, and Osama bin Laden—are, overwhelmingly, male, notwithstanding growing fascination with their female counterparts ([Sjoberg et al. 2011](#), 2). And, media coverage of attacks frequently emphasizes their perpetrators’ masculinity, from the “working class madman” who killed forty nine in New Zealand ([Courier Mail 2019](#)), to the “jihadi killer” who wore a replica football shirt to the 2017 London Bridge attack ([Sun 2017](#)). This widespread imbrication of terrorism and masculinity speaks, of course, to traditional and essentialized notions of gender. “The terrorist,” like “the man,” is a figure of aggression, not compassion; of reason, not emotion; of action, not passivity; and of violence, not peace. As [Emig \(2019, 517\)](#) recently argued, “In the public perception ... a terrorist is male.”

In this article, we set out to reverse this pervasive association by asking not how masculinity produces terrorism. But, rather, how do constructions of terrorism (re)produce and disrupt understandings of masculinity? To do this, we explore how the figure of the terrorist is positioned as a masculine figure in a very specific site of everyday discourse: the media obituary. Drawing on an original sample of eighty-five obituaries, we offer three arguments. First, media obituaries overwhelmingly position the terrorist as a masculine figure. This positioning takes place, we suggest, in a variety of ways including through constructions of the role, character, family life, and “career” of those designated terrorist. Second, the gendered figure of the terrorist is also a heterogeneous one that negotiates different archetypes of masculinity. Here, we demonstrate that the “fighter,” “strategist,” and “leader” templates widespread within terrorist obituaries co-exist despite their association with very different characterizations of masculinity because of a common structural differentiation to individuals and behaviors designated feminine. The article’s third argument is that the stability of this dominant figuration of the terrorist is also disrupted in the genre in two important ways. First, via the juxtaposition of the deceased terrorist to more masculine figures, and second through feminization of the obituarized through characterizations of cowardice, passivity, and vanity. These juxtapositions matter not only because they highlight the relational nature of gender. But, in addition, because they demonstrate how the subordination of femininity to masculinity, or the marginalization of alternative masculinities to a hegemonic form, serves a powerful constitutive function in producing subjects such as “the terrorist.” By exploring the masculinized storying of terrorism and terrorists in a largely neglected site of discourse, the article, therefore, extends contemporary work on gender and political violence, and on constructions of terrorism as a threat to interna-

tional security. As detailed in the conclusion, moreover, this analysis also contributes to recent work exploring the reproduction of global politics in seemingly banal or insignificant sites.

The article begins by reviewing scholarship on gender and political violence, situating our analysis within recent critical work that addresses two longstanding limitations of the field: the reduction of gender to an explanatory variable, and the equation of gender with women. If research on terrorism still suffers from a “gender problem” ([Gentry 2022](#), 210), such work provides important conceptual, methodological, and empirical insight into gender’s constitutive functioning. A second section introduces our conceptual commitments via engagement with contemporary theoretical work on masculinity as contingent, fluid, relational, and productive of the socio-political. A third section introduces our method and explains our focus on obituaries as an understudied, yet important, site of everyday discourse on terrorism and gender alike. The final, analytical, section then traces the masculinization of deceased terrorists in obituaries. In this section, we discuss common tropes and heterogeneities therein before exploring the structural importance of feminine and subordinate counterparts in cohering the terrorist figure. We finish by conceptualizing instances of emasculation as evidence of the genre’s potential for problematizing or disrupting dominant narratives around global politics.

Gender, Violence, and Terrorism

Terrorism research was notoriously slow to address questions of gender. Although precursors are identifiable ([Aust 1985](#); [Schalk 1994](#)), it was only with the field’s post-9/11 “boom” ([Silke 2004](#)) that significant attention was finally paid to the gendering of terrorism ([Davis, West, and Amarasingam 2021](#)). Amongst this work’s important contributions were studies on the roles of men and women in terrorist organizations ([Bloom, Gill, and Horgan 2012](#); [Spencer 2016](#); [Bloom and Lokmanoglu 2023](#)); analyses of women’s motivations for joining violent groups ([Cunningham 2003](#); [Nuraniyah 2018](#); [Perešin, et al. 2021](#)); explanatory work on the willingness of women to perpetrate political violence ([Jacques and Taylor 2008](#); [Davis 2013](#); [Gonzalez et al. 2014](#); [Margolin 2016](#); [Koehler 2023](#)); and policy-relevant work on preventing the violence of female terrorists ([Cunningham 2007](#); [Aasgaard 2017](#)).

Scholarship such as this has been vitally important in broadening our understanding of the gendering of political violence. At the same time, it has tended to suffer from two limitations familiar within wider fields including International Relations (IR) and Security Studies. First, as indicated above, “gender and political violence” has tended to mean *women* and political violence. Indeed, as [Herschinger \(2014, 53\)](#) writes, “despite their potential merits, the greatest part of these studies is not interested in gender as an analytical category but in gender as difference in sex.” Second, much of this scholarship also approach gender as a “variable”: as an (essentialized) “thing” to be cataloged,

compared, and explained, often through positivist frameworks (see [Shepherd 2013](#), 11–2). This is potentially problematic, as [Sjoberg \(2009, 189\)](#) summarizes, because:

many “mainstream” scholars who use gender as a variable do so with what feminists argue is an insufficient understanding of the meanings and implications of gender in global politics. Too many scholars who use gender as a variable use it as a proxy for women (or men), failing to take account of the complexity of the levels and ways that gender operates in global politics.

Dissatisfaction of this sort was vital for the emergence of more explicitly critical scholarship on gender and terrorism approaching the former not as a variable, but rather as “noun/verb/logic” ([Shepherd 2013](#), 11–2). Drawing, frequently, upon constructivist and post-structural traditions, this work has been vital in unpacking the socio-political productivity of gendered constructions, performances, and power relations ([Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 2015](#)). Although heterogeneous, this research often detaches gender from the body’s brute corporeality, approaching it as something socially diffuse but with effects so concrete that they will be taken as natural. “Sacrificing” the “scientificity” of positivism ([Foucault 1997, 7](#)), such work serves to center attention on power/knowledge relations within gendered discourses that establish, organize, restrict, and prioritize:

The feminist recognition of a relationship between the knower and the known means that many if not most feminist scholars see (all) knowledge building as a political enterprise. Feminist scholars have argued that all IR scholarship has political commitments, even though most of the discipline hides its politics behind claimed objectivity. Feminist scholars, however, emphasize that all knowledge is interested, and express a political commitment to understanding the world from the points of view of marginalized peoples and actors ([Sjoberg 2009, 192–3](#)).

Sjoberg’s reference to the hiding of political commitments behind claims to objectivity resonates with [Gentry’s \(2021, 9\)](#) recent argument that what we consider to be “normal, right and credible” in IR and Terrorism Studies can be explained by the “forgettings” of these disciplines. These “forgettings” - of gender, race, sexuality, rationality, and so forth - stem from inadequate reflection on the disciplines’ roots, and the legacies of Westphalia, the Enlightenment, and colonialism on reifying a particular (gendered, racialized) knowledge of (counter-)terrorism. Indeed, the critique here is not just with “traditional” Terrorism Studies but with more recent work in Critical Terrorism Studies, too, which Gentry and others (e.g., [Khan 2021, 448](#)) argue has been locked in a “post-9/11 counter-discourse” preventing scholars from “grappling more seriously with deeper issues at play.” Such reflections have led intersectional feminists, critical race theorists, and queer theorists to consider how “genders intersect with other aspects of identity and experience” ([Choi et al. 2022, 515](#)), and to investigate how powerful organizing logics such as heteronormativity situate the terrorist and counter-terrorist figures at either end of a rational/irrational binary ([Weber 2016](#)). Where work such as this has been particularly important in tracing intersections of gender with race, religion, and nation ([Holt 2010; Parashar 2011; Martini 2018; Brown 2020](#)), intersectional work on masculinity within terrorism research remains a significant blindspot ([Gentry 2021, 89](#)). Despite the slew of post-9/11 terrorism scholarship, two pieces in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* by Laura [Shepherd \(2006\)](#) and Meghana

[Nayak \(2006\)](#) stand out in this period for their attentiveness to constructions of masculinity, race, and religion in justifications of the ensuing interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. These pieces pulled much-needed attention to the discursive work done by claims to a stoic and authoritative US masculinity as the savior of infantilized and helpless feminized victims from cowardly overseas barbarians.

The engagement with “neo-imperialism” in these texts reflects what became a primary focus within Critical Terrorism Studies. Interest in terrorism and masculinity, however, has diversified in the ensuing period. Such work includes important scholarship on “everyday” or “intimate” terrorism ([Kleinman 1997; Orbals and Poloni Staudinger 2014; Pain 2014; Innes and Steele 2015; Javaid 2022](#)) drawing attention to the role of hyper-masculine frameworks in determining which violence qualifies as “proper terrorism” and (therefore) merits attention. Here, authors such as [Brown \(2021, 479\)](#) point to the enduring pre-eminence of political realism, and the ways in which, “the narrative of IR—and terrorism—as characterised as a sequence of ‘big time’ events that punctuate ... produces a politics which intentionally obscures the ongoing violence against women and people of colour as part of the systems of governance.” Other authors, however, caution against linking “everyday violence” to terrorism for fear of legitimizing intimate and everyday counter-terrorist violence ([Sjoberg 2015](#)). This warning may be particularly urgent for scholarship on the Global South ([Zalewski and Runyan 2015](#)), given the continuing pull of orientalist discourses around “white men saving brown women from brown men” ([Spivak 2010](#)).

A separate body of relevant work explores the importance of culturally specific and historically informed forms of masculinity within violent political contexts. [Aslam \(2012, 2014\)](#) investigates Islamism and masculinity in Pakistan, and the role of tribal values prioritizing honor and shame. [De Sondy \(2013\)](#) refutes the notion of a singular masculinity within Islam but investigates links between jihadist masculinities and gender within the Qu’ran and in Indian/Pakistani history. In Northern Ireland, [Ashe \(2012; see also Bairner 1999\)](#) reflects on the lack of attention to men’s gendered identities during “the Troubles,” arguing that militarised masculinities sustained this conflict while offering restitutive avenues. And [O’Branski \(2014\)](#), finally, traces how male prisoners in Her Majesty’s Prison (HMP) Maze used self-starvation as a means of weaponizing their bodies to reconstitute their masculinity in the face of feminizing treatment. Work such as this speaks, finally, to scholarship on “toxic masculinity” as an ideology that promotes traditional gender roles including the reduction of women’s worth to their physical appearance and child-bearing ability, or the valorization of men who obtain “alpha” status ([Gentry 2021, 179](#)). The momentum of toxic masculinities in online spaces has engendered concerns about the amplification of misogyny via prominent influencers like Andrew Tate and their potential effect on boys and young men ([BBC 2022](#)). Such developments are of interest to terrorism researchers investigating right-wing, misogynistic and “incel” inspired terrorism drawing from this ideological reserve to justify violence ([DeCook and Kelly 2022; Gentry 2022](#)) and to researchers identifying “gender blind spots” in counter-extremism strategies ([Agius et al. 2022](#)).

Conceptualizing Masculinity

The critical work highlighted above is diverse in form and focus. It tends, however, to coalesce around an understanding of gender as socially constituted and

socially constitutive. Thus, in the first instance, gendered identities, practices, and connotations are taken as made and not (biologically) given. In the second instance, they contribute to the formation of wider social truths about (counter-)terrorism. This emphasis on gender's provisionality is shared by contemporary scholarship on masculinity within which our argument is situated. As [Connell \(2005, 71\)](#) put it, masculinity is not reducible to male biologies or bodies. Rather, it should be approached as, "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage in that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture." These effects are felt across society upon, "individuals, relationships, institutional structures and global relations of domination" ([Schippers 2007, 86–7](#)), with masculinity operating across the gender dispositif to structure social practice and to organize subject positions. As a constituted, as well as constitutive, entity, masculinity is historically and spatially contingent ([Kabesh 2016; Jablonka 2022](#)). Moreover, as extensive work in anthropology, gender, and queer studies has shown, masculinity is capable of existing in multiple forms at once ([Gilmore 1990; O'Donnell and O'Rourke 2005; Hopson and Petin 2020](#)), such that, "the cultural constitution of normative masculinities is constantly shifting and open to reconfiguration through social change" ([Ashe and Harland 2014, 750](#)).

The constructed character of masculinity brings us to a second feature of relevance to our argument: its relationality ([Singh 2017](#)). Masculinity, crucially, only becomes meaningful via relations of difference and similarity to other gendered identities. Most obviously, the meaning of masculinity emerges from differentiation to femininity. At the same time, because masculinity does not refer to one position or set of practices/effects, contextually defined hierarchies of masculinity comprising hegemonic and subordinate forms thereof often emerge ([Innes and Anderson 2015](#)). The relational binaries of masculine/feminine and hegemonic/subordinate here have social power because they reify gendered subject positions and practices as desirable, while also producing concrete effects that socially elevate and exclude. Indeed, as [Vito et al. \(2018, 88\)](#) argue, hegemonic masculinity grants "collective privilege over women" but also, "strategically barricades most men from achieving its normative standard."

The notion of hegemonic masculinity, specifically, refers to, "the most honoured way of being a man ... [requiring] ... other men to position themselves in relation to it" ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832](#)) and its reification in, "norms and practices associated with men in powerful social institutions" ([Krosnell 2005, 281](#)). Normative manliness in this form, typically connotes one's, "degree of hardiness and self-discipline" ([Gilmore 1990, 220–1](#)) and correlates closely with, "independence, autonomy, superiority, dominance over others, heterosexuality, and aggression or violence" ([Ashe and Harland 2014, 750](#)). As a feature of hegemonic masculinity ([Morrell et al. 2012](#)), a capacity for violence often requires constant performance in order to demonstrate societal status ([Butler 1990](#)) or to restore physical or social injury ([Ferber and Kimmel 2008, 874](#)).

In the remainder of this article, we now build on this conceptualization of masculinity as contingent, constitutive, mutable, and relational to demonstrate how a reliance upon, and reproduction of, masculinized gender norms is vital in storying (the lives of) those designated terrorist in media obituaries. From this, we are able to highlight the heterogeneity of gender expressions therein, and to reflect on

the genre's capacity to disrupt traditional masculinized constructions of terrorist violence. Obituaries, we argue, offer a promising genre for such analysis, because their longer form emphasis on the figure of the terrorist offers a thickness and granularity of insight into the individual lives and experiences of violent men in a medium—the news media—often dominated by biologically essentialist "journalistic common sense" ([Connell 2005, 46](#)).

Obituaries and Their Analysis

Media obituaries represent an important yet understudied site for the discursive (re)production of world politics. Although the genre has received growing attention within sociology and memory studies (e.g., [Fowler 2007; Danilova 2015; Taussig 2017](#)), it remains surprisingly neglected within fields such as IR and Security Studies, despite a nascent "memory turn" therein (e.g., [Edkins 2003; Heath-Kelly 2016](#)). With few exceptions (e.g., [Jarvis 2019](#)), the small body of work in this area tends to focus on how obituaries contribute to dominant constructions of identity by remembering those unjustly or unfortunately killed such as terrorist victims or soldiers (e.g., [Zehfuss 2009; Jarvis 2010; Tidy 2021](#)). This article broadens that focus by approaching the genre as an important, if seemingly banal, location for the (re)production and (de)stabilization of threat, violence, insecurity, and otherness.

Obituaries matter, [Fowler \(2004, 154\)](#) argues, because they offer, "tiny exemplary tales of our times": "not theodicies, but sociodicies, accounts which serve to legitimate the social order." Although ostensibly "backward" looking, obituaries, like all memory projects, are constructed around present interests and mores, such that, "The individual stories they tell are shaped by dominant cultural values" ([Taussig 2017, 460](#)). While purporting to remember the already significant, obituaries are constitutive of their subjects' lives and importance. This is because they position the dead in particular ways—a "genius," a "humanitarian," a "terrorist", and so on—and selectively narrate their lives and achievements ([Hamann 2016](#)). Although a recognizable literary genre, obituaries are heterogenous, and vary considerably (e.g., [Starck 2008](#)).

Obituaries are also, importantly, gendered in multiple ways. Most obviously, the genre suffers from significant historical inequalities in the representation of men and women (e.g., [Eid 2002](#)). One quantitative analysis of UK, US, and French newspaper obituaries found a continuing prioritization of male figures and childless women ([Fowler and Bielsa 2007, 209](#)). Related studies on the obituarization of specific populations—such as academics—find similar biases (e.g., [Tight 2008](#)). Content analyses identify significant gender differences in the framing of individuals, their lives, and deaths in obituaries (e.g., [Ferraro 2019](#)). While constructivist work closer to our own ambitions explores how obituaries reproduce gender norms and in so doing help legitimize social institutions and dynamics including violence ([Tidy 2021](#)). Importantly, these historical biases may slowly be changing ([Fowler 2004](#)): one recent analysis of leaders' obituaries in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, for instance, found that, "female leaders were described as increasingly agentic over time, but not as increasingly competent" ([Zehnter et al. 2018, 1](#)). The persistence of such differences, interestingly, extends also to the visual, with one study finding that photographs selected for women's obituaries tended to portray them as "significantly younger than their actual age at death" ([Ogletree et al. 2005, 341](#))

In the remainder of this article, we focus on the obituaries of eleven individuals posthumously remembered for an involvement in “terrorism”: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1971–2019); Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966–2006); Abu Nidal (1937–2002); George Habash (1926–2008); Manuel Marulanda (1930–2008); Timothy McVeigh (1968–2001); Osama bin Laden (1957–2011); Seamus Twomey (1919–1989); Seán Mac Stíofáin (1928–2001); Shamil Basayev (1965–2006); and Velupillai Prabhakaran (1954–2009). Every obituary of these individuals published across thirteen international media outlets was analyzed for the purposes of this research: *Agence France Presse*, *Al Jazeera*, *Time Magazine*, *The Associated Press*, *The BBC Online*, *CNN*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The New York Times*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Washington Post*. This generated a corpus of eighty-five obituaries comprising 108,691 words accessed via Lexis Nexis and subsequent targeted searches.

Our focus on obituaries published within the mainstream news media reflects the global reach of the English-language press (Gray and Franck 2019, 277), its continuing importance as a “social forum” (Schäfer et al. 2016, 81), and the pragmatic advantages of media data which is “readily available and easily accessible” (Schäfer et al. 2016, 82). Our selection of the thirteen news media outlets reflected four specific criteria: (1) diversity of political standpoint (see Gray and Franck 2019, 277); (2) diversity of format; (3) international reach; and (4) reputation as a publisher of obituaries. Thus, the sample includes two major broadcasters with international reach, the *BBC* and *CNN*; prominent international news agencies in *Al Jazeera*, the *Associated Press* and *Agence France Presse*; two high-circulation US newspapers in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*; the UK’s “four leading obituary pages” (Starck 2005, 278) in *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The Times*; and two long-standing and influential publications—*Time Magazine* and *The Economist*—the latter having published lengthy obituaries for over twenty-five years (Wroe and Colquhoun 2008, 1–2).

The eleven obituarized individuals included in our sample were identified by two primary criteria. First: representativeness of an organization or acts widely designated “terrorist.” Thus, nine had held leadership positions in organizations listed “terrorist” in places such as the US State Department’s List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations or the UK Home Office’s List of Proscribed Organizations: al-Baghdadi (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS]); al-Zarqawi (al Qaeda in Iraq); Nidal (Abu Nidal Organisation); Habash (People’s Front for the Liberation of Palestine); Marulanda (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia); bin Laden (al Qaeda); Prabhakaran (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam [LTTE]); Twomey (Irish Republican Army [IRA]); and Mac Stíofáin (IRA). The remaining two—Basayev and McVeigh—were included for involvement in high-profile “terrorist” attacks such as the 2002 Moscow Theatre attack, the 2004 Beslan School massacre, and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

The second criterion was a primary emphasis on “terrorist” violence in an individual’s obituarization. Thus, individuals deemed “terrorist” at some time by political opponents—e.g., Nelson Mandela or Yasser Arafat—were excluded from the study because their obituarization concentrated on their political careers as much as any violence of which they were accused. Beyond these initial purposive criteria (see Etikan et al. 2016), heterogeneous sampling was also employed to include individuals with diverse geographical, political, and historical backgrounds

(Howarth 2005, 331; Etikan et al. 2016, 3). This approach satisfied the article’s focus on terrorism obituaries as a site in which knowledge of masculinity and its relationship to violence is (re)produced, negotiated, and (de)contested. Our non-probabilistic research design cannot, however, sustain claims to our findings’ generalizability. Upon collection, the obituaries were collated into a master document for hybrid deductive and inductive coding. Here, a review of literature on terrorism and masculinity provided an initial road map, generating the following codes: physical attributes; psychological attributes; behavioral attributes; family life; hobbies and interests; career as a terrorist; and miscellaneous. This was followed by an inductive coding process comprising two further readings identifying additional themes.

Founding Fathers and Grand Old Men: Terrorism and Masculinity

The figure of “the terrorist” within media obituaries is, overwhelmingly, a masculinized one. Overtly gendered references to the deceased and their global standing situate their subject as male: from the “man to be reckoned with” (Bulloch 2002) that was Abu Nidal, to George Habash’s status as “one of the very earliest founding fathers” of the Palestinian struggle and “one of the great patrons of ‘international terrorism’” (Hirst 2008). Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) leader, Manuel Marulanda, was the patriarchal “grand old man of Latin American guerilla leaders” (Gunson 2008); Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “the world’s most-wanted terrorist chieftain” (Callimachi and Hassan 2019), and “most feared man on the planet” (Chulov 2019). Shamil Basayev is a “Chechen warlord” (Steele 2006); Abu Musab al-Zarqawi sat atop “the league-table of the world’s most wanted villains and terror masters” (Darwish 2006); and Osama bin Laden was a “master terrorist” (*Time Magazine*); “poster boy for Islamist anti-Western militancy” (*Telegraph* 2011), and “the world’s most wanted man” (Graham 2011). Indeed, the Buchan (2011) obituary of Al Qaeda’s former head went further still, suggesting:

Kalashnikov semiautomatic weapon at the ready, a master of international commerce and satellite communication, Bin Laden seemed to embody a new and romantic model of Arab masculinity.

Descriptions of hobbies, habits, and appearance contribute to this masculinized figuration. Al-Zarqawi, for instance, “played soccer in the street” (Gentleman 2006), while al-Baghdadi made a name for himself as a “talented footballer” (*Telegraph* 2019). Bin Laden, we learn, “was always earthy ... he loved to go hiking and mountain climbing, to hunt and ride horses” (Beyer 2011). References to self-destructive behaviour such as alcohol and tobacco consumption invoking stereotypical constructions of heterosexual masculinity (Lindsay and Lyons 2018, 626) are important here, too, from Al-Zarqawi’s history of “hit[ting] the bottle and ... getting tattoos” (Gentleman 2006) to an enjoyment of whisky and tobacco shared by Abu Nidal (Hirst 2002), Manuel Marulanda (*New York Times* 2008), and George Habash (*Independent* 2008). Timothy McVeigh had a “love for guns, going back to his boyhood” (*CNN* 2001) and Velupillai Prabhakaran practiced martial arts (*Economist* 2009). Constructions of personal appearance, too, often position the dead terrorist in recognizably masculine guise (see Barry 2018, 639): from Marulanda—“dressed in simple farmer’s clothing or camouflage fatigues and always with the trademark rubber boots, machete on his belt and towel draped over shoulder to wipe the sweat off his brow”

(Bajak 2008) to the piratic Shamil Basayev sporting ‘a shaven head, thick beard and prosthetic leg’ (Economist 2006) and the ‘moustachioed commander’ Prabhakaran (Taylor 2009).

Descriptions of romantic relationships reflect heteronormative and often racialized norms with brief mention typically afforded to spouses and offspring.¹ Marriages, here, are sometimes “arranged” (Darwish 2006), with wives having been “taken” (Farrell 2009). And allusions to variable cultural mores intertwine with quantitative constructions of virility from “Habash ... [who] married a cousin, with whom he was to have two children” (Telegraph 2008) to bin Laden—“reported to have at least 23 children from at least five wives” (Al Jazeera 2011), and Marulanda who “reportedly sired several children around the country” (MacLeod 2008) and married ‘a much younger woman’ (Gunson 2008). Friendships with other men are articulated within an overtly gendered vernacular (see Carver 2014, 116), for instance, in the depiction of Abu Nidal and Libyan leader Gaddafi as “instant buddies” (Hirst 2002). Discernibly masculine characters, meanwhile, offer rich material for comparison or explanation. Thus, Al-Zarqawi, for example, “adopted the name of Abu Masab, a seventh-century Islamic warrior” (Darwish 2006). Bin Laden’s “unconscious models were the anti-colonial revolutionaries of the 1960s” (Buchan 2011), explaining, perhaps, his “cult status as a kind of Islamic Che Guevara” (Times 2011). Shamil Basayev, also, “appeared preoccupied with the career of Che Guevara” (Telegraph 2006), while Prabhakaran claimed to be “fascinated by the lives of Alexander the Great and Napoleon” (BBC 2009), although his “great hero ... was ... Subhas Chandra Bose, who had tried to drive the British out of India with armed force” (Economist 2009).

Fighter, Strategist, and Leader

Constructions of gender in any context are seldom uniform, often working through “templates” or “archetypes” that simplify and crystalize subject positions (e.g., Moss 2011, 3). Thus, although the preceding section implies an emergent figure of the (risk-taking, heterosexual, combative) terrorist, there is important variation across these obituaries. In the following, we turn to three recurrent archetypes within the genre: the fighter; the strategist; and the leader. These archetypes—all of which relate to the working lives or “murderous trade” (Economist 2002), of these men—have prominence, of course, beyond this discursive site (see, amongst others, Emig 2019, 522; Spector-Mersel and Gilbar 2021, 863). Yet their reference, here, to distinct, yet distinctively masculine traits, consolidates the construction of terrorism as a masculine “profession” enjoyed by manly men.

FIGHTER

The first archetype—of the terrorist-as-fighter—situates this figure as an aggressive, combative subject. Regular reference is made here to physical resources associated with strength or violence. Marulanda, for instance, was ‘a tall, strong campesino with small, dark, somewhat slanted eyes and a reputation for never smiling’ (Gunson 2008); or, more fearsome still, ‘a leathery-faced man with piercing eyes’ (Bajak 2008). Bin Laden, too, enjoyed a “tall stature ... piercing eyes” (Times 2011) and “air of omnipotence” (Buchan 2011) in his formative years. Al-Zarqawi was able to intimidate “inmates with a mere glare” (Joffe 2006) during one period of incarceration, while such was Basayev’s

strength that—during an amputation procedure—“The operation was videotaped and later televised [with] viewers seeing the foot ... removed under local anesthetic while Basayev looked on impassively” (Telegraph 2006).

A psychological inclination toward (often excessive) violence is prominent within this figuration. Marulanda, again, was a “cold-blooded executioner when circumstances demanded” (Gunson 2008); a “force to be reckoned with” (Times 2008); and a “ferocious fighter” (MacLeod 2008). IRA Leader Seamus Twomey, relatedly, was an “implacable hard-liner and promoter of bloody guerrilla tactics” (Guardian 1989). Al-Zarqawi’s “ruthless attacks on Shiite civilians” (Gettleman 2006) drew disapproval from even Osama bin Laden, demonstrating the former’s “dedication to violence” (Telegraph 2006) manifest, most vividly, in “the horrific footage showing the beheading of foreign hostages” (BBC 2006). Abu Nidal was responsible for “brutal” and “ruthless” attacks (Telegraph 2002). And, Shamil Basayev—“bloodythirsty author of some of the most appalling terrorist atrocities of recent times” (Times 2006)—became, by the time of his death, ‘a man only of violence’ (Economist 2006).

The terrorist-as-fighter’s inclination toward violence is connected, at times, to an abnormal capacity for brutality. Abu Nidal, for instance, was, “Paranoid, despotic, capricious and cruel,” appearing “to suffer from severe psychopathic tendencies, and ... [a] longing for extreme excitement” (Times 2002). In one obituary of this “undisputed, monstrous king” of conflict, indeed:

All irregulars are tempted by superfluous violence and cruelty. The Palestinians were no exception. But none within their ranks exemplified this scourge like Abu Nidal. He was the patriot turned psychopath. He served only himself, only the warped personal drives that pushed him into hideous crime (Hirst 2002).

Al-Zarqawi is described as having a “pathological hatred for ‘unbelievers’” (Darwish 2006) and appearing to feel “whole only when locked in conflict with others” (Times 2006). Al-Baghdadi embraced ‘a kind of extreme brutality’ (Warrick 2019), which saw him revel “in ghoulis displays of violence” (Warrick 2019). As this obituary continues “His followers carried out mass crucifixions, turned female captives into sex slaves and gleefully executed prisoners by stoning, hacking or burning them alive—always with Mr. Baghdadi’s implicit blessing” (Warrick 2019). This willingness to do violence to others is also, at times, linked to atypical boldness. Thus, Basayev—whose name was “shared with the legendary warrior priest of the Caucasus” (Times 2006)—shared with, “many Chechens ... a contempt for and fearlessness towards death” (Corley 2006). Bin Laden’s boldness, in contrast, is religious rather than national: “The price set on his head for more than a decade never bothered him, for Allah determined every breath in his body ... His martyr’s time would come when it came” (Economist 2011).

The violence of these men is often exemplified in this archetype through references to youthful transgressions, such as al-Zarqawi’s history as a “juvenile delinquent who ... became a street fighter, drank alcohol, visited bars, and was once arrested for carrying drugs” (Telegraph 2006) or Prabhakaran’s throwing “a bomb into a group of soldiers” when “bunking off school at 17 with his mates” (Economist 2009). Early combat experiences receive attention too, from al-Zarqawi’s time in Afghanistan where he “was trained in guerrilla warfare, learned about chemical weapons, and came into occasional contact with Osama bin Laden” (Telegraph 2006) to Timothy McVeigh’s past as ‘a decorated Army

¹We return below to the position of female figures in these obituaries.

veteran of the Persian Gulf War' (CNN 2001) or Basayev's earlier time as "one of [Grozny's] fiercest defenders" (Steele 2006) who "battled hard for his country" (Times 2006). Whether born or encultured thus, this first figuration, with its emphasis on the terrorist's aggression, brutality, and bravery, positions violence not as something the terrorist *does*, but as vital to who the terrorist *is*.

STRATEGIST

A second archetype in these obituaries focuses less on the subject's physical attributes than their cognitive ones. Drawing on a different discursive repertoire to the fighter, with masculinity now collocated with rationality, inventiveness, and collectedness, we see the terrorist here positioned as a man of reason. The terrorist-as-strategist—or "mastermind" (Washington Post 1989; Agence France Presse 2008), in a particularly widely used trope—is a man of cunning, able to outwit rather than out-fight his adversaries.

A first component of this archetype is the terrorist's strategic and tactical intelligence. Bin Laden, for instance, had a "keen eye for public relations—and an understanding of the potential of the still new technology of satellite televisions" for his "strategy of propaganda by deed" (Burke and Lawrence 2011). George Habash, "was regarded much more as an ideologue and theorist than as the action man feared by airlines and security services" (Independent 2008). Marulanda is described as a "highly skilled guerrilla tactician" (Gunson 2008) and a "master strategist [who] earned his nickname ... for his skill ambushing army patrols (Bajak 2008). This framing is even, on occasion, applied to Abu Nidal—the individual most widely obituarized as a fighter—including through reference to his 'masterminding [of] the assassinations of Fatah leaders" (Telegraph 2002) and in the Bulloch 2002 description of his propagandistic powers:

his real genius showed through ... whenever anything happened anywhere, somehow the gossip in the bazaars was that Abu Nidal was responsible, or if not him directly, then certainly his men. It was a careful campaign that did more for Abu Nidal than a thousand recruits.

This archetype—with its emphasis on patience and premeditation—is some distance from the sense of urgency associated with the terrorist-as-fighter template, as an anecdote in one Marulanda obituary indicates:

after a long rainy march in the jungle ... Marulanda [was asked] how it was that his boots and pants had no mud stains. "He told me, 'I never take a step without deciding where I am going to step next'" (Bajak 2008).

References to academic interests and achievements further flesh out this figuration. George Habash "graduated from university in 1951, first in class" (Hirst 2008); al-Baghdadi was a scholar, "fascinated with Islamic history and the intricacies of Islamic law" (Warrick 2019); Marulanda, an "avid student of military history and guerrilla warfare" (Bajak 2008); and Prabhakaran possessed, "an apparently natural gift for military strategy" (Times 2009). Whatever the origins, the terrorist, here, is a calculating figure capable of complex deliberation and possessing skills beneficial to the conduct of terrorism. Abu Nidal (Fisher 2002) and al-Zarqawi (Telegraph 2006), for instance, are both described as a "master of disguise." Many others are credited with a considerable capacity for innovation. Thus, Habash is positioned as having "pioneered" the use of airline hijackings, and becoming, "one of those responsible for introducing the world to international terrorism" (Telegraph 2008). Sea-

mus Twomey, "is credited—if that is the word—with the invention of the car bomb" (McKittrick 1989). Marulanda is remembered as "FARC's political and military mastermind" (BBC 2008) responsible for helping "hone the practice of abducting people for ransom" (New York Times 2008). And, Prabhakaran "was credited with having developed ... suicide bombing" (Times 2009), and al-Zarqawi's "macabre" inventiveness helped usher the propaganda of the deed into the digital age: "he staged beheadings of Western hostages ... which were then uploaded to the internet to ensure maximum publicity" (Darwish 2006).

LEADER

The third archetype encountered in these obituaries is of the terrorist-as-leader responsible for the "success" of their organization. Marulanda, for instance, is "the most powerful and resilient guerrilla leader the world had never heard of" (MacLeod 2008). Al-Zarqawi was a "Murderous leader of Islamist terrorists in Iraq who dreamt of surpassing in brutal influence even Osama bin Laden" (Times 2006). Abu Nidal was a Palestinian "resistance leader" (Hirst 2002); George Habash "was best known as the Palestinian leader who adapted modern terrorist tactics as a weapon in the conflict with Israel" (New York Times 2008); and Osama bin Laden was, for supporters, 'a visionary leader' (Burke and Lawrence 2011), who "built the brand [of Al Qaeda] and turned it into a global franchise" (Economist 2011). This hierarchical framing is accentuated, moreover, with the regular description of subordinates as "followers" (e.g., Burke and Lawrence 2011), "supporters" (e.g., Buchan 2011), or, even, "minions" (Times 2006).

References to charismatic authority find prominence within this figuration, too (e.g., Buchan 2011). The "charismatic figure" (Independent 2008) of George Habash, for example, "never commanded more than a thousand or so guerrillas, yet his influence permeated the whole Palestinian movement" (Independent 2008). Prabhakaran, relatedly, "inspired fanatical devotion among his fighters" (Telegraph 2009), "creating an immensely powerful personality cult and a suicide ethos among his fanatically loyal fighters" (Taylor 2009). An ability to maintain internal discipline also finds recurrent mention, from bin Laden's running of Al Qaeda "like a rogue multinational firm ... with subsidiaries ... in dozens of countries" (CNN 2011), to Prabhakaran's forging of the LTTE into "one of the world's most highly disciplined and highly motivated guerrilla forces" (BBC 2009). Indeed, the latter's "autocratic rule" (Farrell 2009) meant that "To oppose him was usually to die" (Times 2009), despite the strict "code of discipline for his cadres: no alcohol, no tobacco, no sex, no life outside the movement" (Times 2009).

This third archetype clearly situates the masculine figure as central to the formation and success of terrorist organizations. The Times (2008) notes that Habash "was the founder, and until 2000, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)." Marulanda "was the founder and senior commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)" (Gunson 2008), responsible for its becoming 'a well-organised and fearsome fighting machine' (O'Shaughnessy 2008). Where bin Laden's leadership took place at a distance—"As a rule he observed from afar as "his boys" blew up the American base at Khobar in Saudi Arabia, or the USS Cole in Yemen" (Economist 2011)—al-Baghdadi is the embodiment of ISIS, which "would come to mirror its leader: a messianic figure drawn to the harshest interpretations of Islamic texts and seized with the conviction that all dissenters should be put

to death” (Warrick 2019). Such leadership attributes are, again, often evident in the formative years of these men: Al-Zarqawi’s youthful incarceration saw him, “soon established himself as the leader of his block” (Times 2006); Marulanda’s rise to prominence “from peasant origins to top commander of Latin America’s largest rebel group” (New York Times 2008), reflected the “qualities of initiative and leadership” (O’Shaughnessy 2008) demonstrated since his youth.

Boy Scouts and Beauties: Situating the (Masculine) Terrorist

The recurrent turn to fighter, strategist, and leader archetypes within media obituaries situates the terrorist as an intrinsically masculine figure by drawing upon longstanding and conventional constructions of masculinity (see, amongst others, Tickner 1992, 3; Shepherd 2006; Carver 2014, 124). Where the figure of the fighter emphasizes physical strength, toughness, aggression, and violence, the strategist positions the terrorist as a calculating, emotionless figure of innovation. In the figure of the leader, finally, authority, organization, decision-making, and the respect of subordinates are emphasized.

These figurations, in conjunction with the masculinized labels and tropes with which we started, have two important implications for our understanding of terrorism and terrorists. In the first instance, they emphasize the importance, the agency, and therefore—because we are dealing with terrorists—the threat posed by these individuals. Stereotypically masculine characteristics such as strength and authority remain widely valorized, notwithstanding ongoing changes in, contestations of, and alternatives to historically dominant expressions of masculinity (Hooper 1998, 30–2; Connell 2005, 260–6). By writing the terrorist within a composite masculinized register, newspaper obituaries contribute to the positioning of terrorists as competent, powerful actors, whereas feminizing their targets as vulnerable or powerless. In so doing, they draw upon and reproduce the post-9/11 writing of terrorism as a significant security threat (Jackson 2005), with readers of these obituaries more likely—if not inevitably—to position themselves as potential victims than protagonists of terrorist violence (see Hall 1991; Hay 1996). This construction of threat is particularly pronounced in depictions of the pitiless barbarity of the terrorist-as-fighter archetype which clearly draws upon racialized and orientalist constructions of the threat posed by racially “other” men capable of heinous and depraved acts of violence (Nayak 2006; Shepherd 2006; Khalid 2011).

Second, and relatedly, this construction also performs an explanatory role in locating the causes of (political) violence within (multiple) manifestations of masculinity. Driven, in part, by the structural norms that guide the obituary’s focus on the biographies of ostensibly significant lives, the genre connects the inclination toward violence to the personality traits and characteristics of its protagonists who act as they do *because of* the men they are. This not only contributes to a widespread “tendency to psychologise social problems” (O’Donnell 2018, 992) such as terrorism and extremism. It also reinforces a traditional, essentialized, connection between masculinity and violence (True 2015, 557–9; Hatton 2022, 426–7), thus militating against alternative understandings thereof while reducing gender to an attribute—to a variable—possessed by individuals rather than a contingent, and historically variable, social configura-

tion. This conceptualization of gender is evident in the frequency with which masculine qualities are traced back to the terrorists’ youth, from Al-Zarqawi’s time as “a hyperactive child and school bully in a rough and dusty Jordanian town” (Times 2006), whose “childhood was characterized by fighting constantly with other boys” (Times 2006) to Abu Nidal “who, as grown man, took terrible, disproportionate revenge on his fellow men for the sufferings of his infancy” (Hirst 2002).

Although the three archetypes contribute to the masculinized construction of terrorism, they are also, importantly, heterogeneous, invoking different conceptions of manliness. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, with work on masculinity and violence often emphasizing the contextually specific existence of multiple masculinities or “models of man” (Tickner 1992, 62; see also Carrigan et al. 1985; Barrett 1996; Hooper 1998, 2001; Connell 2005). Work, such as this, on masculinity’s multiple incarnations is important, as argued above, because it moves us from static to relational conceptions of gender. Masculinity—like all identities—is produced through relations of similarity and difference. And, recognizing the structural, hierarchical, and contingent construction of gender matters, for our analysis, because the archetypes of the fighter, the mastermind and the leader share little common internal content about what it means to be masculine (as a terrorist). They do, however, share a common structural opposition to other gendered identities encountered within these obituaries.

In the first instance, other men mentioned in these obituaries are often situated as feminized counterparts to their primary subjects, augmenting the latter’s masculinity through differentiation. Carlos the Jackal, for example, is infantilized as a “boy scout” in a (premature) obituary of Abu Nidal (Friedman 1986). Marulanda’s manly reserve is contrasted to “the flamboyant lives of rebel colleagues like former Cuban leader Fidel Castro” (MacLeod 2008). Al-Baghdadi as a man of action is contrasted with Bin Laden as a man of words: “This was the scale of purge that Bin Laden and other jihadist pioneers had [only] talked about in fire and brimstone warnings” (Chulov 2019). With the latter’s retirement, indeed, al-Baghdadi’s agency becomes even more palpable:

unlike Osama bin Laden, al-Baghdadi was no recluse. Bin Laden walled himself off from the world in a compound in Pakistan in an effort to avoid detection and operated as a distant manager. Al-Baghdadi, by contrast, was directly involved in some of his group’s most notorious atrocities, including the organized rape of women considered to be nonbelievers (Callimachi and Hassan 2019).

And sexualized language, too, helps communicate the differential masculinity of terrorist figures such as when Al-Zarqawi was able to ignore Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda leadership upon their becoming “isolated and largely impotent” (Times 2006; see also Cohn 1987).

More frequent in these obituaries than juxtaposition with feminized men, though, are distinctions between the masculine terrorists and the feminized women who receive typically brief mention as domestic backdrops to the terrorist’s public life. Abu Nidal, for instance, “married a Nablus woman in 1962 and had a son” (Telegraph 2002); Al-Zarqawi is reported as “taking a second wife” (Times 2006). This female passivity stands in stark contrast to the global agency of their husbands and sons (see also Poloni-Staudinger and Ortals 2014): “When [bin Laden] was four or five his father

divorced his mother and *awarded her* to one of his company executives” (Telegraph 2011, our emphasis); “Bin Laden rented a chocolate-coloured house of three stories, one for each of the wives he had by then *acquired*” (Beyer 2011, our emphasis). Female combatants, even, have their agency reduced, including “the girls [Prabhakaran] ‘cared for’ at his special school in Vanni [who] ... were trained to strap explosive belts underneath their dresses” (Economist 2009) or the obedient “young female guerrilla, Sandra, [who] accompanied [Marulanda] everywhere, and was rumoured to be his wife” (Times 2008). In other instances, we see a physically imposing terrorist contrasted with his spouse’s attractiveness, such that Prabhakaran’s wife was “fiery and beautiful” (Taylor 2009), or the terrorist’s masculine impassiveness contrasted with stereotypically feminine emotionality: “His wife, who first caught [Prabhakaran’s] eye by throwing a bucket of coloured water over him at the Holi festival, burst into terrified tears when she had done it” (Economist 2009).

These depictions of women and feminized men matter because they demonstrate consistency beneath the heterogeneity of the three masculinized roles. The constructions of the fighter, the strategist, and the leader all work via common structural oppositions in which “privileged versions of masculinity feed off contrasts both with alternative masculinities and with an oppositional, feminized ‘other’” (Hutchings 2008, 389). As we have seen, the terrorist’s masculinized qualities—strength/agency/rationality—find their counterpart in traditionally feminine traits—weakness/passivity/emotionality—embodied by a cast of male and female characters in the storying of their lives. In the final part of our analysis, however, we now demonstrate that this opposition—while commonplace and coherent—is neither fixed nor total by exploring two ways in which it is disrupted in these texts. First, is via juxtaposition of the deceased to more masculine figures. Second, is through feminization of the (masculine) terrorist himself. Paying attention to these disruptive moments—obituaries, like all texts, are capable of sustaining competing readings—moves us from the close reading of masculinities above to a more disruptive or unsettling reading aimed at denaturalizing the stability of those constructions (e.g., Campbell 1998, 21–3).

“He Behaved Like a Secretary”: Disrupting the Masculine Terrorist

A first moment of disruption to the heavily masculinized figure of the terrorist is through juxtaposition of the deceased to more masculine figures. Such juxtapositions serve to highlight masculinity’s relationality, with a common theme being the limited martial competence of some of these men (see Barrett 1996). Bin Laden and the other “Arab Afghans,” for instance, experienced ‘a series of humiliations’ in their time in Afghanistan, such that “during one fracas in 1986, the Afghans asked bin Laden to withdraw because his forces were more of a hindrance than a help” (Telegraph 2011). George Habash, relatedly, was “never comfortable in the field” of conflict (Telegraph 2008), whereby:

He was always happier sitting arguing in an office than out with his men in the field—on one occasion he tried to fight with them ... his senior commanders had to tell him that starry-eyed idealism was no substitute for military realism (Independent 2008).

Abu Nidal’s warrior standing is called into question with the suggestion that he “would stand no chance beside the real exploits of the young men and women of Palestine”

(Bulloch 2002). As is Sean MacStiofain’s via differentiation from more authentic comrades with his “laughable Irish accent” and “no Irish ancestry to speak of” (Telegraph 2001). Timothy McVeigh’s obituary, finally, looks back to childhood emasculation through encounter with stronger classmates, including “an incident when some older high school students dangled McVeigh by his feet, trying to stick his head into a flushing toilet” (CNN 2001).

A related form of disruption involves feminization through constructed passivity, weakness, cowardice, and vanity. Such constructions see the dead terrorist’s masculinized aura diminished in various ways, perhaps nowhere more than in the case of bin Laden, who, despite being the “world’s most threatening terrorist ... was also known to submit to dressings down by his mother” (Zernike and Kaufman 2011). Bin Laden’s emasculation is evident in references to his discomfort with weaponry, his looking “unconvincing whenever he handled the Kalashnikov rifle” (Beyer 2011) and to the “reedy voice [which] seemed to belie the warrior image he cultivated” (Zernike and Kaufman 2011). The disconnect between Al-Baghdadi’s sense of self and external projection provides further example such that although “his head was full of lions, unsheathed swords and infidels dying in their own blood, he did not fight. He behaved like a secretary, serving the tea at meetings and fading into the background” (Economist 2019).

Constructions of physical limitations further undermine the composite masculine figure discussed above. Marulanda—a man “not much more than five feet tall” (Times 2008) in one obituary—had been reduced, by the end of life, to ‘a stocky man with ... bags under his eyes [who] squinted into the sunlight’ (New York Times 2008). Abu Nidal, relatedly, is remembered not only as “the world’s most ruthless Palestinian terrorist” (Telegraph 2002), but also in far less fearsome register as ‘a squat balding man with a fearsome temper’ (Telegraph 2002) and “bad stomach ulcers” (Agence France Presse 2002). Velupillai Prabhakaran’s ruthlessness, meanwhile, appears unmatched by any physical endowment, with his “high-pitched voice [and] ... soft demeanour ... [meaning] most people who met him were surprised that such a quietly spoken man could be the feared and brutal leader he was known to be” (Taylor 2009). This “chubby-faced figure” (Times 2009)—his “rotund features” (Farrell 2009) generated by “weaknesses for boiled crab and chocolate” (Telegraph 2009)—was “stocky, soft-spoken and with a pleasant smile, like a middle-order restaurant manager” (Economist 2009).

References to cowardice, although relatively rare, provide further examples of emasculation. Marulanda’s paranoia, for instance, meant he was prepared to risk his female partner’s life for self-preservation: “He was so wary of assassination attempts that he would have his companion, ‘Sandra,’ taste his food to make sure it wasn’t poisoned” (Bajak 2008). Sean MacStiofain’s abandonment of a hunger strike, similarly, was “seen as weakness and effectively meant the end of his [IRA] leadership” of the IRA (McHardy 2001). More common, though, are depictions of passivity or insignificance, with multiple obituaries containing stories of their subjects being *acted upon* by more powerful actors. Al-Zarqawi’s importance as a terrorist, for example, is depicted in a number of obituaries as “greatly exaggerated” (Telegraph 2006); a product, perhaps of ‘a carefully calculated propaganda programme’ (Darwish 2006) by the United States. Habash, Al-Baghdadi and Abu Nidal are all described as having been “hunted” (e.g., Halaby 2008) by more powerful states or being forced to “flee” on others’ terms (e.g., Hirst 2008).

Conclusion

In this article, we offered an original discursive analysis of the obituaries of eleven prominent terrorists across eighty-six mainstream media outlets. These texts, we suggested, represent an important—yet almost entirely neglected—site in which the figure of the terrorist is constructed. Three arguments were made. First, terrorist obituaries overwhelmingly position their subject as a discernibly masculine figure who demonstrates traits and forms relationships that fit comfortably with hegemonic notions of masculinity. Second, and consistent with contemporary theorizing around masculinity, these obituaries also write masculinity in different, yet overlapping ways: as violence and daring in the case of the fighter; as intelligence and inventiveness in the case of the strategist; and as charisma and organizational prowess in the case of the leader. The coherence of the masculinized figure of the terrorist despite this heterogeneity, we suggested, speaks to the relational nature of gender, with endogenous variation in these figures balanced by a common exogenous contrast to constructions of femininity and subordinate masculinities. Third, we also argued that obituaries contain important disruptive moments which move toward problematizing the constructed masculinities around which these stories of dead terrorists are written. Emasculating accounts of terrorists hopeless on the battlefield, anxious under pressure, or derided by their peers all contribute, as we have seen, to representations of failed or subordinate masculinity. In concluding our discussion, we point to the wider contributions to knowledge that follow these arguments.

First, this article has shown the richness of media obituaries as a space to investigate constructions of terrorism, and subsequently wider global phenomena such as violence and gender. Rich in historical and biographical detail, obituaries have value because they communicate and therefore produce the lives and deaths of “terrorists” in fuller (although not necessarily more accurate) ways than typical in media coverage. This granularity, we have shown, enables engagement with the resonance and mobility of specific constructions, offering an expansive discursive site for analyzing depictions and memories of (here) abject figures. Taking the genre seriously, therefore, expands the growing engagement with the banal or everyday in IR; an engagement evident in feminist scholarship and beyond (e.g., Enloe 2011; Nyman 2021). The everyday, as that work has shown, is vital for the (re)production of global politics and (in)security dynamics therein.

Second, the article also contributes to critical scholarship on gender and violence by exploring the former’s importance in the writing of danger and insecurity. Gender relations and norms, we have shown, emerge as vital, even necessary, resources in the storying of men’s lives in this medium, with notions of (hegemonic) masculinity acquiring considerable explanatory importance in efforts to make sense of the lives and actions of these terrorists. At the same time, however, gendered constructions offer a powerful resource for diminishing and thereby desecuritizing the terrorist threat in these texts through emasculation and via reference to more masculine figures. As Sjoberg and Gentry (2007, 205) argue elsewhere, to understand the production of security threats such as terrorism, we must “take account of gender, of gendered stories.” Our article attempts precisely this.

There is, finally, significant scope for future research building on our analysis. As detailed above, our article has focused on the remembrance of men in English language

publications intended, primarily, for Western audiences. Expanding the analysis to news outlets in the Global South, for instance, could therefore facilitate comparative exploration of the importance of geographical, historical, and cultural mnemonic contexts. Research on the writing of female terrorists within media obituaries, similarly, would complement and expand our emphasis on the heterogeneous gendering of violent political actors in this genre.

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