

GENDERED TERRORISM

The Link Between Sex and Organized Violence

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SCHOLARS CITE RELIGION, FOREIGN OCCUPATION, ECONOMIC DESTITUTION, AND LACK OF OPPORTUNITY AS REASONS FOR TERRORISM, BUT GENDER AND MASCULINITY ARE NEARLY ABSENT FROM THE CONVERSATION. DOES MASCULINITY SHAPE THE SOCIETAL STRUCTURES THAT FOSTER TERRORISM? EXAMINING THE TALIBAN IN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN AND THE PROVISIONAL IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY (PIRA) IN NORTHERN IRELAND DEMONSTRATES HOW MASCULINITY ESTABLISHES THE PHYSICAL SPACES THAT RADICALIZE MEN AND EXCLUDE WOMEN. IT IS THE FORCE THAT PROPELS GROUP RADICALIZATION AND TEARS APART SOCIETIES. IN SCHOLARSHIP, MASCULINITY IS OBSCURED BY COLONIALISM AND NATIONALISM, BUT EXAMINING MASCULINITY CLOSER ILLUMINATES SOCIETAL CONSTRUCTIONS THAT HAVE DEEP, VIOLENT, AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES.

INTRODUCTION

The Black Widows of Chechnya, the veiled bombers of Boko Haram, and the San Bernardino wife are all female terrorists burning up web pages, Twitter feeds, and other media outlets. Female terrorists are all the rage because they are breaking gendered assumptions of terrorist identities. While the increasing participation of women in terrorism is worthy of investigation, let us instead pursue the very characteristic of terrorism that makes female entry so notable: its maleness. To understand why female terrorists are apparent aberrations, it is necessary to examine whether terrorism is inherently masculine.

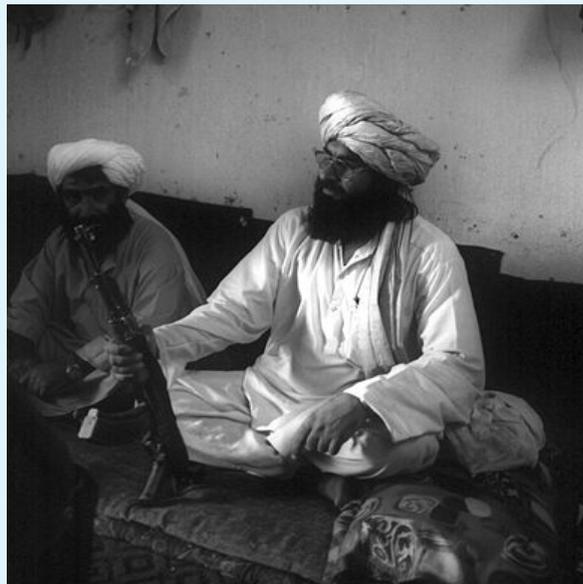
In the fight against terrorism, the West is called upon to save Muslim women. Feminists proselytize about oppressed women, often for good reason. However, the subject of masculinity in the fight against terrorism has been overlooked by the media, scholars, policy makers, and public. Why don't we investigate gender dynamics to understand their implications for terrorism? Examining the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the PIRA in Northern Ireland demonstrates how conceptions of masculinity lay the societal foundations that establish the physical spaces that radicalize men and exclude women—making terrorism an almost exclusively male phenomenon.

Scholars cite religion, foreign occupation, economic destitution, and lack of opportunity as reasons for terrorism. Gender and masculinity are nearly absent from the conversation surrounding terrorism and its causes. Perhaps this lack of an intersection exists because political science issues do not often coincide with sociological or gender studies issues, and thus gender and terrorism have not merged. The media, the public, and most scholars take the maleness of terrorism as a given, but it is time to examine the complexities of maleness and terrorism. First, I will introduce a conceptual understanding of masculinity to establish a foundation for the conversation. Second, to strengthen this argument regarding the importance of masculinity in understanding terrorism and why terrorists radicalize, I will consider the merits of other arguments. Third, I will introduce two cases of terrorist organizations, the Taliban and the PIRA, one a Salafi-jihadi Islamist group and one a primarily Catholic group, to test the theoretical concepts and to arrive at a greater understanding of the role of masculinity in terrorism. Finally, I will conclude with observations of the potential impact of this line of study and hopes for future study of this topic.

CONCEPTUALIZING MASCULINITY IN THE CONTEXT OF TERRORISM

Masculinity is a set of traits related or belonging to the male sex. It is important to note for the purpose of this paper that masculinity is also the set of performed acts that are prescribed to the male gender. This second part of the definition relies heavily on the work of Judith Butler and her idea of “gender performativity,” wherein “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual.”¹ Butler’s inclusion of “ritual” will be especially important in understanding how masculinity aids in radicalization, bonding, and execution of terrorist acts. Peter Jackson’s distinction of “masculinities” over “masculinity” further improves this definition.² His distinction highlights the importance of recognizing the “attendant instabilities and contradictions, rather than assuming a uniform and unitary pattern of masculinity.”³ Acknowledging the enrichment of the definition with Peter Jackson’s distinction, masculinity in the singular will be used throughout this paper for the purpose of ease. This clarification is especially important given the differences in the PIRA and Taliban’s societies and cultures.

Examining masculinity in the framework of terrorism will rely upon work by scholars on the psychological structures within terrorism. Charles L. Ruby conceptualizes two ways



TALIBAN BORDER GUARD IN TURKHAM, AFGHANISTAN
(COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

“[T]errorism aims to reconstruct masculinity in a circumstance in which men feel it has been taken away.”

of examining the terrorist “mindset.”⁴ First, the “psychodynamic model” approaches a terrorist from the perspective that their actions are a “result of defects or disorders in one’s personality structure.”⁵ Ruby conceptualizes the second approach to a terrorist as examining behavior for the purpose of political violence. While terroristic scholarship generally preferences the latter approach, the former model should be considered and amended. Terrorism cannot be attributed entirely to mental defects or illness, but examining the psychological component of masculinity and gender performativity is enlightening. Ruby further relates the psychodynamic model to the defects of family, but attention should be turned to outward social webs and not to inward family dynamics. For example, kinship networks are shown to aid in the recruitment and radicalization of terrorists, but friendship bonds demonstrate an expansion of powerful commonalities in radicalization narratives. Another scholar, Jerrold Post, offers the view that terrorists develop out of “negative childhood experiences and a damaged sense of self.”⁶ Post seems to postulate a negative starting point for terrorists. Instead, let us conceptualize the appeal of terrorism as a way to achieve greater purpose or status in life.⁷ This model of self-improvement is especially important because terrorism offers community and a path paved by masculine models. Both models asserted by Ruby examine the terrorist on the individual level. It is important to understand masculinity on the individual psychological level, but the flaw in Ruby’s argument is that masculinity is built upon group dynamic and mentality. Masculinity cannot be invoked in a vacuum.

If masculinity is an important organizing principle for terrorism and a critical component of the radicalization process, then why are there female terrorists? Although there are female terrorists, their presence and attacks are largely overemphasized and sensationalized due to their rarity. According to the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, between 1982 and 2016, 2,552 terrorist attacks with a known gender of the attacker were perpetrated.⁸ Male terrorists committed 2,335 of these attacks while women carried out 217 of these attacks.⁹ This translates to percentages of 91.5% of attacks by male terrorists as compared to 8.5% of attacks by female terrorists. Female terrorists do not represent a negligible percentage, but male terrorists have historically committed most attacks.

Masculinity is a causal mechanism for the independent variable of colonialism and the dependent variable of terrorism. Frantz Fanon argues that “political resistance, both in its spontaneous and organized forms, is often founded upon a reconstruction of masculinism and a restructuring of gender relations within native society.”¹⁰ This is an important argument in understanding terrorism and political violence because terrorism aims to reconstruct masculinity in a circumstance in which men feel it has been taken away. Fanon pays particular attention to this triangulated relationship between colonialism, masculinity, and political violence. Like Fanon, scholars cite occupation and colonialism as causes for terrorism. This makes sense, especially if you take masculinity into account. Colonialism emasculates men and their identities.

Men engage in political violence to assert agency, reaffirm their masculinity, and establish political identity. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks notes that:

historians have shown how the dominant discourse on masculinity affected the formulation of colonial policy, shaped nationalist politics and ideology and determined the status of native women and their rights. However, these two observations about the presence of masculinism in national liberation movements and the politics of masculinity in the shaping of colonial ideology have not been analyzed together as related phenomena in a satisfactory way.¹¹

Frantz Fanon considers colonization as a process of “depersonalization,” and it is in trying to regenerate gendered identity that masculine terrorism should be considered.¹² Seshadri-Crooks further remarks that “what is important to note here is that a politics around masculinity emerges as the crux of colonial domination to deny the specifically gendered values of native subjectivity.”¹³ Gender is critical to the intersection and understanding of colonialism, nationalism, and political violence.

I will argue that masculinity is a key component in understanding terrorism and in linking waves and changes over time; masculinity remains constant. Terrorism scholar Marc Sageman eschews commonly held beliefs that terrorism is caused by brainwashing, religion, or mental illness.

Regarding religion, Sageman points out that, “the majority of terrorists come to their religious beliefs through self-instruction...often, they have not started reading the Quran seriously until they are in prison, because then it is provided to them and they have lots of time to read it.”¹⁴ Additionally, he argues there is no formidable link between a strong Muslim upbringing and terrorism later in life.¹⁵ So, if it is not scripture that initially attracts terrorists to terrorism, then what does? It must instead be the community, friendship, and the masculine bond that initially attracts men, and then radicalizes them.

Sageman refutes the argument about the relationship between terrorism and sex, calling it a “dead end.”¹⁶ It is accurate for him to assert that this argument has no foundation, but he fails to consider gender, and not sex, as having a relational impact. For example, Sageman discusses the Hamburg cell responsible for 9/11 quite extensively. He refers to them as “a bunch of guys” and says that they aided in each other’s self-radicalization.¹⁷ Group-radicalization was their stepping stone into al-Qaeda. Sageman says, “the groups who came to Afghan training camps were in search of thrills, fame, and glory...they wanted to impress their friends. In a sense, it was a constant, mutual self-recruiting atmosphere, and there was no need for an outside recruiter.”¹⁸ Strength and masculinity are the foundation of this atmosphere; these men sought male role models in al-Qaeda heroes. Sageman further characterizes it as, “a collective process...it was a group adventure” and one that was distinctly masculine.¹⁹

If masculinity is so important, what about Marxist-Leninist groups who eschew social inequality and promote gender equality? Gender equality was a false promise of the Weather Underground group as seen in the group’s policies about sex. The Weatherman claimed that they “challenged the normative order of bourgeois society” by subverting the sexual practices of a heteronormative, sexist society. The “Weather Bureau” “ordered that all female revolutionaries sleep with all male revolutionaries, and vice versa.”²⁰ This may seem equalizing, but the policy in which “women were also to make love to each other” does not. Men were not made to have sex with each other. Same-sex relations were unequally distributed – a double standard in the subversion of heteronormative standards.

EMASCULATED, COLONIAL PAKISTANI MEN, AND THE TALIBAN

The Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan demonstrates the impact of societal masculine structures, such as colonial legacy, madrassas, and male political spaces on terrorist activity. A secondary purpose of this case study will examine the breadth and depth that colonial legacy must have to influence terrorism. Dr. Maleeha Aslam composed a study of masculinity in Pakistani male populations. Her study sought three objectives: 1) “documenting subjective interpretation of the masculine gender within a Pakistani context” 2) “documenting potential reactionary behaviors of socially and economically incompetent or otherwise troubled men” and 3) “probing the nexus between cultural ideals of masculinity and one’s tendency to opt for militant-jihadist Islamism or terrorism.”²¹ I will use this study to determine the role and effectiveness of masculinity in perpetuating terrorism.

Pakistan has a colonial past, but not one that was always steeped in conflict. There is a “culture of protest” and political participation in Pakistan that transcends age and class lines.²² British colonialism feminized Pakistani men and characterized them as weak, Asian bodies.²³ This legacy continued with the Zia regime and the incorporation of Islam in official capacities.²⁴ Aslam notes in the background of her study that, “When the ‘feminine’ divine attributes of beauty, mercy and compassion are crushed in psycho-cultural-theological consciousness, the product one ends up with is ‘the Taliban’.”²⁵ Did the Taliban use the colonial feminization of its Muslim men to regain independence, agency, and identity through gendered political violence?

Osama bin Laden and the founders of al Qaeda stationed themselves in Peshawar, and today the Taliban continues to carve itself the dominant political position in Pakistan.

Colonial foreign occupation does not automatically lead to anger and political dissonance. Aslam analyzes this process saying,:

socially trivialized men experience phases of frustration and discontent that move them towards undertaking actions that are assumed and portrayed as potentially significant tools for regaining self-worth and masculine efficacy. To achieve this objective, Muslim men use militant Islamism, terrorism and suicide bombings.²⁶

In response to 9/11 and the United States' War on Terror, in particular, "Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan," there was greater antagonism towards the U.S. and more support for the Taliban in Pakistan.²⁷ Perhaps to the Taliban and would-be supporters, the War on Terror resembled a second colonialist influence. Pakistani youth helped to foment a culture of political opposition and protest.²⁸ After the state emergency in 2007, the legacy of student participation bifurcated. As Mullick notes:

[T]oday, two main ideologies dominate student activism and, subsequently, political dissent in Pakistan. The constitutionalists are fighting for the rule of law and freedom of speech through a democratic and, so far, peaceful modus operandi. The Islamists are split disproportionately between a small number that still believe in parliamentary democracy and a large number increasingly inclined toward abetting, or worse, joining militant organizations loosely connected to the Pakistani Taliban.²⁹

So, what could help predict, determine, or sway the path so that the youth would not join terrorist organizations?

The Taliban plays upon the domestic crises in Afghanistan and Pakistan to expand its control. This split between pro-democracy and pro-military Islamist student protest presents an opportunity for counterterrorism because it offers a place to turn the tide against political violence. What would be the factors that would tend to trend students in one way or the other? As Robert Reilly noted, "the last time Afghanistan found itself in chaos, it was the Taliban, with Pakistani sponsorship, that emerged as the basis for that community."³⁰ The U.S. failed with the war in Afghanistan because it was a war of ideas and founded on the premise that "whoever wins the argument for justice wins the war of ideas and, concomitantly, the support of the people."³¹ The Taliban won people with its gendered, masculine tactics, in contrast to the American emasculating, colonialist initiative.

The Taliban exploits the ability for Islam to unify people across borders in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Those who joined the Taliban joined as a reaction to the United States' foreign occupation and emasculating colonialism.

The masculine nature of the Taliban parallels an image in the history of "the wandering talib band of exuberant young Pashtun men in the mid-twentieth century".³² Pervez Amirali Hoodbhov claims that "the suicide bomber

and the masked abductor have crippled Pakistan's urban life and shattered its national economy."³³ He also says that "the bearded ones, many operating out of madrassas, are hitting targets across the county. Although a substantial part of the Pakistani public insists upon lionizing them as 'standing up to the Americans', they are neither seeking to evict a foreign occupier nor fighting for a homeland. They want nothing less than to seize power, and to turn Pakistan into their version of the ideal Islamic state."³⁴

This characterization of the goals of the Taliban are significant in light of developments that the Islamic State is attempting to form an Islamic caliphate. What is most interesting in this, however, is the inclusion of madrassas and the assumption of a fight against Americans. Fighting against Americans is a frequent rallying cry for the Taliban and a secondary incarnation of fighting against Western colonial power. Madrassas are frequently blamed in much of the writing about the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Madrassas can be as broadly defined as Islamic religious schools or as narrowly defined as schools that inculcate their students with Salafi-jihadi Islamism. As one article described, "the madrassas in Pakistan shut off all scientific inquiry from the Afghan children, turned their ears only to the battle cry of jihad, and drove them to kill all infidels and be killed in the process."³⁵ This is a mischaracterization of both the role and the scope of madrassas. To blame terrorism on the madrassas is casting too broad of a stroke. While the empirics of madrassa-educated terrorists is not causal, they should be examined as something besides just "religious brainwashing." For instance, madrassas could influence terrorism through friendship bonds and the way in which cultural lessons of masculinity are learned in a radicalized, group method.

Madrassas influenced the Taliban through the hyper-masculine environment they fostered, not solely because of the religious teachings. In *The Looming Tower*, Lawrence Wright identifies three "streams" that fed into the Taliban: foreign money, madrassas, and opium. The most important of these, in the lens of masculinity, is the madrassas feeding into the Taliban. Many of the madrassas were instituted to accommodate the three million Afghan refugees.³⁶ There was no adequate public school system that could educate them and the Pakistani children. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia supported these madrassas and served the secondary purpose of scouring political support for Wahhabis.³⁷ These madrassas were more than just schools – they were an occupation for the students because they were residential, the students received a stipend, and

as Wright notes, they were “a vital source of support for many of these students’ families.”³⁸ So did these madrassas just inculcate the students and make them terrorists? No, but they provided an isolating, hyper-masculine environment to foster radicalization. Wright notes:

these boys had grown up in an exclusively male world, separated from their families for long periods of time... they were stigmatized as beggars and sissies, and often preyed upon by men who were isolated from women. Trenched in their studies, which were rigidly concentrated on the Quran and Sharia and the glorification of jihad, the talibs imagined a perfect Islamic society, while lawlessness and barbarity ran rampant all around them. They lived in the shadow of their fathers and older brothers, who had brought down the mighty superpower, and they were eager to gain glory for themselves.³⁹

The description of the madrassas is steeped in masculinity, and this hyper-masculine environment aids in the radicalization of men.

So what if the link between terrorism and masculinity is more of a link with the colonial emasculation of the native population? It is valuable to identify emasculation as a causal mechanism between the independent variable of colonialism and the dependent variable of terrorism. Masculinity should be examined in the study of terrorism because it is the crucial causal link that so often is the foundation of terrorist ideologies.

IRISH MALE WARRIORS AND THE WOMEN THEY LEFT BEHIND

The case of Northern Ireland demonstrates how masculinity defines the spaces where men are allowed and women are not. These spaces are carved out by masculinity for the purpose of political and, in this case, nationalist goals. Masculinity helps individuals get to the point of radicalization, but it fails in totally achieving stated goals because it undermines the fabric of society.

The period of conflict, referred to as the Troubles, pulled apart Northern Irish society in the late 20th century. The conflict between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its outgrowths, most notably the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), against the United Kingdom and its loyalist groups was largely viewed as a struggle over religion and nationalism. Absent in this understanding of the conflict

is the way in which space was carved for gender in order to achieve political goals. The case of Northern Ireland demonstrates how terrorism can disrupt the societal foundations terrorists painstakingly try to maintain.

Masculinity attempts to reestablish order upon a society. However, by engaging in this reestablishment of order through terrorism, the society is disrupted further. While these disruptions may be intentional and lead to the attainment of some strategic goals, there can be immediate and long-lasting implications of the terrorist conflict. For example, in Northern Ireland, the families of terrorists were often impacted more and for longer periods of time than the terrorists themselves. This observation is interesting because a key tenet of masculinity is securing strong family units because they are the foundation of a society. However, terrorists abandoned protection of the family units to achieve nationalist goals. This is a failure of masculine pursuits of terrorism because nationalism and familial goals are both significant to sustaining masculinity, yet one is often achieved or pursued to the detriment of another. For example, a former member of the IRA gave an interview in which he described a female informant who was not sentenced to death because she was a mother. He said, “A man most certainly would have been executed. But the IRA see being a mum as the most important role to the struggle.”⁴⁰ A key part of masculinity is defining roles for men and women in society. Lorraine Dowler observed from interviews that “women who become soldiers tend to lose their identities as mothers within this community.”⁴¹ Women are not permitted to be both. The ‘warrior’ political space is reserved for men.

Second, with expectations of masculinity come expectations of femininity; society expects women to fulfill complementary roles to men for the achievement of societal goals. For example, a woman from Belfast described the downsides of her husband’s involvement in the Troubles. She said, “I haven’t seen my husband in 14 years. He’s on the run. He had to leave the North because he is wanted here and he is also wanted in the Free State.”⁴² While women’s responsibilities included “fighting for the sanctity of the hearth”⁴³ and maintaining the order of the domestic sphere, this was often taken too far and served to persecute them – even to the extent of endangering the nationalist project because it destabilized society. As Róisín noted:

We can’t all be moving around the world...If he had just gone to prison he would have been out by now. My chil-

“One of the chief grievances of terrorists is that they have been systematically excluded from the political arena, and this has emasculated them.”

dren could have visited him. He didn't want to go to prison. Said it was his duty to stay on the outside. Well then, why do I feel like I'm in prison?⁴⁴

This interview, conducted by Lorraine Dowler, surfaces another consideration that terrorism wreaks upon societies, men become absentee members of society. This seems to be an especially important issue in relation to frequent suicide bombers.

Suicide bombers and other terrorist attacks concentrated within communities can entirely destabilize the social order. Another woman from Belfast described the generational impact of the Troubles. She said:

I've been going to that prison for my whole life, first to visit me da, then to visit my husband, then to see me daughter, that was hard because I had her young'uns while she was in Armagh. Now my grandson is in The Kesh. I've been in the prison for each generation of my family.⁴⁵

Terrorist activities can make absent whole demographics of a society. Men peddle the image of women as the sup-



A REPUBLICAN WALL MURAL IN COALISLAND, COUNTY TYRONE (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

porters of warriors, but based on these women's statements, they see themselves as inmates, not warriors.⁴⁶ Terrorism is a disease on society and an imprisoner of women. However, these interviews also provide a resurgent narrative wherein women provide a stabilizing, assertive influence on society. Masculinity plays a key role in defining the roles of men and reasserts family as the foundational unit of society. Men are supposed to be the heads of their families, but if they are dead or imprisoned as a result of terrorism, this undermines their own stated goals the fabric of society for generations.

CONCLUSION

For the terrorist organizations with Salafi-jihadist Islamist ideology, does this societal disruption occur as a result of their broader misogynist culture? This is an important component of terrorism and it contributes to the perception of masculinity in society. However, there is a difference between the masculinity in society and the operationalization of masculinity for organizational purposes as seen in the madrassas, for example. One could also argue that there are more male terrorists because politics is generally, and specifically in the cases presented, a male sphere and not because of 'masculinity.' I argue that this proves the argument of this paper because in order to enter the political sphere, a man has to prove his masculinity. One of the chief grievances of terrorists is that they have been systematically excluded from the political arena, and this has emasculated them. Their goal is the reentrance, reclamation, and expulsion of foreign forces – not just from physical land but also from their ideological, political space.

Why is this argument about masculinity and terrorism relevant to political science? Masculinity serves as an impetus for political violence. Masculinity helps shape and form terrorist organizations and the bonds between individual terrorists. Terrorism scholars study the emotional responses of the victimized public, but largely eschew the emotions of terrorists. This is most likely due to the fact that the irrationality and emotionality have been disproven as causes of terrorism. While this is a productive

movement in the field of terrorism scholarship, masculinity needs to be understood as an organizing principle, and a performative concept, it directly affects behavior.

Lately, with discussions about counterterrorism strategies for Salafi-jihadist Islamist groups, there is concern that military defeat of an organization will not result in its complete destruction because physical defeat is not equivalent to ideological defeat. Ideologies can be defeated by attacking what maintains and sustains it: gender and masculinity. Aslam argues that counterterrorism strategies are “gender-deficient,” and this appears accurate.⁴⁷ Beyond identifying and attacking the gendered components of terrorism, what can be done to structurally improve them?

This paper began by questioning the extent to which masculinity shapes the societal structures that foster terrorism. The case of the Taliban demonstrated that this was true because colonial emasculation laid a foundation for political precedent and action. The establishment of madrassas that fed students into the Taliban furthered this historical emasculation and political participation. These madrassas are notable not because of the religious radicalization that they engendered but because for many young men, they provided an all-male environment, apart from their families. This environment spurred not only religious radicalization, but also a radicalization of male behavior and beliefs. The second case from Northern Ireland demonstrated that masculinity helped define goals of terrorism such as establishing patriarchy and nationalism, but that the pursuit of goals undermined their intentions. What is clear in these two cases is that identifying the causes of terrorism based on religious and nationalist reasons is too oblique. It is important to understand that masculinity establishes the foundations upon which terrorism is both rationalized and enacted.

Masculinity helps tie together the individual and organizational levels of terrorism because they are inextricably linked. Examining terrorism in this way begs for individual psychological approaches paired with understandings of the group dynamic. Terrorism is tragic, but it is too often characterized as irrational and exclusively political. Marking masculinity as a causal mechanism of terrorism brings us closer to understanding terrorism so that we can find the right policies to counter it.

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