

(En)Gendering Violence: Masculinity and the Fight for U.S. Airstrikes on Syria

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Abstract: From March 2011, when protests first shook Syria, to September 2014, when Obama launched an air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS), those who supported American intervention into the Syrian Civil War commonly employed gendered language and rhetoric. Two tropes were most widely used: first, that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and ISIS needed to be “civilized” through masculine domination; and second, that Obama was weak and effeminate for not pursuing an aggressive foreign policy approach. In the academic field of feminist international relations today, much of the existing scholarship centers around the American invasion of Iraq in 2001, which was similarly characterized by extremely gendered rhetoric. This paper builds on that existing research and uses around three years of news articles, op-eds, and letters to the editor published in the New York Times to argue that the rhetoric of military intervention into Syria was mired in harmful gendered tropes and stereotypes.

“You just think how lame you’d be ... suppose I had let a million people, two million people be refugees out of Kosovo, a couple hundred thousand people die, and they say, ‘You could have stopped this by dropping a few bombs. Why didn’t you do it?’ And I say, ‘because the House of Representatives voted 75 percent against it?’ You look like a total wuss, and you would be.”

— former President Bill Clinton, criticizing then President Barack Obama at a McCain Institute event on June 11, 2013 (Rodin, 2013)

At the time of those stinging words, two years had passed since protests had erupted in the southern Syrian city of Daraa, catalyzing first a wave of demonstrations across the country, then a violent crackdown ordered by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (The Associated Press, 2019). The small Middle Eastern country, nestled by the Mediterranean Sea, had for months been engulfed in a civil war — one that has since claimed nearly 400,000 lives and displaced over half of the population (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2021). And in the summer of 2013, President Barack Obama had yet to militarily intervene. Other than freezing Syrian government assets, the United States had kept its hands out of the conflict. Obama had marked as a “red line,” a year ago, the use of chemical weapons by Assad’s government (The Associated Press, 2019). It would be another two months after Clinton’s speech before the U.S. would first receive proof that the Syrian government had fired sarin-loaded missiles into civilian residential areas, but even then, Obama would be widely criticized for remaining hesitant on launching strikes against Assad’s regime. Hence, Clinton’s famous designation of the president as: “a total wuss.”

Though the remark was brushed off by many as a joking stab from a former president to a sitting one, the implicit, unsaid words that made “wuss” Clinton’s insult of choice unveil the gendered language of politics and international relations at that time. A study published on gender-linked derogatory terms in 1998 found that for 90 percent of people, the instant image evoked by the insult “wuss” was men and that the term fell under an umbrella of insults used to imply that a man is “weak in character,” “like a woman” or “homosexual” (James, 1998, p. 2, 5). For many men in the study, being likened to women was considered the worst insult that they could receive, reflecting the need for men to be “competent masters of every situation” (James, 1998, p. 8). Given that international relations is a field not only dominated by men, but also steeped in gender norms and ideas, Clinton’s use of the word “wuss” in criticizing what he considered to be weakness in the Obama administration is unsurprising. This influence of gender prejudices on foreign policy was first documented by feminist scholar J. Ann Tickner in *Gender in International Relations*, the 1992 book that carved out the contours of feminist international relations. In it, she writes that “[c]haracteristics associated with ‘manliness,’ such as toughness, courage, power, independence, and even physical strength, have, throughout history, been those most valued in the conduct of politics ... manliness has also been associated with violence and the use of force ... [which] has been valorized and applauded in the name of defending one’s

country” when used in the international sphere (p. 6). Clinton’s pointed insult embodies this criticism perfectly; his advocacy for heightened aggression and violence against the Syrian government was centered around pointing out Obama’s weakness and threatening his masculinity.

From March 2011, when protests first shook Syria, to September 2014, when Obama launched an air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS), those who supported American intervention into the Syrian Civil War commonly employed gendered language and rhetoric like Clinton’s. In this paper, I identify two tropes that were most widely used: first, that Assad and ISIS needed to be “civilized” through masculine domination; and second, that Obama was weak and unmasculine for not pursuing an aggressive foreign policy approach.

In the academic field of feminist international relations today, much of the existing scholarship centers around the American invasion of Iraq in 2001, which was similarly characterized by extremely gendered rhetoric — President Bush’s adopted persona of a “cowboy,” for example, evoked images of wild, powerful masculinity embodied by the rogue stars of the Wild West (Christensen and Ferree, 2014, p. 2). Since there is presently little research about the Syrian Civil War in this context, this paper borrows extensively from the conversation around the Iraq War, applying scholars’ analysis and work to the neighboring country. The bridging of the Iraq War to the Syrian Civil War is also interesting because the former, which was widely dubbed a failure for the U.S., led to a new generation of politicians and Americans deeply suspicious of entrapment in foreign conflicts. Those who debated intervention into Syria thus found themselves haunted by the shadow of Iraq — there was always the fear of repeating history. I argue in this paper that although this fear somewhat tempered the aggressive, gendered rhetoric used to support American intervention into Syria, the minority of people who did advocate for air strikes and military support for the Syrian rebels still employed much of the same gendered language that had been used a decade earlier. Because of the unique histories and conditions of each conflict, I do not wish to overly flatten or simplify the similarities between Syria and Iraq; however, the deep scholarship on the Iraq War is certainly helpful for identifying trends in the language of international relations, particularly regarding the Middle East.

In this paper, my analysis will draw on direct quotes from approximately three years of news articles, op-eds, and letters to the editor published in the New York Times (NYT) about the Syrian conflict. Though evidently a qualitative rather than statistical analysis, I aim to present evidence of gendered tropes that have been used by both reporters and public figures in talking about the civil war. The quotes take place between March 2011 and September 2014 to cover the entirety of the political build-up to Obama’s decision to launch the first of many airstrikes in Syria, but gendered rhetoric of course continued past that point in conversations about increasing aggression even further. And although the quotes analyzed here draw only from the New York Times (NYT), sociologists Wendy M. Christensen and Myra Marx Ferree’s statistical analysis of media during the Iraq invasion found that media across the political spectrum were relatively

equally likely to use gendered language; they only differed on “the meaning given to gender and how it was used to legitimate or discredit each point of view” (Christensen and Ferree, 2014, p. 295). This paper’s findings should consequently not discount that other media sources also utilized similar tropes regardless of their stances on American intervention into Syria, and further research encompassing a wider time frame and range of sources is invited.

The Civilizing White Man

“Surely Miliband must realize that Western values, thought processes and decision making are conspicuous by their absence in this corner of the woods. His first precondition calls for the Syrian government and the rebel groups to adhere to international laws and norms, and is followed by other related preconditions. While to Western minds, such requirements are reasonable and logical, they are totally foreign in this area of conflict.”

— Michael Dorian Goldberg, writing in a letter to the editor published in the NYT on July 16, 2013

Western minds are “reasonable” and “logical.” In “this corner of the woods,” namely the Syrian government, those values and characteristics are “totally foreign.” *Surely*, we must all recognize this, Goldberg writes, and the roll of his eyes is almost palpable behind his words. Michael Dorian Goldberg is just a normal reader of the NYT. The only further identification under his letter to the editor was that he was writing from Israel — but the “nobodyness” of this author reveals how deeply gendered and racialized tropes were entrenched in the Western public consciousness. Syrians like Assad were hopeless: the U.S. could not rely on them to be “reasonable,” to be “logical,” to “adhere to international laws and norms.” The only option left is unsaid: civilizing them through Western force.

Almost a decade before Goldberg published his letter, feminist legal scholar Nancy Ehrenreich wrote in her paper, “Disguising Empire: Racialized Masculinity and the Civilizing of Iraq,” about then-President Bush’s construction of a “racialized masculinity” — the identification of the public to a masculinized nation-state whose masculinity is associated with the domination of people of color. During the Iraq War, Bush’s consistent classification of Iraq as a “rogue state” and the U.S. as the leader of the “civilized world” added to a long history of the West constructing itself as a generous power needed to protect the world from savagery or barbarism. Ehrenreich argues that the racialization of Iraqis and Muslims as backwards and uncivilized enabled American imperialism to paint itself as civilizing and beneficent, and that “dominant American norms of masculinity help to make ‘civilizing’ missions like Gulf War II both believable and appealing to many Americans” (Ehrenreich, 2005, p. 7). The message was that the white man and his pure, valiant masculinity are needed to tame the lesser, more corrupt Iraqi man. America embodied “good” masculinity, Iraq “bad.”

Years later, supporters of American military intervention into Syria again borrowed from these same gendered and racialized tropes to portray Assad and his government as savage, barbaric and needing to be civilized. Some government officials, speaking anonymously, even admitted to purposefully using this rhetoric to provoke the Syrian leader. According to one article from April 2011, “[a]dministration officials say that while they lack many effective economic tools, they believe Mr. Assad is sensitive to portrayals of his regime as brutal and backward. ‘He sees himself as a Westernized leader,’ one senior administration official said, ‘and we think he’ll react if he believes he is being lumped in with brutal dictators’” (Sanger, 2011). Despite cultural differences, Western conceptions of masculinity followed where Western power led, spilling even into the Middle East.

The words used to describe the Syrian regime, whether strategically or subconsciously selected, revived this “racialized masculinity” of the U.S. that had last been built during the Iraq War. Gendered and racialized language portrayed the Syrian president as “backwards” and “uncivilized,” playing into tropes of the “white man’s burden” that have long been used to garner support for Western imperialism and colonialism. Assad’s crackdowns were described as “savagery born of desperation” (Khoury, 2011) and a “savage assault upon his own people” (Baty, 2013). Debates circled around the idea of saving the Middle East from itself: Op-ed political and cultural columnist David Brooks called the Syrian government a “depraved regime,” writing that

“[f]or 30 years, diplomats and technocrats have flown to Damascus in the hopes of ‘flipping’ Syria — turning it into a pro-Western, civilized power ... Perhaps some of them were so besotted with their messianic abilities that they thought they had the power to turn a depraved regime into a normal regime. Perhaps some of them were so wedded to the materialistic mind-set that they thought a regime’s essential nature could be altered with a magical mix of incentives and disincentives” (Brooks, 2011).

This quote perfectly encapsulates the ways in which “Western” and “civilized” were seen as synonymous. “Depravity,” in contrast, was seen as an “essential” part of the Syrian government’s, perhaps even the Syrian people’s, nature. Intervention into Syria was constructed as necessary, even generous: Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney argued that “America must show leadership on the world stage and work to move these developing nations toward modernity” (Parker, 2011). Journalist Clemens Wergin wrote that unless America stepped in, the leadership vacuum would be filled by “rogue actors like Al Qaeda, Hezbollah and Iran — and not only in Syria,” implying that Western forces are needed to stabilize and help the Middle East because regional actors are too barbaric and savage (Wergin, 2014). These words underscore a conception of American masculinity as the savior: the white man is more civilized, moral and courageous than the Syrian man, and must thus offer him aid and lead him into modernity.

The history of this rhetoric is deep and extensive: Rudyard Kipling's notorious poem "The White Man's Burden," which urged the U.S. to inherit the European "burden" of conquering and civilizing other lands, was itself inspired by America's seizure of Guam, Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines — the latter of which suffered a campaign of "benevolent assimilation" under former President McKinley that killed 16,000 Filipino soldiers and approximately 200,000 civilians (Höglund, 2007). Here, America's intervention into Syria is again portrayed as "benevolent," a generous act to save the Syrian people and the Middle East, despite the violence and death that it would inevitably cause. The word "savage" has also been consistently used to justify colonialism and suppression of Indigenous populations by portraying them as subhuman and "degenerate," and thus requiring "administration and instruction" (Harding, 2005, p. 1). These "civilizing missions" are also highly gendered; Tickner writes that "colonial people were often described in terms that drew on characteristics associated with women to place them lower in a hierarchy that put their white male colonizers on top" (Tickner, 1992, p. 48). Gendered language is, then, inseparable from America's history of imperialism.

America's "racialized masculinity" was also built through the rhetoric of the Syrian "thug." An anonymous editorial in the New York Times referred to the Syrian government as "the Syrian leader and his thugs" and "Mr. Assad and his henchmen," and another said that Assad was "sending his troops and thugs to murder anyone who has the courage to demand political freedom." Even Secretary of State John Kerry, in a speech about the use of chemical weapons in Syria, called Assad a "a thug and a murderer" (Kerry, 2013). The word "thug" is deeply racialized and gendered: in America, it is often used as "coded language" that "draw[s] on past racial stereotypes and myths," particularly of Black people (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016, p.6-7). The term reinforces an idea of criminality, savagery and brutality, a characterization of Black men as almost *overly* masculine — according to Columbia English professor John McWhorter, "thug today is a nominally polite way of using the N-word" (McWhorter, 2015). Historically, the term has also been used to posthumously describe Black people killed by police officers in order to demonize them, justifying the violence and aggression that had been used against them (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016, p. 2); if the narrative is that Black men are hypermasculine, then it is easier to rationalize masculine retaliation, through violence and power, against them. When used to describe the Syrian government, "thug" similarly evokes explicit and implicit conceptions of race and gender that aid advocates in justifying increased force against the Assad regime. The implication is that the Syrian government is inherently criminal and brutal, necessitating greater violence to combat it. Pro-intervention advocates' co-option of these language patterns echoes the rhetoric of Iraq, past imperialism and colonialism, and current institutional racism, reconstructing America's new "racialized masculinity." The argument, to many, was that the civilized Western man was needed to save Syria from itself.

Obama the "Wuss," Bush the "Protector"

*“Obama is now being taken to task by those who say that he is soft ...
Obama is seen as weak, hesitant and vacillating.”*

— Amos Harel, a military analyst writing in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz on September 1, 2013

Dogged by fears of repeating the mistakes of his predecessor, Obama initially approached the conflict in Syria with caution. In 2011, the New York Times reported that “[t]he Obama administration [was] determined to avoid a repeat of the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq,” hesitant to intervene and hoping that the conflict would resolve itself without the U.S. “orchestrat[ing] the outcome” (Cooper, 2011). From the start, pro-intervention advocates had criticized this hesitance as weak. But especially after Obama refused to launch airstrikes even after receiving proof that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons against its own civilians, the previously-established “red line” for American retaliation, that criticism reached new heights. The rhetoric of weakness and hesitancy employed by critics reflects Tickner’s claim that in international relations, “the rationale for fighting wars is presented in gendered terms such as the necessity of standing up to aggression rather than being pushed around or appearing to be a sissy or a wimp” (Tickner, 1992, p. 47). By using gendered language, supporters of military intervention targeted the president’s masculinity, artificially conflating rationality and an unwillingness to get involved in foreign conflicts with feminine fear and weakness.

One such strategy was to underscore the masculine role of “protector” and Obama’s supposed failure to fulfill it. During the first few years of the Syrian Civil War, politicians debated the foreign policy principle known as R2P: the “right to protect,” a U.S.-endorsed “2005 United Nations initiative that calls on countries to intervene to prevent genocide and other mass atrocities” (Landler, 2013). The idea of the U.S. taking on a protector-role is not new; writing on the Iraq War, political theorist and socialist feminist Iris Marion Young argued in her paper, “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State,” that exploiting the “masculine role of protector in relation to women and children” makes it easy to build a “security state that wages war abroad and expects obedience and loyalty at home” (Young, 2003, p. 2). Though Young’s theory poses the U.S. as protector of Americans at home rather than civilians abroad, her analysis of how the masculine conception of being a “protector” legitimates both domestic authoritarianism and international aggression still applies. The Bush administration, in using the language of fear and threat, justified the violent invasion of Iraq and gained widespread support for restrictions of liberty such as the Patriot Act (Young, 2003, p. 3). Similarly, the logic of R2P justifies military intervention abroad in the name of protecting innocent civilians, particularly the often pointedly named “women and children.” People like Richard S. Williamson, a foreign-policy adviser to Mitt Romney, were consequently able to take advantage of this rhetoric by claiming that “‘R2P [was] ... struggling,’ in part because of the administration’s unwillingness to do more about Syria” (Landler, 2013). By implying that

Obama was shedding his masculine role of “protector,” Williamson indicts his leadership and strength.

Critics also focused on two additional choices that made Obama the target of “weakness” assertions: not keeping his word on retaliating if the “red line” of chemical weapons usage was crossed and seeking Congressional approval for launching airstrikes. Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former case officer in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), wrote that “President Obama may not believe that Middle Eastern conflicts are a proper test of his or America’s mettle; that sentiment is irrelevant now. He put the country’s reputation on the line in Syria. The president has said many times that he doesn’t bluff. Assad, with Tehran and Moscow behind him, has called his hand” (Gerecht, 2014). Four days later, journalist Roger Cohen echoed that sentiment, writing that “[t]he credibility of the United States is a precious, already eroded commodity ... [that] cannot be compromised in this instance. A world where President Bashar al-Assad thumbs his nose at the U.S. president ... is headed in a very dangerous direction” (Cohen, 2013). The fear of losing credibility is also gendered: Tickner writes that while men are seen as rational and calm beings, women are frequently portrayed as “irrational, emotional, and unstable” (Tickner, 1992, p. 9). The idea of Assad “thumbing his nose” at Obama also implies an emasculation and humiliation of the president that makes him look weaker and more embarrassed. Seeking Congressional approval, too, was seen as an act of over-hesitancy both internationally and at home. Samir Nachar, a member of the opposition National Coalition in Syria, called Obama a “weak president who cannot make the right decision when it comes to such an urgent crisis,” and Yin Gang, a Chinese expert on the Middle East, said that Obama “doesn’t want to fight. He’s afraid, very afraid” (Barnard and Mullany, 2013). In the U.S., op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd wrote that “[m]any Republicans are trying to use this as an attempt to emasculate the president” (Dowd, 2013). This uproar demonstrates how even something such as seeking to take a more democratic approach to airstrikes could be construed as weakness because it didn’t follow the expected, and encouraged, method of directly attacking and asserting America’s strength. The rhetoric was so clearly gendered that Dowd even directly pointed to it in the Republicans’ language.

The fear of being seen as weak also influenced what *wasn’t* talked about — peace. Referencing a 2014 conference in Geneva where involved actors gathered to discuss the Syrian conflict and potential resolutions, artist Patrick Chappatte drew a political cartoon depicting the “Geneva II Peace Conference.” A dove clutching an olive branch in its beak looks up at a man peering at a scroll, who says, “I don’t see you on the guest list.” Behind him, caricatures of frustrated world leaders argue angrily with one another.

Aggression and violence were often the default in discussions about foreign policy options in Syria. In 2013, Chief Executive Officer of the International Rescue Committee David Milibrand wrote that “[t]he Western political debate has focused on military options” despite growing humanitarian concerns (Milibrand, 2013). And in the face of rising voices calling for military solutions, former secretary-generals of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Javier Solana and Jaap De Hoop Scheffer desperately called for more “diplomatic maneuvering” (Solana and Scheffer, 2013). Even when peace *was* discussed, it was with the backing of hard power: General Salim Idris of the Syrian opposition said that the rebels “would not attend the conference unless they received additional arms and ammunition,” indicating that peace was not even to be considered without also insisting on aggression (Gordon and Landler, 2013). Though Obama was this time not targeted as an individual, the fear of the West and its allies being seen as weak definitely still influenced the discourse around intervening in Syria. In her paper “War, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War,” gender and security scholar Carol Cohn posits that in high-level conversations about foreign policy options, government officials are pressured to “speak like a man,” meaning in a “hard-nosed, unrealistic, unsentimental, dispassionate way,” lest they be seen as feminine and consequently associated with all the negative traits of femininity (Cohn, 1993, p. 230). This spills over into the subjects that people feel comfortable to talk about as well: “words that express an emotional awareness of the desperate human reality behind the sanitized abstractions of death and destruction” are not permitted, such as discussions of staggering numbers of casualties, imaginations of the pain and suffering of the “enemy’s” people, and concerns for the psychological impacts of warfare (Cohn, 1993, p. 231-232). The desire to avoid being seen as weak thus aided pro-intervention advocates by discouraging discussions of peace or non-military options, and encouraging in their place an impersonal, sanitized conversation of aggression. Gendered language about femininity and weakness ensured that other perspectives and suggestions remained at the margins.

Women as Peacekeepers, Women as Warriors

In an international arena that curves toward violence and aggression, women-led movements can present alternatives that reject the default options of masculine foreign policy. Referencing a former op-ed in which journalist Nicholas D. Kristof had said that the only alternative to launching cruise missile strikes was sitting back and doing nothing, Jessica Neuwirth, the founder of women’s rights group Donor Direct Action, wrote that

“Syrian women may be able to help reframe the options. The Syrian Women’s Forum for Peace is working to build a democratic Syrian state through peaceful means and to find a political solution to stop the needless bloodshed ... It envisions an anti-violence campaign that engages Syrian mothers, wives and all women with help from women in other countries who have played a successful role in the cessation of armed conflict ... Bringing the voices of Syrian women to the forefront may give us creative alternatives to consider as we debate intervention” (Neuwirth, 2013).

Historically, women have played important roles in both imagining non-military approaches to international relations, and in resisting military-focused ones: at the 1985 Women’s International Peace Conference in Halifax, Canada, women from both the West and

the Global South agreed that “security meant nothing if it was built on others’ insecurity”; women at Greenham Common demonstrated against the installation of cruise missiles in Britain in 1981; and in the 1980s, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo demonstrated in support of people who had been disappeared by the Argentine military dictatorship (Tickner, 1992, p. 54, 60-61). Incorporating more feminine and intersectional feminist perspectives in foreign policy can push definitions of security toward one of “the absence of violence whether it be military, economic, or sexual” rather than the realist conception of militarization in preparation for inevitable war (Tickner, 1992, p. 66).

But, up against a system already deeply entrenched in patriarchy, women themselves can also contribute to gender norms in international relations, especially in attempting to succeed in the field. The pressure to speak in a “masculine” way that Cohn wrote about is perhaps even heavier on women and other marginalized genders, since “in the defense community, the only thing worse than a man acting like a woman is a woman acting like a woman” (Cohn, 1993, p. 239). Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s advocacy of military intervention into the Syrian Civil War demonstrates this: criticizing Obama in 2014, she said that “[w]hen you are hunkering down and pulling back, you’re not going to make any better decisions than when you were aggressively, belligerently putting yourself forward” (Bruni, 2014). Clinton might genuinely hold realist perceptions of international relations; but she is also undoubtedly influenced by the pressure on women in foreign policy positions to prove themselves “masculine” enough by supporting aggressive and violent options. The root of the problem is thus not that women are not represented enough in international relations, but that “feminine” ideas and perspectives are not legitimized — “the inclusion and delegitimization of ideas marked as ‘feminine’ acts as a more powerful censor than the total absence of ‘feminine’ ideas would be” (Cohn, 1993, p. 239).

Even movements that advocate for a feminist approach to international relations can be co-opted by patriarchal structures if they primarily center on the experiences and perspectives of Western women. During the Iraq War, for instance, Young criticized American feminist movements for joining the government in its crusade to “save” Iraqi women from Muslim fundamentalism. Though she acknowledges that the Taliban certainly had cruel and oppressive policies toward women, she argues that the constant invoking of women’s liberation to justify the war both “constructed these women as exoticized others and paradigmatic victims in need of salvation by Western feminists,” and deflected attention away from more subtle instances of gender-based violence and discrimination in other parts of the world, including within the United States and West (Young, 2003, p. 19). Similarly, journalist Maureen Dowd pointed out in 2014 that although “when American presidents rain down bombs on Muslim countries, they use the awful treatment of women in the Middle East as one of their justifications,” politicians ignore the human rights violations of allied countries “because we need the regressive rulers in the Persian Gulf to sell us oil and buy our fighter jets and house our fleets and drones and give us cover in our war coalitions” (Dowd, 2014). Feminist approaches to international relations have the potential to deconstruct existing masculine conceptions of security and war but can also still

easily serve imperial aims and justify using violence in the name of “saving” women, bolstering the role of the state as “protector.”

The role of women in international relations is therefore nuanced and complex: though women have historically been at the vanguard of movements against militarism and violence, they have also historically been subsumed into masculine structures to further aggressive foreign policy options. Their inclusion in high-level foreign policy discussions is not enough to solve this issue of gendered rhetoric and policymaking. Women are peacekeepers, but they are warriors and weapons too.

The Shadow of Iraq

With the failures of the Iraq War lingering in public consciousness, America found itself with a new generation that did not want to go to war, tempering both the intensity and the prevalence of the aggressive, gendered rhetoric that was used to encourage intervention into Syria. While Bush had embraced the role of “cowboy” and himself adopted extensive gendered language in defending his decision to invade Iraq, Obama was instead the target of gendered criticism because of his unwillingness to intervene. This change in the commander-in-chief’s role in perpetuating gendered conceptions of international relations reflects the evolution of the American public’s views on foreign policy, which necessarily impacts scholarship on this subject.

In June 2013, a poll conducted by the New York Times and CBS News found that 61% of respondents felt that the U.S. did not have “a responsibility to do something about the fighting in Syria between government forces and anti-government groups.” That same month, a deputy national security adviser, Benjamin J. Rhodes, said that “[s]ending American troops is ‘off the table,’ ... citing the difficulties they faced stopping violence during the Iraq war” (Baker, 2013). More space was also made for nonmilitary options, with influential figures such as Yale Law School professors Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro writing that “the choice between military force or nothing is a false one” and listing alternatives such as economic retaliation, providing nerve agent antidotes to rebels, and using the U.S.’s rhetorical power to shame and pressure the Syrian government’s allies (Hathaway and Shapiro, 2013). In bridging research and scholarship on the Iraq War with an analysis of the Syrian Civil War, this paper acknowledges the social changes that occurred over the decade in between the two conflicts that qualify the direct application of the former to the latter. But although airstrikes against Assad and his regime were less popular than the invasion of Iraq was, those who called for them still employed gendered rhetoric and tropes in their advocacy, indicating that as a field, international relations was still deeply entangled with the valorization of masculinity and “masculine” characteristics and ideas. Despite social shifts, scholarship about the Iraq War is therefore still relevant and applicable to Syria.

Conclusion: Looking to Non-gendered Conceptions of Security

As the U.S. grappled with its role in the Syrian Civil War, interventionists borrowed from a longstanding trend of gendered narratives to bolster support for air strikes against the Assad regime. Two broad themes emerged from this rhetoric: first, that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and ISIS needed to be “civilized” through masculine domination; and second, that Obama was weak and effeminate for not pursuing an aggressive foreign policy approach.

Can the U.S. reach a conception of security that is non-gendered, especially as this “shadow of Iraq” fades with time? The odds are tough: throughout countless conflicts among nations, not just in America and the West, gendered language has been exploited to further aggression, domination, and violence for centuries. This cannot be rectified by simply increasing the proportion of women in international relations. As Tickner writes, “the achievement of peace, economic justice, and ecological sustainability is inseparable from overcoming social relations of domination and subordination; genuine security requires not only the absence of war but also the elimination of unjust social relations, including unequal gender relations” (Tickner, 1992, p. 128). Nongendered conceptions of security, thus, can only be truly achieved through the dismantling and uprooting of patriarchal structures everywhere.

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