**Saving Their Women: Constructions of Gender and Sexual Violence**

**and the Case for Military Action Against the Islamic State**

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**Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)**

In July 2014 the Pew Research Center released the results of a survey that found most Americans (55% to 39%) thought that the United States had no responsibility to act against ISIS in Iraq.[[2]](#footnote-2) While far more Democrats (61% were opposed to renewed American military action, not even a majority of Republicans (48%) supported military intervention. Moreover, the survey found, “the public’s worries about an imminent terrorist attack are no higher than they were a year ago, shortly after the bombings at the Boston Marathon” (Pew Research Center, “Most Think” 2014). A second Pew survey released just three months later revealed majority 57%, bipartisan (68% for Republicans and 54 for Democrats) support for direct military intervention to counter the rise of ISIS (Pew Research Center, “Support for” 2014).[[3]](#footnote-3) A year later, in July 2015 the Pew Research Center found sustained, even expanded, support (63%) (Pew Research Center, “A Year” 2015). What happened that caused public opinion to move in ways that supported a new American military engagement in the Middle East?

This paper seeks to evaluate theories and claims advanced in both feminist IR theory, and in a growing literature on the gendered nature of Orientalism, in order to explain this move from public skepticism to public support for renewed American military engagement in the Middle East. The paper begins by accepting the premise that gender is related to war and international conflict in multiple, complex, and overlapping ways from gendered national identity to the gendered ordering of the international system to gendered strategies and tactics that target women’s bodies and men’s masculinities. It derives a set of hypotheses about how gender might be related to support for American militarism in the Middle East, and it seeks to examine the dominant framing of ISIS both in the media and by political elites at this critical juncture. In essence, I want to know if narratives about the need to save women from the oppression of ISIS shaped public support for military intervention. Such an explanation seemed plausible and generated my interest in the subject precisely because of highly publicized narratives about rape and sexual enslavement perpetrated by ISIS (Radwan and Blumenfeld 2014), and because of the strange obsession on the left with female Kurdish fighters as the epitome of ISIS’s just desserts (Watkins 2015). Somewhat surprisingly, these narratives were sparsely evident in the daily coverage of ISIS that emerged in the two newspapers with the largest daily circulation.

*Gendered Orientalism*

In the period following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, feminist International Relations scholars have explored and exposed how a gendered Orientalism has helped provide popular justification for US military actions in the War on Terrorism, and relatedly in the Iraq War. Orientalism, of course, refers to the interlocking set of intellectual and cultural practices that seek to study, talk about, and bring into being some notion of the Orient, which is posited as a space that exists outside of and in contradistinction to the Occident or the West. The Orient as a space is Islamic; it is Middle Eastern. Where the Orient begins (geographically, culturally, and in the imagination), the West ends. These constructions, as Edward Said makes clear, have real consequences, but nonetheless are varyingly false, racist, reductivist, and homogenizing. To suggest that Orientalism is gendered is to acknowledge the ways in which Orientalism is played out both semiotically on women’s bodies, and in the figuration of differing conceptions of hegemonic masculinities and subordinated femininities. According to this gendered Orientalism literature constructions of the Islamist subjugation of women have become a central part of justifications for American military operations because they provide a means for framing interventions as just and libaratory in nature (e.g. Nayak 2006, Cloud 2004, Mahmood 2006 & 2009, and Khalid 2017).

In her scholarship, anthropologist Saba Mahmood has traced the Orientalist tropes that inform the popular narratives of Middle Eastern and Muslim women in need of saving. Writing in the midst of the US Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Mahmood declared, “Hardly a week goes by without one of the major dailies running a story on the latest affront, if not act of violence, Islam has committed yet again against the collectivity of Muslim womanhood” (2006: 117). Mahmood’s works analyze several popular biographies that gained wide following and acclaim in the West. “These writings,” she argues, “perform an age-old genre of Orientalist (if not outrightly racist) tropes that accord popular legitimacy to the current neo-conservative policy agenda in the United States and the swell of right-wing anti-immigration policies in Europe (2006: 118). Works such as Azar Nafisi’s memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* construct for the reader a bifurcated world where the Islamic stands for the intolerant, the uneducated, and is juxtaposed with the possibilities offered by the western, educated, civilized world that Nafisi finds herself forbidden from sharing with her students during the early years of the Islamic Republic in Iran. This narrative of Iran, Mahmood argues, fit perfectly with Bush administration constructions of Iran as part of an access of evil, and its central point was that it was precisely in the ways these regimes imposed control on women that their illegitimate, evil nature was revealed. Mahmood summarizes: “What concerns me most . . . is the role the tropes of freedom, democracy, and gender inequality have come to play in this story, and the ease with which Islam’s mistreatment of women is used as a diagnosis as well as a strategic point of intervention for restructuring large swaths of Muslim population, if not he religion itself” (2009: 194). Saving Muslim women from the oppressive nature of their religion, and the way their religion gets deployed as a political ideology, thus, becomes part of the enduring just war narratives that continue to underpin American and European military engagements in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In a slightly different vein, Nayak (2006) argues that the shock of the 9/11 terrorist attacks challenged America’s sense of itself, and to erase this vulnerability, she traces the emergence of hypermasculine rhetoric in the Bush administration’s framing of the war on terror. “After 9/11,” Nayak writes, “the US government, the media and ‘experts’ collaborated to signify the oppression of Arab/Muslim women as the categorical proof of Islamic terror, and women accordingly became a central point of the war on terror” (2006: 49). Specifically, Nayak points to the Bush administrations’ references to Saddam Hussein’s “rape rooms” in the lead up to the Iraq War. According to Nayak’s analysis, demonizing the oriental other, coupled with the construction of America as a savior, a bringer of freedom to the Middle East, helped restore America’s sense of itself. More recently, Khalid’s (2017) book provides an even more thorough examination of the rhetoric of Bush’s war on terror to unpack the ways in which power and knowledge get deployed to construct understandings of good and evil that underpin America’s war making in the post 9/11 era.

*Gendering war and militarism*

The narrative that emerges in the gendered Orientalism literature intersects with feminist IR theory insofar as Orientalist views of women in the Middle East and broader Islamic world underpin narratives that construct differing masculinities and femininities. In facing down the barbaric masculinities ascribed to the Islamic world, western militarized masculinities are posited in chivalric ways. This connection between gender and conflict is perhaps most comprehensively outlined by Laura Sjoberg’s book *Gendering Global Conflicti.* Sjoberg argues that since gender is variable, considering the ways in which international politics are gendered offers a more compelling lens into the permissive contexts for global conflict than more realist emphases on anarchy. Considering gender as a structural variable leads Sjoberg to offer several arguments about the relationship between gender and conflict. Foremost, she argues that if the pecking order in international politics is gendered, we should consider gender hierarchy, not anarchy as the permissive cause of war. Subsequently, she suggests that variations in ideal-type (e.g. hegemonic) masculinity contributes to different kinds of competition, and therefore different proclivities to engage in international conflict. For example, she writes, “States with elements of hypermasculinity in their nationalist discourses would be expected to be more aggressive, while states with elements of gender equity in their nationalist discourses (state feminists) would be less likely to be aggressive” (2013: 100).

Two types of masculinity that make international conflict more permissible, for Sjoberg, are chivalric and competitive forms of masculinity. Of the former, Sjoberg writes, a chivalric masculinity emphasizes values “such as ‘the responsibility to protect’ and incentivizing states to function and relate in ways that maintain toughness and tenderness” (2013: 101). More competitive forms of masculinity are characterized by the aggressive positioning of states against one another within a patriarchal international system (2013: 101).

In her essay, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” Kimberly Hutchings explores the gendered implications of recent scholarship on the changing nature of war. In particular, Hutchings is interested in the way Kaldor’s (2012) work on new and old wars reinforces the “contrast between civilization and barbarism” (2008: 399). The civilized, controlled violence associated with the enforcers of cosmopolitan law, in Hutchings’ reading of Kaldor, gets contrasted with “the uncontrolled, illegitimate violence of the gangster” in ways that reflect dueling forms of masculinity (2008: 399). According to Hutchings, “Kaldor diagnoses the masculinity of the new warriors as pathological, something that takes a recognizable form of human behavior to new and extreme limits and that needs to be countered by responsible and autonomous action on the part of the cosmopolitan law enforcer” (2008: 399). In essence, Hutchings is suggesting there is a gendered element that emerges in describing contemporary violence as barbaric, extreme, or unprecedented. Rather than saving the women, intervention against the barbarism is underpinned by values that impute one group with a superior and the other with an inferior masculinity. Here again, Khalid’s book underscores the link between this line of feminist IR theory and the gendered Orientalism literature by focusing on “how ‘Western masculinity’ and ‘Western femininity’ are understood and constructed as being different from ‘passive Other femininity’ and ‘barbaric Other masculinity’” (2017: 35-36).

*Hypotheses:*

In this project, I seek to move beyond the critical, interpretivist scholarship on gendered orientalism, and apply more positivist methodologies to test some of the theoretical arguments that emerge in both the gendered Orientalism literature and feminist IR theory.[[4]](#footnote-4) In particular, if gendered discourse is critical to war making, and if a gendered Orientalism is critical to American war-making in the Middle East, then we should see evidence of gender playing into the construction of the Islamic State as a threat worthy of American military intervention at precisely the moments when American public opinion moves from being opposed to being supportive of a new military engagement in the region. Specifically, this analysis seeks to test three distinct hypotheses:

H1: Islamic State violence against women is deployed as a regular trope to frame the case for justifying direct American military intervention. Support for saving the women threatened by the Islamic State underpins the construction of American just war narratives, and informs positive changes in public support for military intervention.

H2: Islamist violence is constructed as barbaric in ways that highlight a perverse, uncontrollable masculinity that can only be effectively countered by the application of more controlled, civilized (even cosmopolitan) masculinity. The gender contrast here is between good and bad, civilized and uncivilized or barbaric masculinities.

H3: It is possible to think of constructions of ISIS violence as threatening non-combatants, who are read in gendered ways as vulnerable citizens in need of protection. The need to protect vulnerable citizens helps mobilize support for military actions.

The first hypothesis is derived most directly from the gendered Orientalism literature. This hypothesis suggests a chivalric masculinity animates the framing of ISIS and the need to intervene militarily. The second hypothesis is derived more specifically from feminist IR theory, though the link to gendered Orientalism ought to be clear enough. Framing ISIS’s violence as extraordinarily brutal or barbaric constructs a narrative about the untamed, uncivilized masculinity of ISIS, which can only be tamed through the use of force. The final hypothesis draws from insights in feminist IR theory that discuss the identification of citizens with women and children who must be protected from foreign threats.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The strongest evidence that gendered Orientalism underpins the shift in public support for military intervention against the Islamic State would come from evidence that direct and repeated references to gender and/or sexual violence dominated at the critical juncture when public opinion swung from opposition to support for American military intervention. Strong evidence that tropes about sectarian violence, oil, refugees, or territorial expansion dominated at these critical junctures would complicate the expectations articulated in the gendered Orientalism and feminist IR theory literature. If a focus on the Islamic State’s brutality dominated the media and political framing of ISIS, then this, as H2 suggests, could potentially support some of the major claims advanced in the gendered Orientalism and feminist IR literatures.

There are several alternative hypotheses that might plausibly explain the shift in public support for direct military intervention against the Islamic State. This research design allows me to focus on five alternative explanations for changing public support for military intervention against ISIS that might be derived from realist and Liberal IR theory.

AH1: Threats to American national interests emerging from concerns about ISIS control over the strategic resource of oil might drive public support for direct intervention.[[6]](#footnote-6)

AH2: Direct threats against the American homeland, or within the homelands of our key global allies helps drive increasing public support for military intervention. Attacks, for example, in Paris or Orlando, increase the saliency of the ISIS threat to the American public. And explain the shift from opposition to support for military confrontation.

AH3: Attacks against Christians confirm the clash of civilizations narrative in ways that increase public support for military intervention against ISIS.

AH4: Territorial gains by ISIS represent a threat to American national interests insofar as they erase gains achieved in the Iraq War.

AH5: Threats to religious or ethnic minorities inform increased discourse concerning ethnic cleansing, mass atrocities, and genocide invoking support for a Liberal Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

Alternatives 1, 3, 4, and 5 are considered by tracking frames related to these hypotheses within both media coverage and political speeches about ISIS. Alternative 2 is addressed by examining whether or not the media coverage of ISIS violence focuses on violence within Iraq/Syria, or Europe/United States.

There is, of course, one additional explanation for public support for military intervention against ISIS that ought to be considered: partisanship. It is worth noting that even when overall public support for military intervention in the Middle East is low, Republican support for it was always fairly high.

**Methodology – Political and media framing of the ISIS threat**

In order to examine how gender structures global politics as well as the causes of war, Sjoberg suggests that, “Coding state press releases for claims about gender in belligerents’ (and potential belligerents’) sense of ‘self’ and statements about opponents (and potential opponents)” might prove useful for examining gender alongside other datasets that explore the causes of war (2013: 103). This paper takes up a similar task in order to examine the gender discourse from the emergence of ISIS through the decision to engage in military action against the Islamic State in September 2014. Public opinion experienced a fairly dramatic move away from opposition to military intervention in the Middle East to strong support at first for airstrikes, and slowly for more direct military engagement with the Islamic State. The research presented here provides an analysis of both discourse by President Obama, and presents initial results of analysis of newspaper coverage of ISIS, which provides a snapshot of public discourse around and framing of the Islamic State threat. This paper simply reports trends in the framing of ISIS over time, which I broadly, though, not systematically correlate with changes in public opinion polls regarding support for military intervention for an indirect measure of how public constructions of ISIS shaped public support for military intervention. Below I outline the methods used to gather the data, report some initial results, and address some of the limitations and future plans.

The goal of the research discussed in this paper is to map how discourse on gender and sexuality entered into media and political framing of the Islamic State threat, and then to correlate this analysis with changes in public opinion in favor of greater American military intervention against the Islamic State. The media analysis was conducted by gathering all references to ISIS that appeared in the two largest papers of circulation in the United States, *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. The choice to confine the search to these sources was necessary given the incredible number of mentions ISIS received in all newspapers. The first mentions of ISIS appeared in mid-2013, but coverage exploded during 2014. In this paper, I end the analysis with September 2014, the month where American airstrikes began, and the month where public opinion moved toward majority support for military intervention against ISIS. Sources were gathered through LexusNexus and include news articles, op-eds, editorials, and blogs that are either news analysis or on-line op-eds. After reading through several months of coverage I identified seven themes that emerged within media coverage of ISIS violence: religious/ethnic conflict; sexual/gender violence; a focus on the extraordinarily brutal nature of ISIS’s violence; the way ISIS violence contributes to refugees; the relationship of ISIS violence to control of oil resources; and the relationship of ISIS violence to its territorial expansion. Consequently, I developed a coding scheme [Appendix A] used in the construction of an original database. All articles were catalogued by date of publication; source of publication; whether they were news or editorial/op-ed; whether they focus on ISIS’s violence or not; whether the violence focused on is in Syria/Iraq or Europe/the United States; and which theme(s) from the seven identified above emerge within the news source. On many, if not most, occasions articles discussed violence in ways that hit on more than one theme. In addition, I tracked key terms in each article as a means to evaluate both repeated linguistic constructions, and provide validity for the categorization of sources. I am still coding coverage from 2015 through the Presidential election of 2016. The data allow me to track the saliency of particular media and executive branch frames over time, which gives some understanding of how the threat from ISIS was constructed in public discourse. Tracking these changes over time also allows me to identify which frames “dominated” in the period when public opinion swung from opposition to support for direct US military intervention against ISIS. I rely on PollingReport.com for analyses of changes in public opinion regarding American military intervention against ISIS over time. Their ISIS page provides an excellent resource for tracking these changes across multiple polls (<http://www.pollingreport.com/isis.htm>), although the differing ways in which questions are asked of the public makes the aggregation of data used in this paper somewhat problematic.

A similar content analysis was conducted using the public statements made by executive branch officials including, but not limited to the President, State and Defense Department Leadership, and will be conducted based on public statements and debate transcripts for 2016 Presidential candidates using the same seven themes applied to the analysis of media coverage. Since, President Obama is the only executive branch official to deliver a speech focused on ISIS through September 2014, the analysis here is limited to his speeches. Of course, it is worth noting that Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel famously said ISIS was “beyond anything we’ve seen” in an August 2014 briefing. Matching these themes with the timing of statements will also help understand which frames “dominated” executive branch constructions of ISIS, and see how those frames correlate temporally with changing public support for intervention.

**DATA – speeches & newspapers**

Between September 2013 and September 2014 ISIS was mentioned in 723 different news stories, editorials, and/or op-eds in *The New York Time* and *USA Today*; 409 of these stories focused on ISIS violence. Stories that didn’t focus on ISIS violence might mention ISIS in articles that focuses on topics ranging from troubles with Iraq’s government, the emerging US strategy in response, and about discussions at the United Nations. Only two of these mentions, both in September 2014, focused on ISIS violence outside of Iraq and Syria.[[7]](#footnote-7) Figure 1 provides and overview of press mentions over time.

Of the 409 mentions of ISIS that focused on ISIS violence—again, it is important to remember that sources often focused on more than one theme—mentions of ISIS’s extraordinary brutality occurred most frequently (239 times), followed by mentions of religions/ethnic violence (127 times, and territorial control (114 times). Least mentioned, were discussions of ISIS’s violence in relation to refugees (22 times); the relationship of ISIS violence to oil (24 times); and ISIS’s sexual/gender violence (28 times). Figure 2 provides an illustration of the total number of mentions of ISIS violence by topic areas.

As coverage of ISIS ramped up during the summer of 2014, the dominant theme focused on ISIS’s rapid territorial expansion. Over time, the focus on its extraordinary brutality quickly emerged as the dominant media trope; within the focus on extraordinary violence, coverage of ISIS’s beheadings (particularly of the two American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff) appeared again and again. References to beheading, beheadings, or decapitations occurred at least 83 times. Figure 3 presents an overview of mentions of types of violence in the newspaper coverage over time.

An interesting contrast emerges, however, between the dominant tropes within newspaper coverage of ISIS and the themes mentioned in Barack Obama’s seven speeches on ISIS during this time frame. President Obama did mention ISIS’s sexual and gender violence, as well as its extraordinary brutality in speeches he made in August and September 2014, but far more often in those speeches he referenced ISIS contribution to religious and ethnic violence. Figure 4 illustrates President Obama’s mentions of ISIS violence by theme.

Keeping these trends in mind, we can see that the key transition from opposition to support for military confrontation with ISIS occurred between June and September 2014. In June, an average of 31.2% asked in various polls favored military confrontation with ISIS, while an average of 61% opposed military confrontation. In both July and August slim majorities (54% - 31% in July and 54% - 39%) favored military intervention. In September, however, average support increased to 65% in favor and 29.2% opposed to military intervention. Although, it is worth noting that when recipients were specifically asked about supporting or opposing the use of ground troops, throughout September 2014 only an average of 41% favored, while an average of 50.6% opposed sending US ground troops into Iraq or Syria. Figure 5 presents aggregated trends in public support for military action against ISIS over time.

I wish to highlight two important limitations about this research that need to be acknowledged. Foremost, in making inferences about the connection between public framing of the Islamic State and public support for military intervention against it, we should be cautious about over-imputing causal significance. Analysis of press coverage and political speech can tell us how the media and key elites were framing the Islamic State, but can’t in and of itself tell us if these frames actually resonated with and informed evolution in public opinion. What we do know, though, is that from 56% who reported the US had no interests that would justify getting involved with the growing Islamic insurgency in Syria and Iraq in June 2014, by September 14, 2014 59% found ISIS a “very serious threat to vital interests.” Moreover, the data here reveal little about how the public interpreted the threat of the Islamic State. In the concluding section, I address this in discussing the next stage of this project.

A second important limitation involves the choice to focus on newspapers rather than other forms of media representations of Islamic State violence. This project tells us little about how Islamic State violence was framed on nightly newscasts, for example, and ignores the ways in which alternative forms of media (e.g. YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook) might have played important roles in visually framing ISIS for the American public. At best, then, the intitial findings reported below need to be qualified.

**Initial Findings and Future Research Plans**

Based on my analysis of the coverage of ISIS in America’s two largest daily newspapers, an explicit focus on ISIS’s sexual and gender violence was not a major part of media coverage of ISIS during this critical time period. This was the case even though the siege of the Yazidi community took place during the mid-summer of 2014.[[8]](#footnote-8) Indeed, this was the case even though the sexual enslavement and systematic rape of Yazidi women was specifically mentioned by President Obama in his speeches laying out the case for US military action against ISIS. This lack of an explicit focus on ISIS’s gender/sexual violence provides little support, therefore, for hypothesis 1, and suggests American support for a new military engagement in the Middle East was not (at least initially) motivating by saving their women. It is clear, on the other hand, that a focus on ISIS’s brutality was the dominant theme during the critical juncture when public opinion shifted squarely in favor of a new American military engagement in the Middle East. The evidence here suggests tentative and plausible support for hypothesis 2—that the American public came to see the threat of ISIS’s barbaric masculinity as justification for a new war in the Middle East. Given the dominance of references to beheadings, and the repeated mention (I noted over 16 times) of James Foley or Steven Sotloff by name, this analysis suggests tentative and plausible support for hypothesis 3, as well. It might be the case that, as coverage of the beheading of these American journalists became a dominant subtheme, more Americans began to metaphorically think of Foley and Sotloff as metaphors for the average American citizen. Their highly publicized and brutal executions highlighted the vulnerability of the average citizen in the face of a barbarous threat. In short, a careful analysis of newspaper coverage of ISIS violence suggests tentative and plausible support for two theses that have emerged to explain US war making in both feminist IR theory and the literature on gendered Orientalism.

The newspaper data also present some interesting and tentative findings related to the alternative hypotheses. Given the paucity of coverage (only 24 mentions) of ISIS’s violence leading to control of oil as a strategic resource during this time period, and (only two stories) on ISIS violence outside of Iraq and Syria, there is little support for either alternative hypothesis 1 or alternative hypothesis 2, both of which are derived from more traditional realist IR theory. Indeed, the shift in public support for military intervention against ISIS preceded ISIS-claimed high profile attacks that would later take place in Europe and the United States. The data also shed doubt on the plausibility of alternative hypothesis 4, given the way a focus on territorial control emerged as a dominant theme in newspaper coverage of ISIS in May and June 2014, but did not seem to cause a dramatic increase in public support for a new military engagement in the Middle East.

Thinking about what the analysis here implies for alternative hypothesis 3 is a little more complex. While there were at least 66 separate mentions of ISIS’s violence against Christians, a fact that might easily be interpreted as evidence of a clash of civilizations, in the newspaper coverage I examined, coverage of ISIS’s religious or ethnic violence was never as dominant during the critical turning point in public opinion as coverage of ISIS extraordinary brutality.[[9]](#footnote-9) Moreover, there were relatively few articles, editorials, or opinion pieces (44 in total) that mentioned ISIS’s extreme religious beliefs, a number I would expect to be higher if it were to reflect narratives about a clash of civilizations. Yet, if we look at President Obama’s speeches, ISIS’s sectarian violence emerged as the dominant trope in August and September 2014. A more thorough content analysis of these speeches, however, highlights only the passing mention of Christians displaced by ISIS violence, and much greater textual concern given to the plight of Kurds and the besieged Yazidi community. Toward this end, a clear responsibility to protect line of argument (in support of alternative hypothesis 5) is evident in President Obama’s speeches, suggesting he actively sought to justify his authorization of military force through such Liberal norms. For instance, on August 7, 2014 President Obama announced:

Today I authorized two operations in Iraq—targeted airstrikes to protect our American personnel, and a humanitarian effort to help save thousands of Iraqi civilians who are trapped on a mountain without food and water and facing almost certain death . . . . When we face a situation like we do on that mountain—with innocent people facing the prospect of violence on a horrific scale, when we have a mandate to help—in this case, a request from the Iraqi government—and when we have the unique capabilities to help avert a massacre, then I believe the United States of America cannot turn a blind eye. We can act, carefully and responsibly, to prevent a potential act of genocide. That’s what we’re doing on that mountain.

On the other hand, that such arguments didn’t emerge as salient in media coverage of ISIS (I only counted 9 distinct mentions of the term “genocide”) in either August or September 2014 suggests we might need to consider the limits of this frame’s resonance. Moreover, almost nowhere in public opinion polling data does the American public voice support for military intervention on humanitarian grounds.

This study contributes to the political science subfield of international relations, and represents an effort to empirically apply and test theoretical arguments developed in feminist IR theory. The research discussed in this paper seeks to explain why an American public that seemed war fatigued and was initially opposed to the re-entry of American military forces into the Middle East shifted toward supporting a new military engagement. Even if, as is the case in most political events, there are multiple causes (in this case, multiple frames that resonate) for this swift and dramatic turn, there is little systematic research that explores why this particular change occurred. Consequently, this project may provide insights into future analyses of the relationship between framing and the support for American war-making. The strongest correlation noted here seems to involve coverage of ISIS’s brutality, and in particular of the beheadings of two American journalists and increased public support for military intervention against ISIS. In addition, public opinion data suggest a great deal of knowledge and attention was paid to these executions. Further research might focus on unpacking response to this. Was this such a visceral event because people identified with the victims—encountered their own vulnerability and desired a protector as hypothesis 3 suggests. Or, perhaps, did the brutal killings challenge American masculinity in ways that sought to restore pride by righteously punishing those who perpetrated the act? Or, perhaps still, did this confirm Orientalist narratives of Islamist barbarism that underpinned the kinds of relationship between militarism and masculinity that are suggested by hypothesis 2?

One way that I hope to get at these questions is by augmenting the analysis of the research on media and Executive branch framing presented here with a qausi-experiment conducted on-line through Qualtrics. Given the noted partisan differences in public support for US military intervention against ISIS, this quasi-experiment is designed to tease out how certain framings of ISIS in public discourse affect the saliency of support for military intervention while controlling for gender and partisanship. In addition, I plan to continue tracking the dominant frames of ISIS in political speech and newspaper coverage through the 2016 presidential election, and correlating this with public support for military intervention. I’m interested to see what themes helped sustain or even enhance public support for the military engagement with ISIS.

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**Appendix A**

**Coding for media & Executive branch analysis of coverage of ISIS:**

The goal of this is to analyze how ISIS is being covered over time, how ISIS is characterized in Executive branch speech over time, and to think about how that coverage and characterization correlates with changes in public support for direct military intervention in Syria and Iraq. The project seeks to examine a key hypothesis of the gender and conflict literature, which states that war becomes more permissible when defined in particular ways.

Because the coverage is so pervasive I’ve limited my analysis to America’s two largest daily newspapers (*The New York Times* and *USA Today*). I’ve searched Lexis Nexis for the term ISIS, and cross-checked other terms to be sure I wasn’t missing an unacceptable number of articles. I limited my focus to newspaper stories only, discounting blog posts, but including web-only news articles and op-eds.

**To code the news articles:**

**Source:** NYT or USA Today

**Date of Publication:**

**Q1:** Is it news (1); is it editorial or op-ed (2)

**Q2:** Does it touch on ISIS violence? Yes (1); no (2)

**Q3:** If it touches on ISIS violence, is this violence that occurred in Syria/Iraq (1), or Europe/United States (2)? I assume that ISIS violence in the US and Europe are part of a longer trope about terrorism.

**Q4:** Does the article focus on:

* 4. 1 religious/ethnic aspects of ISIS’s violence
* 4.2 sexual/gender violence
* 4.3 the extraordinarily brutal nature of ISIS’s violence
* 4.4 refugees
* 4.5 Islamic law/rule
* 4.6 oil
* 4.7territorial control

**To code the Executive branch speech on ISIS:**

**Person Making Statement:**

**Date of Public Remarks:**

**Q1:** Do the remarks touch on ISIS violence? Yes (1); no (2)

**Q2:** If the remarks touch on ISIS violence, is this violence that occurred in Syria/Iraq (1), or Europe/United States (2)?

**Q:** Does the discussion of ISIS violence focus on:

* 4. 1 religious/ethnic aspects of ISIS’s violence
* 4.2 sexual/gender violence
* 4.3 the extraordinarily brutal nature of ISIS’s violence
* 4.4 refugees
* 4.5 Islamic law/rule
* 4.6 oil
* 4.7territorial control

**Key Terms (for example):**

*Religious/ethnic:*

* Sectarianism; Sunni/Shia; Jew; Christians; Yazidis; Kurds;

*Sexual/gender:*

* Rape; ***women***; gays; sexual assault; forced marriage

*Extraordinary brutality:*

* Beheading; crucifixion; stoning to death; public execution; barbaric; brutal

*Refugees:*

*Islamic law/rule:*

* Harsh Islamic rule; Sharia

*Oil:*

* Control of wells; sale of oil to provide revenue to IS

*Territorial control:*

* Expansion into Iraq; fall of Mosul;

1. I would like to thank Muhlenberg College student Brigid Deegan for her research assistance on this project. Brigid found and coded all of the executive branch speeches used in this analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These results were similar to a June 2014 poll released by Gallop that found 54% of respondents opposed “taking direct military action in Iraq to assist the government in fighting militants there,” and an ABC News/Washington Post Poll also released in June 2014 that found 65% opposed to “sending US ground forces to combat the Sunni insurgents in Iraq.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In September 2014 Gallop found 60% approval for US military action “against Islamic militants, commonly known as ISIS.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Khalid’s (2017) book, for example, deploys a post-structuralist discourse analysis rooted in interpretive approaches to the broadly defined “texts” of the War on Terror. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This gendered construction of non-combatants is best illustrated by the 2014 Navy advertisement, “The Shield.” In this recruitment commercial a family stands at the center of an urban intersection—mom, dad, and little daughter. The ad shows a diverse range of men and women in various navy uniforms, and contains few words: “To get to you, they have to come through us.” It is critical to notice the camera’s close-up on the face of the little girl exactly as the word ‘you’ is said. The ad, at once, uses this innocent, vulnerable little girl as a metaphor for the non-combatant American public. But, of course, this is a recruitment ad, so the viewer is not meant to be part of the ‘you,’ rather the viewer is meant to be part of the ‘us’ deployed around the world to protect the little girl’s (and thereby the non-combatant public’s) innocence. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In June 2014, for example, a CBS News/New York Times poll found that 83% of respondents “think the situation in Iraq will make gas prices in the United States go up.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These articles looked at discourse around ISIS threats to subways, particularly in New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The terms Yazidi or Yazidis were noted on at least 66 different occasions in my research. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Clash narratives were advanced in some op-eds, and in a conference held by Senator Ted Cruz during this time. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)