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A Gendered Critique of the Role of Spectacular Violence in Al Qaeda

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Al Qaeda has been analysed from various angles, and in particular, there has been a focus on its use of spectacular violence, such as beheadings filmed and then published online. This paper will argue that in order to achieve a better understanding as to the role of spectacular violence in Al Qaeda's enactment of power and resistance, it helps to approach this question from a gendered perspective. Furthermore, it will argue that Al Qaeda's construction of masculine narratives has created frameworks for giving meaning to the use of spectacular violence as a tool for the enactment of masculinity. The first section undertakes a conceptual analysis of masculinity and femininity and their relationship with ideas of power and resistance. The second section explores how these ideas have been given coherent meaning in the construction of narratives within the Al Qaeda movement. This is followed by an analysis of how these narratives have provided a framework for giving meaning to the use of spectacular violence as a tool for the enactment of masculinity, and has arguably contributed to the emergence of spectacular violence as a form of communicative power within the region. Section three examines the notion of humiliation both as a justification for the use of spectacular violence, and as part of a mobilising discourse for the purposes of resistance. In particular, these notions will be explored as they appear in the Al Qaeda training manual.

Before beginning, it should be clarified that when this paper speaks of making feminist sense of spectacular violence, or of understanding its use in relation to women, it does not seek to examine women as active agents of the violence itself, rather, it is about acknowledging that the dynamics of masculinity requires being curious about the complex workings of femininity. Furthermore, neither value is placed above the other. In other words, it does not argue that appeals to ideals of masculinity should be countered simply by giving priority to values associated with femininity. Moreover, the scope of this essay is such that it is not possible to delve into other reasons as to the role of spectacular violence and therefore, it should be stated from the start that spectacular violence as a projection of masculinity is but one explanation.

This paper defines gender as "the socially and culturally constructed categories of masculinity and femininity." [1] Contrary to popular discourse, the concept of gender does not refer to particular characteristics of men and women (i.e. their sex as determined at birth). For example, it is possible to be considered female in terms of sex, but to adopt a masculine gender and vice versa. Feminist scholars have pointed out that the content of the categories of masculinity and femininity changes across time and cultures, but these concepts are typically defined as opposite to one another. [2] Therefore, the essence of being masculine is to not be feminine. Another feature of gender is that what is deemed masculine is typically assigned a greater value than what is defined as feminine. [3] In order to define who (or what) is masculine or feminine, society undertakes a process of gendering, which can be understood as the following: "a set of practices and discourses that constitute 'men' and 'women' and masculinities and femininities in particular ways. Gendering is neither about women alone, nor is it a pure and autonomous dichotomy." [4]

Taking Cynthia Enloe's argument as to the 'personal nature of international politics', [5] this essay will examine the question from the following perspective; what happens to our understanding of the use of spectacular violence by groups such as Al Qaeda if we make the experience of women's lives more central to the analysis? According to Enloe, we would have a more realistic notion of how the world operates: "[I] cannot imagine trying to think seriously about the constructions of power and the systems by which power is both perpetuated and implemented without

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talking about patriarchy”.[6] Following Foucault, if we understand power as a ubiquitous force that operates continuously in a subtle but penetrating manner; then power “seems to be everywhere and nowhere...[and] depends for its very existence on the multiplicity of points of resistance”.[7] Moreover, Foucault’s claim that where there is power, resistance will inevitably follow, suggests that one could argue that similar to power, one cannot understand how notions of violent resistance attributed to masculine norms are constructed without thinking about patriarchy, and subsequently, the understandings of femininity that come alongside this notion. In other words, this paper argues that in order to understand Al Qaeda’s use of spectacular violence, we need to understand how they define themselves as masculine –not as a singular concept, but in relation to how they understand and define Muslim women. Connell’s discourse on ‘hegemonic masculinity’ focuses on the relational character of gender and the patterns by which men are socially constructed in opposition to some form of femininity, be it real or imaginary.[8] Connell stresses the importance of emphasized femininity[9] in order to better comprehend the important role women play in the construction of masculine identities.

Connell and Enloe represent just two feminist scholars who have redrawn the political map so to speak, to include issues such as the accessibility of public transport, or the availability of affordable childcare facilities and at home nanny services.[10] The way power operates within households and families is directly related to how it operates in governments, political parties, various social movements, and even communities as a whole. Take for example the international economy, and the widely accepted idea that its care is dependent upon maintaining stable political and social relations between nations. Enloe and Connell would argue that “as mothers, schoolmates, girlfriends, sexual partners, wives etc.”; women have been largely responsible for the creation of these stable communities.[11] In a similar vein, quoted in an Al Qaeda women’s magazine, a contributor describes the role of females in creating and sustaining stable communities for their warrior husbands:

A Muslim woman is a female Jihad warrior always and everywhere. She is a female Jihad warrior who wages Jihad by means of funding Jihad. She wages Jihad by means of waiting for her Jihad warrior husband, and when she educates her children to that which Allah loves. She wages Jihad when she supports Jihad when she calls for Jihad in word, deed, belief, and prayer.[12]

In this way, it could be argued that the ‘jihad warriors’ of Al Qaeda need this sense of feminine support in order to construct their own masculinity.

In the aftermath of the September 11 (9/11) attacks, analysis of the events, from looking at the individuals who did the attacking, to those who helped save lives on the ground, and politicians and government officials who attempted to make sense of the events in their aftermath, seemed to be predominantly about men. Yet interestingly, this framework was not connected to ideas of manhood or masculinity. In their article on sex, gender and the attacks of 9/11, Charlesworth and Chinkin imagine what the analysis would have been like if the scenario was the opposite – if all the hijackers were women, and all those involved in intelligence gathering and analysis, as well as those making decisions in the White House and world leaders were women. They argued that such a scenario would inevitably lead to an analysis of the events based explicitly on sex.

It would be assumed first that the hijackings and the response to them were connected to femaleness in some defining way. A phenomenon of nineteen women hijackers willing to kill themselves for a cause would very likely be read as a product of women’s instability, excitability, and unreliability.[13]

And yet, if an attack is perpetrated solely by men, the sex of the offenders remains unexceptional and unremarked.

In their article on the influence of gender on political protest, Einwohner et al. argue that “scholars have paid relatively little attention to how gender affects social movement structures and processes and how social movements, in turn, affect gender.”[14] Since writing this article, due to the work of feminist sociologists, there has been an increase in research on gender and social movements, which has contributed to our understanding of the many complex ways in which gender has influenced, and is shaped by various social movements. The first wave of gendered social movement analyses focused on women’s movements, and movements specifically addressing gender issues. Recently however, there has been a lot of argument in support of extending the analysis of gender and social

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movements to include the study of movements, which, on the surface, are not about women or gender. For example, in their analysis of the gendered face of terrorism, Ferber and Kimmel argue that the “ideology and organisation of many terrorist groups are saturated with gendered meanings, both as the analytic prism through which they view their situation, and also as a means of political mobilisation”.^[15] For these scholars, the gendering of terrorism is often a response to the terror of gender.^[16] That is, a fear amongst certain radical groups as to the changing nature of what it means to be masculine or feminine. They focus on the attacks of 9/11 and contend that this manifestation of terrorism provides men with an opportunity to perform and reassert their masculinity.^[17] If we take this understanding, and apply it to displays of spectacular violence, it could be argued that they too represent opportunities for expressions of masculinity. In order to understand how and why, however, we first need to look at the construction of masculine narratives within Al Qaeda.

Post-modernists focus on knowledge and power – specifically, how power is discursively constructed and thus, how the politics of gender are about contestations over meanings and symbols.^[18] In this sense, in order for men to be looked upon as masculine, women represent very public symbols that need to be controlled in order to maintain their power and masculinity. For example, the veiling of women; by virtue of being such a visible act, represents an example of a previously apolitical symbol that, by becoming involved in negotiations with the state, has been transformed into a public symbol that is open to manipulation from different sides.^[19] Another example can be seen in the comparison between a woman's body, with a given land or territory. This was a common feature of the Palestinian national narrative and could arguably be applied to the case of Al Qaeda. On the Palestinian Authority website they speak of ‘the rape of Palestine’:

This metaphor of the loss of Palestine as rape... signifies the loss of Palestine as loss of female virginity but also of male virility, since the virile actor now is the rapist/enemy. This male loss of virility is inscribed as Palestinian defeat.^[20]

Within this narrative, the female body is possessed by others, thus the invasion and occupation of Muslims lands by foreign forces is a symbolic, psychic, *and* physical humiliation. If we apply this notion to the masculine narrative of Al Qaeda, control of women becomes a symbol of power that has been taken away from the secular State or foreign enemies. This symbol needs to be protected in order to maintain a religious society and resist against perceived humiliations from the West. Moreover, the argument could be made that Al Qaeda's use of spectacular violence is also linked with female subordination. In Katharina Von Knop's article on women in Al Qaeda, she argues that because terrorist acts occur mainly in the public realm, from which women are excluded, the participation of females in terrorism could be linked with female subordination.^[21] In other words, maintaining the asymmetrical relationship between men and women ensures that women will continue to need men to protect them, according to Al Qaeda's narrative. It also ensures that Al Qaeda will continue to have a symbol, which they can then construct their masculine narratives against.

Understanding the internal workings of masculinity in Al Qaeda is important to make sense of their use of spectacular violence as an enactment of masculinity. Men's sense of their own manhood has derived from their perceptions of other men's masculinity and of the femininities of women. Consequently, in order to make ‘feminist sense’ of their use of spectacular violence,^[22] we have to understand their notions of masculinity and how they see themselves in contrast to women. Traditionally, men in Al Qaeda have confined women to the “guarded sphere” of the family and household.^[23] In constructing themselves in contrast to this, the role of men could be seen as outside the house and family environment and yet, as we know, it is rarely this simple. In her article on Taliban and Al Qaeda brides, Amy Waldman looks at the role of women in the processes that have nurtured warlordism.^[24] Commenting on this role, Cynthia Enloe states the following: “let's talk about warlordism and marriage...as if marriage also were a transaction of power that created a social system that allowed Al Qaeda Arab male fighters (and others)...to confirm their masculinities in wartime.”^[25] In this sense, women are no longer simply the subjects of masculinity but are active agents themselves, aiding in the construction of masculine narratives by providing a ‘nurturing’ environment in which men can identify as masculine. In turn, the construction of narratives resulted in the creation of frameworks, which gave meaning to the use of spectacular violence as a tool for resistance. In other words, the presence of these frameworks has enabled spectacular violence to emerge as a form of ‘communicative power’ whereby Al Qaeda is able to resist the notion of feminine humiliation and communicate ideas of their own masculinity.

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This paper has argued that Al Qaeda's construction of masculinity has given meaning to the use of spectacular violence as a tool for the restoration of a damaged sense of masculinity. If we consider this from a gendered perspective, it could be argued that this experience of emasculation reveals a sense of gendered humiliation.[26] In Al Qaeda's case, humiliation has come about as a result of failure to protect women, both as an embodiment of territory and a symbol of a pious Muslim society. In Avishai Margalit's examination of what constitutes a 'decent society', he defines humiliation as "any sort of behavior or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured...humiliation is injury to human dignity." [27] Because this paper's focus is on Al Qaeda, and the organisation arguably defines itself as Islamic, it is necessary to conceptualise this notion within an Islamic discourse. Thus, the 'humiliation of Islam' can be seen as the "imposition of impotence on Islam/Muslims by those with greater and undeserved power, a condition understood to violate biological gender and sexual norms as well as the divinely given socio-moral hierarchy upon which justice depends." [28] Using these definitions, the final section will examine in greater detail the notion of humiliation as a tool for both the justification of the use of spectacular violence, and also as a mobilising discourse for the purposes of resistance.

If we understand humiliation as any sort of behaviour or condition that goes against gender and sex norms, then any retaliatory act of spectacular violence can be considered an enactment of a particular version of masculinity. For example, the introduction of an Al Qaeda training manual calls for retaliation for every "sister believer...whose clothes the criminals have stripped off...whose hair the oppressors have shaved...whose body has been abused by the human dogs," furthermore, "Pledge O Sister...to retaliate for you against every dog who touch you even with a bad word". [29] Within this narrative, women continually feature as the root cause for masculine humiliation and represent a powerful trigger for violent retaliatory resistance. Moreover:

[T]heir bodies are the primary battleground for the humiliation of Islam; their degradation is the archetypal trigger for retaliatory humiliation; their voices are a chorus of praise for such acts; and their virginity is the eschatological reward for those who die humiliating the enemies of Islam. [30]

Indeed, it is perhaps unsurprising that women often feature as virginal rewards for men who undertake violent acts. With several terrorist organisations proclaiming that martyrs will receive seventy-two virgins as their reward in heaven, [31] the ties between masculinity and virility are clear. In the final instructions given to the hijackers of 9/11, the men were instructed to "sharpen their knives for the slaughter (*dhabihad*), and heed to the call of the *hur al-ayn* (black-eyed ones) awaiting them in paradise". [32] This quote demonstrates the way in which these movements manipulate their male followers to see the path of violent action as the only avenue available for them to achieve manhood.

A further example can be seen in the description of psychological torture techniques allegedly used by foreign 'secret agents', including "threatening to summon his [the 'brother' or member of Al Qaeda's] sister, mother, wife or daughter and rape her". [33] Here, as elsewhere, the bodily integrity of women implicitly serves as a measure or mirror of Muslim masculinity: as female purity reflects the ability of men to guard and protect, a woman's violation demonstrates male impotence and subsequently, their humiliation. [34] The position of women in society, and specifically the question of their body, has long been a key symbol for Islamists who sought to strengthen the institutions of cultural, social and religious control in the Middle East. Subsequently, as a significant site of domination and resistance, the use of spectacular violence in order to defend this symbol is seen as justified. It is important to note that this paper does claim that there exists a single variable called 'masculinity' that somehow explains the concept of humiliation. Rather, the tension between a dominant understanding of masculinity, and a set of transformations that jeopardize the possibility of performing it (specifically the protection and control of women), translates the experience of imposed powerlessness at the heart of humiliation into emasculation. [35]

Another important aspect to consider, when examining the notion of humiliation within the Al Qaeda discourse, is its ability to act as a mobilising discourse for the purposes of resistance. Specifically, its ability to operate as an effective instrument for the "political mobilisation of masculinities". [36] This is not to suggest that women cannot, by definition, be humiliated also. Rather, in seeking to understand humiliation as a mobilising discourse for the use of spectacular violence, it is necessary to focus on the framework of masculinity. The projection of humiliation within Al Qaeda discourse mobilises a normative masculinity, [37] still widely constituted in terms of power to provide, protect, and

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control, an understanding that clusters females as the objects of such power rather than as themselves agents.[38] “Do not accept humiliation and disgrace. Disobey orders and oppose them.”[39] This statement, also from the training manual, demonstrates how Al Qaeda discourse on humiliation can be understood as producing a particular conception of Muslim masculinity that needs to be mobilised against.

In order to inspire mass mobilisation within the movement, the leadership of Al Qaeda created collective action frames that were constructed around the discourse of humiliation and the idea that the only way to reverse this humiliation was to take up violent resistance. According to Schock, in order for these frameworks to be effective,[40] they must “successfully critique the dominant belief system that legitimises the status quo and provide alternative belief systems that legitimate non-institutional political action.”[41] In his ‘Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places’, Osama bin Laden states the following:

Where are the noble men defending noble women by force of arms? Some shames can never otherwise be blotted out; death is better than life in humiliation (*dhull*).[42]

Use of the term ‘noble’ could be understood as having a religious or masculine connotation – a ‘noble man’ as being strong and faithful. ‘Shame’ and ‘humiliation’ are self-explanatory and link back to the discourse of humiliation. The use of ‘force’ and ‘defending’ in the same sentence is interesting (albeit, not surprising) as it constructs a framework for violence that justifies the use of violent retaliation. While this represents just one example, it nevertheless demonstrates how the leadership of Al Qaeda has used collective action frames to shape the discussion and persuade its audience that their solution (the use of spectacular violence) is the most appropriate, or ‘noble’ one.

In conclusion, this paper has argued that Al Qaeda’s construction of masculinity has given meaning to the use of spectacular violence as a tool for the restoration of a damaged sense of masculinity. Following Connell’s discourse on ‘hegemonic masculinity’, the relational character of gender means that masculinity is socially constructed in contrast to some form of femininity. Thus, Al Qaeda’s experience of emasculation reveals a sense of gendered humiliation that has come about as a result of their failure to protect women, both as an embodiment of territory and a symbol of a pious Muslim society. Within the Al Qaeda framework of masculinity, the humiliation of women deploys certain symbols and rhetoric of emasculation to conjure historical, cultural, and political experiences of powerlessness. In this way, spectacular violence can be understood as a demonstration of masculinity in the form of retaliatory resistance.

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Footnotes

[1] Zalewski, M. (1995) in Charlesworth, H & Chinkin, C. 'Sex, Gender and September 11', *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (July, 2002), 600-606 at 604.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Connell, R. *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 183.

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[4] Khalili, L. 'Gendered Practices of Counterinsurgency', *Review of International Studies*, (2010), 1-21 at 3.

[5] 'The international is personal' implies that governments depend on certain kinds of allegedly private relationships in order to conduct their foreign affairs: "To operate in the international arena, governments seek other government's recognition of their sovereignty; but they also depend on ideas about masculinised dignity and feminised sacrifice to sustain that sense of autonomous nationhood". Enloe, C. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 351.

[6] Cohn, C & Enloe, C. 'A Conversation with Cynthia Enloe: Feminists Look at Masculinity and the Men Who Wage War', *Chicago Journals*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2003), 1187-1207 at 1191.

[7] Davis, K & Fisher, S. 'Power and the Female Subject' in, K & Fisher, S (ed.) *Negotiating at the Margins: The Gendered Discourses of Power and Resistance* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 3-20 at 8.

[8] Connell, R & Messerschmidt, J. 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (December, 2005), 829-859 at 848.

[9] 'Emphasised femininity' was originally formulated together with hegemonic masculinity as 'hegemonic femininity'. It was later renamed to highlight the asymmetrical position of women to men in a patriarchal gender order.

[10] Enloe, C. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 349.

[11] Enloe, C. *Manoeuvres: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Connell, R & Messerschmidt, J. 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (December, 2005), 829-859 at 848.

[12] Von Knop, K. 'The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol.30, No. 5 (2007), 397-414 at 379.

[13] Charlesworth, H & Chinkin, C. 'Sex, Gender and September 11', *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (July, 2002), 600-606 at 602.

[14] Einwohner, R; Hollander, J & Olson, T. 'Engendering Social Movements: Cultural Images and Movement Dynamics', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (October, 2000), 679-699 at 679.

[15] Ferber, A & Kimmel, M. 'The Gendered Face of Terrorism', *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May, 2008), 870-887 at 870.

[16] Ibid., 874.

[17] Ibid., 877.

[18] Davis, K & Fisher, S. 'Power and the Female Subject' in, K & Fisher, S (ed.) *Negotiating at the Margins: The Gendered Discourses of Power and Resistance* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 3-20 at 7.

[19] De Koning, M. 'The 'Other' Political Islam: Understanding Salafi Politics' in Boubekeur, A; Roy, O. *Whatever Happened to the Islamists? Salafis, Heavy Metal Muslims, and the lure of Consumerist Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 153-175 at 162.

[20] Amireh, A. 'Between Complicity and Subversion: Body Politics in Palestinian National Narrative', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 102, No. 4 (Fall, 2003), 747-772 at 751.

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[21] Von Knop, K. 'The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol.30, No. 5 (2007), 397-414 at 400.

[22] The expression 'make feminist sense' can be found in the following book by Cynthia Enloe: Enloe, C. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 357-58

[23] Tripp, C. 'Acting and Acting Out: Conceptions of political participation in the Middle East' in Freedman, M; Vincent, A. *Comparative Political Thought: Theorizing Practices* (London: Routledge, 2013), 88-109 at 101.

[24] Waldman, A. 'A Nation Challenged: Kabul Brides Married Taliban for Better, Then for Worse' in *New York Times* (31 December 2001), available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/31/world/nation-challenged-promises-kabul-brides-married-taliban-for-better-then-for.html>>, accessed on 7 January 2016.

[25] Cohn, C & Enloe, C. 'A Conversation with Cynthia Enloe: Feminists Look at Masculinity and the Men Who Wage War', *Chicago Journals*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2003), 1187-1207 at 1199.

[26] Ferber, A & Kimmel, M. 'The Gendered Face of Terrorism', *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May, 2008), 870-887 at 877.

[27] Margalit, V. *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9, 262.

[28] Euben, R. 'Humiliation and the Political Mobilisation of Masculinity', *Political Theory*, Vol.43, No. 4 (May, 2015), 500-532 at 505.

[29] Post, J. *Military Studies in the Jihad against Tyrants: The Al Qaeda Training Manual* (USAF Counter-proliferation Centre, March 2004), 3.

[30] Euben, R. 'Humiliation and the Political Mobilisation of Masculinity', *Political Theory*, Vol.43, No. 4 (May, 2015), 500-532 at 508.

[31] Ferber, A & Kimmel, M. 'The Gendered Face of Terrorism', *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May, 2008), 870-887 at 876.

[32] Makiya, K & Mneimneh, H. (2002) in Euben, R. 'Humiliation and the Political Mobilisation of Masculinity', *Political Theory*, Vol.43, No. 4 (May, 2015), 500-532 at 510.

[33] Post, J. *Military Studies in the Jihad against Tyrants: The Al Qaeda Training Manual* (USAF Counter-proliferation Centre, March 2004), 145.

[34] Euben, R. 'Humiliation and the Political Mobilisation of Masculinity', *Political Theory*, Vol.43, No. 4 (May, 2015), 500-532 at 508.

[35] Ibid., 516.

[36] Kimmel, M. 'Globalisation and Its Mal(e)contents: The Gendered Moral and Political Economy of Terrorism', *International Sociology*, Vol.18, No. 3 (2003), 603-620 at 606.

[37] 'Normative Masculinity' is a term given to a conception of manhood that dominates in a particular time and place: it "sets the standards for male demeanour, thinking and action... [it] is more than an 'ideal', it is assumptive, widely held, and has the quality of appearing to be 'natural'". Nagel, J. 'Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol.21, No. 2 (March, 1998) 242-269 at 247

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[38]Euben, R. 'Humiliation and the Political Mobilisation of Masculinity', *Political Theory*, Vol.43, No. 4 (May, 2015), 500-532 at 514.

[39] Post, J. *Military Studies in the Jihad against Tyrants: The Al Qaeda Training Manual* (USAF Counter-proliferation Centre, March 2004), 148.

[40] The term 'effective' is used here to denote 'having an effect', be it positive or negative. It should not be confused with the idea of 'effective' that is commonly associated with being 'successful'.

[41] Schock, K. *Unarmed Insurrections – People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 27.

[42] Bin Laden, O (1996) in Euben, R. 'Humiliation and the Political Mobilisation of Masculinity', *Political Theory*, Vol.43, No. 4 (May, 2015), 500-532 at 510.

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