OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS | Security Dialogue

The Moral Imperative to Fight: Grievous and Combat-Driven Masculinities in the Syrian War

Journal:	*Security Dialogue*
Manuscript ID	SDI-24-241.R3
Manuscript Type:	Regular Article
Keywords (Please search on this list or key in user defined keyword):	grevious-masculinity, armed groups, Syrian civil war, honor, identity construction, combat-driven masculinity
null:	

Abstract:	Why do individuals join and persist in armed conflict even under conditions of extreme risk and loss? This article examines how political grievances are internalised through gendered identity to produce a moral imperative to fight in the Syrian civil war. Drawing on over 200 hours of interviews with Syrian fighters conducted between 2022 and 2024, including in-depth interviews with thirty-four Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters analysed in this article, and complemented by new follow-up fieldwork conducted in Syria in 2025 after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, the article develops a relational framework linking structural grievance, emotional experience, and masculine subjectivity. The study introduces two interrelated analytical typologies. Grievous masculinity describes a gendered response to humiliation, political dispossession, and moral injury that constructs violence as an obligation to restore dignity and honour. Combat-driven masculinity emerges through the embodied practices of fighting, where risk, sacrifice, and camaraderie consolidate masculine identity and sustain participation in violence. Integrating feminist security studies, just war theory, and critical masculinity scholarship, the article conceptualises the moral imperative to fight as a gendered logic that fuses emotional injury with ethical justification for armed mobilisation. By moving beyond material or ideological explanations, it demonstrates how masculine identities operate as affective and moral economies that sustain combatant persistence and reproduce militarised social orders. The findings advance theoretical and policy discussions on gender and armed mobilisation, offering insights for future research on military integration, combatant transitions, and violent behaviour in postwar Syria and comparable conflict contexts.

Dr. Rahaf Aldoughli

School of Global Affairs, Lancaster University, UK.

Lecturer in Middle East and North African Studies

r.aldoughli@lancaster.ac.uk

The Moral Imperative to Fight: Grievous and Combat-Driven Masculinities in the Syrian War

Abstract

Why do individuals join and persist in armed conflict even under conditions of extreme risk and loss? This article examines how political grievances are internalised through gendered identity to produce a moral imperative to fight in the Syrian war. Drawing on over 200 hours of interviews with Syrian fighters conducted between 2022 and 2024, including in-depth interviews with thirty-four Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters analysed in this article, and complemented by new follow-up fieldwork conducted in Syria in 2025 after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, the article develops a relational framework linking structural grievance, emotional experience, and masculine subjectivity.

The study introduces two interrelated analytical typologies. *Grievous masculinity* describes a gendered response to humiliation, political dispossession, and moral injury that constructs violence as an obligation to restore dignity and honour. *Combat-driven masculinity* emerges through the embodied practices of fighting, where risk, sacrifice, and camaraderie consolidate masculine identity and sustain participation in violence. Integrating feminist security studies, just war theory, and critical masculinity scholarship, the article conceptualises the *moral imperative to fight* as a gendered logic that fuses emotional injury with ethical justification for armed mobilisation. By moving beyond material or ideological explanations, it demonstrates how masculine identities operate as affective and moral economies that sustain combatant persistence and reproduce militarised social orders. The findings advance theoretical and policy discussions on gender and armed mobilisation, offering insights for future research on military integration, combatant transitions, and violent behaviour in postwar Syria and comparable conflict contexts.

Keywords: Grievances, masculinity, Syria, fighters, armed groups.

Introduction

In the early days of the Syrian uprising, Daraa, a small city in southern Syria, became the crucible of resistance against the Assad regime. The initial spark was the arrest and brutal treatment of a group of young boys for spraying anti-regime graffiti on a school wall, with phrases such as "The people want the downfall of the regime" echoing wider Arab Spring sentiments. The situation escalated when rumours spread that women from the families of these detained youths were also arrested after demanding their sons' release. The streets of Daraa soon filled with protesters chanting "Death rather than humiliation!" (*al-mawt wa-lā al-madhalla*) and "Our honor is more valuable than our lives" (*karāmatnā aghlā min ḥayātinā*), expressions reflecting the deep cultural significance of honour and masculinist protection. These slogans encapsulated the societal outrage and grievances that fuelled mass mobilisation.

While these early events reveal the centrality of honour and masculinity in shaping resistance, academic scholarship has yet to fully examine how such gendered motivations intersect with grievances in the Syrian conflict. In my encounters with fighters affiliated with Syrian National Army (SNA) groups, sentiments such as "our land is our honour" (*ʾarḍna hiya al-ʿirḍ*) and "our revolution is our honour" (*thawratunā hiya sharafna*) were repeatedly articulated as guiding principles of continued commitment to violence. Fighters framed participation not merely as political duty but as integral to their identities as men. Concepts of honour, family, manliness, and protection were central to their narratives, revealing how grievances became embedded within masculine self-conceptions and sustained armed mobilisation up to the fall of Assad on 8 December 2024. These narratives of collective honour and humiliation expose what I conceptualise as a **moral imperative to fight**: a belief that taking up arms constitutes not simply a strategic choice but an ethical act to reclaim dignity and manhood.

This article advances the analysis of Syrian fighters' masculinities beyond essentialist or static frameworks by examining how grievances are internalised through gendered identity. Traditional grievance theory, often structured around a greed–grievance binary, fails to capture this intersection of grievance and masculinity. While Gurr (1970) emphasised political exclusion and Stewart's (2008, 2010) horizontal inequality framework highlighted identity-based inequality, these approaches do not adequately explain how grievances are experienced as threats to masculine

identity that mobilise armed resistance (see also Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006). Although scholarship integrating masculinity into analyses of Syrian fighters remains limited, studies of jihadi masculinities in other contexts provide useful insights. Atran (2010), for example, traces how masculine ideals shape radical mobilisation, while Nilsson (2024) demonstrates how notions of heroic hypermasculinity structured foreign fighters' recruitment and battlefield experiences.

Existing approaches to hegemonic and militarised masculinity explain how gender norms structure behaviour but often overlook how emotional experiences of humiliation, loss, and moral violation transform masculine identity into a perceived obligation to fight (Connell 1995; Duriesmith 2018). While Connell conceptualises masculinity primarily as a configuration of social practices embedded within gender hierarchies, this article extends that framework by foregrounding the emotional and moral processes through which individuals internalise gender norms in conflict settings. Masculinity is therefore understood not only as enacted through practices but as constituted through affective experiences of humiliation, moral injury, and identity disruption that reshape subjectivity and orient individuals towards violent action. The typologies developed here address this gap by tracing how experiences of grievance are internalised and converted into gendered moral imperatives for violence.

This conceptualisation resonates with debates within Feminist Critical Military Studies (FCMS), which emphasise the relational and context-dependent nature of militarised masculinities. Henry (2017) critiques how approaches that foreground identity categories can become descriptive exercises that fail to interrogate the militarist and patriarchal structures sustaining male power, and calls instead for analysis of how militarised masculinity is co-constituted through broader social processes. Similarly, Higate (2012) pluralises military masculinities by demonstrating their contested and fluid character, shaped through the interaction of gender norms, institutional cultures, and political economies. This article follows these insights by treating masculinity as an emotionally constituted and relational process rather than a stable attribute or social role. In doing so, it builds on Chodorow's (1995) account of gendered subjectivity as an inextricable fusion of cultural representation and personal emotional experience, an approach that differs from Connell's (1995) emphasis on masculinity as configurations of social practice within institutional hierarchies, and instead foregrounds the affective and moral mechanisms through which

individuals internalise gendered obligations to fight. Building on FCMS scholarship and my previous research on Syrian fighters, which demonstrates how emotional hardship, uncertainty, and relational ties produce distinct political subjectivities (Aldoughli 2024a; 2024b; 2025a), I conceptualise masculinity as a dynamic process shaped through affective experiences of conflict, shared emotional bonds, and perceptions of grievance. The analytical focus here centres on the gendered constitution of masculine identity in conflict; examining how these processes intersect with class, sectarian, and regional identities constitutes an important avenue for future research.

The article's core analysis draws on thirty-four in-depth interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024, complemented by follow-up fieldwork after Assad's fall. From these data, I develop two overlapping analytical typologies: **grievous masculinity**, a masculine identity rooted in humiliation and collective injustice, and **combat-driven masculinity**, a form tied to martial valor and the embodied performance of violence. Fighters' narratives are infused with emotional experiences of loss, betrayal, and fear of dishonour, which become enduring forces shaping identity and action (Aldoughli 2024b, 1189–1193; Aldoughli 2024c, 3–6; Aldoughli 2025a).

The moralised dimension of violence observed in these narratives resonates with Parsons' (2023) critique of Just War Theory, which exposes how the notion of the "moral equality of combatants" rests on a gendered ontology of manhood. Parsons shows how just war ethics historically constructs men as naturally predisposed to sacrifice and protect, transforming violence into moral duty. This moral imperative is not universal but socially produced through masculine ideals of honour and protection. In Syria, such ideals are embedded within a political culture shaped by Baathist authoritarianism, where belonging has long been tied to the willingness to die and kill for the nation (Aldoughli 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2024c). The fighters' narratives documented here thus exemplify the internalisation of masculine moral duty as justification for violence.

While engaging moral questions surrounding participation in war, this article does not adopt a conventional Just War framework. Rather, drawing on feminist critiques (Wilcox 2010), it examines how moral reasoning itself reproduces gendered hierarchies by framing war as the natural domain of male duty and protection. Masculinity is analysed as a discursive justification for participation in violence, shaping fighters' understandings of honour, protection, and righteous

action. Although such moralised logics also inform women's participation in armed groups, including female combatants in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (North Press Agency 2024), the analysis here focuses on male fighters' narratives.

Accordingly, the article does not seek to catalogue all forms of masculinity among Syrian armed groups or reduce Syrian masculinism to wartime dynamics alone (Aldoughli 2019a; 2019b; 2021a; 2021b; 2024a). Rather, it examines how specific models of masculinity intersect with grievance and combat, linking family honour, protection, and armed group affiliation. Drawing on Aldoughli's (2024a, 34) conceptualisation of masculinity as expressive behaviour produced through constant cultural repetition and experimentation, the article demonstrates that masculinity is both a product and a driver of conflict.

At the time of the article's initial drafting, Assad's regime remained in power; by the time of revision, Syria had entered its post-Assad transition. My earlier research identified two key patterns (grievous masculinity and combat-driven masculinity) among fighters operating under Baathist authoritarianism. Following Assad's fall, however, these masculinities did not diminish. Instead, as fighters transitioned into positions of authority and nation-building, they became reconfigured through intensified grievances and sectarian victimhood.

Recent work (Aldoughli 2025b; 2025c; forthcoming) demonstrates how emergent masculinities under Ahmad al-Shar'a's leadership were implicated in violence in the coast and Sweida. The tribal mobilisation in Sweida in July 2025, including practices such as moustache shaving (*qaṣ al-shawārib*) targeting Druze civilians, illustrates how gendered symbolic violence operates to reinforce sectarian antagonisms. These developments highlight the persistence and transformation of wartime masculinities within post-conflict political orders.

Such shifts carry implications for political settlements and Security Sector Reform (SSR). My recent research shows that international stabilisation efforts, particularly those led by Western donors, have largely neglected masculinity as a driver of conflict despite its relevance to radicalisation and postwar violence. Consultations with British officials and representatives of EU-backed programmes (conducted through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations between 2023 and 2025) revealed that gendered dynamics of mobilisation remained largely

unaddressed, raising concerns that ignoring militarised masculinities may undermine reform efforts.

Revisiting this paper in light of post-Assad developments, I therefore return to the typologies of grievous and combat-driven masculinities as analytical tools for tracing evolving patterns of masculine subjectivity. Drawing on three periods of follow-up fieldwork in Syria, including interviews with former fighters who transitioned into administrative and military roles, I demonstrate that these masculinities have been reconfigured rather than displaced. The typologies developed here thus provide a framework for analysing transformations in masculine identity across shifting political contexts and their implications for postwar governance and sectarian mobilisation.

The article proceeds as follows. It first provides background on SNA groups and the militarisation of the Syrian conflict, followed by methodological and positionality considerations. It then reconceptualises masculinity and grievance theory, problematising hegemonic masculinity as a political structure and advancing a relational approach to gender and mobilisation. The empirical analysis examines grievous and combat-driven masculinities among Syrian fighters before the conclusion reflects on their persistence in Syria's fragile post-Assad transition.

Background of SNA and Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Conflict, which began with hundreds of rival rebel groups have gradually narrowed to include only a few major factions, with the role of the largest cohesive groups being occupied by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as one major group controlling Idlib, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that control north east Syria, and Syrian National Army (SNA) backed by Turkey controlling northern Syria. Since 2017, SNA groups have witnessed significant restructuring of their internal military organization and changes at the level of leaders' shifts in roles and the formation of three Corps. These armed groups, operating inside the framework of the Syrian National Army, exercise authority over opposition-held territories in the northwestern region of Syria, particularly in the rural districts of the Aleppo Governorate. The factions, namely the Sham

Front, Sultan Murad, Hamzat, and Amshat, exhibit unique attributes that collectively set them apart from other Syrian factions. Their significant presence in northern Syria, close connections with Turkey, control over crucial border areas, large number of fighters, and history of defections and mergers make them suitable candidates for this study (Grinstead 2018). Significantly, these specific groups are not classified as terrorist organizations and do not consist of foreign combatants.

This coalition (SNA) comprises a diverse array of factions, including three military corps that exercise control over northern Aleppo. These corps are socially heterogeneous, drawing their fighters from a wide range of class backgrounds, regional affiliations, and ethnic groups. Due to the multifaceted nature of these groups, the changes that take place during conflict following external states interventions, and the resulting shifts in internal structure and identity, the motivations of fighters are unlikely to remain constant and can be influenced by various factors, including the role of external actors and their financial support, illicit economies, and internal conflicts within these groups, either due to ideological competition or utilitarian gains (Achcar 2016, 19–20).

Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the Syrian National Army (SNA) entered a transitional phase marked by both institutional reconfiguration and geopolitical recalibration. Under the emergent leadership of Ahmad al-Sharaa, efforts were launched to consolidate the remnants of opposition forces into a unified national defense framework. Within this process, elements of the SNA were symbolically incorporated into the newly established Ministry of Defense, signaling a formal, if partial, shift from their previous status as Turkey-backed proxy forces toward nominal integration under central authority. Nonetheless, the SNA's structural autonomy and its enduring logistical and financial dependence on Ankara reveal that Turkey continues to preserve these formations as a strategic asset, particularly as a counterweight to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the north. Thus, while al-Sharaa's consolidation has reduced the SNA's direct political leverage, it has not fully severed Turkish tutelage. The SNA today occupies a liminal position: subordinated to the new national order yet retained within Turkey's regional security calculus. This ambivalent integration underscores the persistence of militarized masculinities, factional loyalty networks, and the geopolitical instrumentalization of armed groups in Syria's post-Assad landscape (New Lines 2025d; The World Today 2025e).

Positionality, Methodology and Limitations

When I began researching fighters' motivations in 2020, my objective was to investigate the reasons for joining armed groups and the factors sustaining their continued participation in conflict. These drivers of violent behaviour combine emotional, psychological, and socio-political dynamics that shape decisions to persist in war (Aldoughli 2024c, 2024d, 2025a). Religious teachings enforced across SNA factions, ethnic and tribal affiliations, and variations in material incentives each played important roles in shaping loyalty and affiliation. For instance, fighters in the First and Third Corps typically received salaries as low as USD 20 per month, while those in the Second Corps were paid considerably higher amounts, up to USD 150.

While these disparities reflect differences in external resources, they were often downplayed by fighters themselves, who described economic motivations as secondary to their revolutionary self-perceptions (Aldoughli 2024b, 2024d, 2025a). Nonetheless, financial incentives were not irrelevant: many fighters justified recruitment into foreign deployments, such as Libya and Niger, in material terms. The interplay between material gains and ideological or gendered self-understandings therefore proved central to my inquiry. Over time, it became clear that these narratives were saturated with masculinist notions of grievance, protection, and sacrifice, and that my own gendered positionality shaped how such narratives were expressed.

As a Syrian woman and academic, my presence shaped how participants framed their narratives. Many foregrounded heroic and patriarchal ideals in interviews with me, emphasising their roles as providers and protectors. This was reflected in their frequent use of explicitly gendered language, such as "as you know, you are a woman and know that we must protect women and the vulnerable" or "you are a woman, and you know that this is what should be done." I interpret these statements as shaped by the gendered dynamics of the interview setting, reflecting a performative articulation of masculine responsibility produced within the relational context of the research encounter (Pini 2005). In some cases, my interlocutors enacted traditional gender expectations toward me (arranging male escorts for travel or inviting me into their relatives' homes where women would cook), thus reproducing gendered hierarchies within the interview setting itself. These dynamics underscored how positionality is not incidental but constitutive of

fieldwork: it shapes access, trust, and the narratives that emerge (Aldoughli 2023, 145, 147; Rowe 2014, 628).

My origin as a Damascene, perceived Sunni background, and unveiled appearance further complicated insider–outsider dynamics. Fighters often questioned whether my British citizenship undermined my ability to grasp the depth of their grievances. As one interlocutor insisted, "academics often analyse the Syrian revolution coldly and miss the real meanings of repression and humiliation that led us to carry arms" (Interview 11). Another explained: "we are relegated to being terrorists or jihadists, just because we chose to defend our families and dignity" (Interview 6). Such exchanges confirmed my choice to centre fighters' narratives, recognising how their grievances were mediated through gendered identities.

Feminist scholarship has long highlighted how violence affects women and civilians (see Gordon 2023; **Cockburn 2004**) and challenged the stereotype of women as natural peacebuilders by documenting women's participation in armed groups. My study, however, focuses on men's evolving identities as fighters, rather than on their domestic relationships. Specifically, it interrogates how involvement in conflict reshaped their subjectivities, grievances, and masculine self-perceptions.

Methodologically, I conducted 34 in-depth interviews with SNA fighters between 2022 and 2024, amounting to over 200 hours of interviews. In addition, I conducted three follow-up fieldwork visits to Syria after the fall of the Assad regime (2025), during which I re-interviewed 27 former fighters who had transitioned into administrative and military leadership roles within emerging state structures.[1] These follow-up conversations are used to assess the transformation and persistence of the masculinities identified in the earlier phase of the research.

[1] By the time of this article's revision and publication, 27 of the 34 fighters interviewed had been integrated into Syria's emerging state apparatus, taking up positions within the Ministry of Defence (MOD) or the Ministry of Interior (MOI). This re-integration of former SNA fighters into the state security architecture is itself a salient illustration of the persistence and reconfiguration of militarised masculinities discussed in this article.

Participants, aged 24–63 and with diverse educational backgrounds, were recruited via a gatekeeper and snowball sampling. Interviews lasted two to three hours and were semi-structured, beginning with personal and familial histories before moving to political trajectories, protest experiences, and decisions to join armed groups. Building rapport was time-intensive, but it enabled fighters to speak openly about their emotional experiences and perceptions of masculinity.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using long-interview methodology (Brounéus 2011, 130; Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278–1283). Coding was conducted in three phases: initial thematic coding, axial coding to identify linkages, and selective coding to refine emergent concepts. Triangulation with documents, news reports, and secondary scholarship further strengthened validity. This iterative process was abductive: while inductively grounded in narratives, it was also theoretically informed by feminist and critical masculinity studies, allowing for the development of the typologies of "grievous" and "combat-driven" masculinities.

Methodologically, the analysis follows an **abductive logic of inquiry** (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), characteristic of interpretive and feminist research (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014), allowing theoretical insights to emerge through recursive engagement between field narratives and existing scholarship on gender and conflict. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from King's College London (project reference: LRS/DP-22/23-34063), and strict data security protocols were observed. All participants gave informed consent, and pseudonyms are used throughout. Recognising the risks to participants, interviews were anonymised, securely stored, and shared only in aggregated form.

Finally, limitations must be acknowledged. My focus on SNA fighters excludes other groups (e.g., regime forces, Syrian Democratic Forces), and the study does not extend to private-sphere impacts of fighters' participation. However, by centring identity transformation across time, this study illuminates how grievances, masculinity, and combat interact to shape Syrian fighters' enduring political subjectivities.

Reconceptualizing Masculinity and Grievances in Civil War Contexts

Since the 1980s, feminist scholars have demonstrated how war and militarism are sustained through gendered logics of power, identity, and emotion (Bracewell 2000; Enloe 1990; Mayer 2000). Armed groups reproduce nationalist discourses centred on "brotherhood" and "honor," producing what Enloe (1990, 67) describes as "masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hopes." In International Relations, feminist interventions challenged the gender-blindness of security studies and established gender as an indispensable analytical lens for understanding war and political violence (Sjoberg 2012; Peterson and Runyan 1993; Tickner 1992). Foundational works mapped how gendered imaginaries underpin conflict: Elshtain's (1985) archetypes of the "beautiful soul" and the "just warrior," Enloe's (1983) analysis of the militarisation of everyday life, Reardon's (1985) critique of the "war system," and Ruddick's (1983) emphasis on women's epistemologies of peace.

-Building on these insights, this article conceptualises masculinity not simply as a configuration of social practices or institutional roles, but as an emotionally constituted form of gendered subjectivity produced through the interaction of structural conditions, cultural norms, and affective experience. Drawing on psychoanalytic feminist theory, gender identity emerges through the interplay between cultural representations and personally experienced emotional meaning. As Nancy Chodorow argues, gendered subjectivity constitutes an "inextricable fusion" of cultural representations and emotionally structured personal experience, through which individuals internalise and reinterpret social expectations (1995, 517–518). Masculinity is therefore sustained not only through institutional power but also through affective investments (including humiliation, fear, shame, and moral aspiration) that shape how individuals experience and respond to political violence. In this framework, masculine identity is understood as relational and affective, produced through experiences of emotional hardship, dysphoric memories, and processes of identity transformation in conflict settings, as demonstrated in my previous research on Syrian fighters (Aldoughli 2024a, 1189–1193; Aldoughli 2024b; Aldoughli 2025a).

Despite advances in feminist security studies, gender remains largely peripheral in civil war research, particularly in explaining grievance formation and mobilisation. Prügl (2023, 1885) calls for gender to be employed not as a secondary variable but as a foundational framework for analysing how inequalities and gendered hierarchies catalyse violence. Dolan's (2011) analysis of northern Uganda demonstrates how conflict collapses plural masculinities into singular, militarised forms politicised by state, religious, and development actors. His notion of the "triple bind" (the entanglement of militarisation, religiosity, and neo-colonial development agendas) reveals how structural forces delimit the range of legitimate masculinities. Under such conditions, men internalise hegemonic ideals of protection, endurance, and aggression as primary means through which dignity and moral worth can be restored. The inability to fulfil socially recognised roles generates humiliation and identity disruption, producing what Dolan describes as a crisis of masculine selfhood.

While Dolan foregrounds structural conditions that produce crises of masculine identity, his analysis pays less attention to the emotional mechanisms through which such structural pressures are interpreted as personal injury or moral obligation. Similarly, Duriesmith's work on "new war masculinities" demonstrates how instability in gender orders and encounters between local and global traditions of organised violence produce hybrid configurations of militant manhood (Duriesmith 2018, 2–4). Both Dolan and Duriesmith prioritise macro-level structural configurations, tending to underplay the subjective and affective processes through which individuals internalise gendered obligations to fight. Cornwall et al. (2011) advance a complementary argument, that masculinity must be understood as a political structure embedded in economic and institutional systems, yet this emphasis similarly risks marginalising the emotional dimensions of mobilisation. Theidon (2009), writing from post-conflict Colombia, provides a closer account of how combatant identities are produced through the embodied fusion of violence, camaraderie, and gendered performance, insights that resonate directly with the Syrian material. Where this article extends Theidon is by foregrounding the prior phase of grievance formation: how political dispossession and humiliation are first internalised as moral injury, producing the conditions under which combat-driven masculinity later consolidates. The framework thus bridges structural accounts (Dolan, Duriesmith, Cornwall) and embodied accounts (Theidon) by examining the affective and moral processes through which structural grievance is

converted into gendered obligation. By doing so, it complements this literature by examining the affective and moral processes through which structural grievance is internalised as a gendered obligation to fight. By foregrounding emotional experience, this article shifts attention from gender norms or institutional structures alone to the constitution of masculine subjectivity in conflict.

My previous research similarly demonstrates how emotional hardship, dysphoric memories, and ritualised recollections of loss shape identity transformation among Syrian fighters, producing forms of psychological kinship and collective belonging (Aldoughli 2024a, 1180–1184). These processes generate identity fusion between personal and collective selves, transforming participation in violence into a moral and relational commitment. Perceived political uncertainty and emotional adversity produce distinct revolutionary subjectivities grounded in shared experiences of loss and grievance (Aldoughli 2024b). These findings highlight the importance of examining the emotional and relational processes through which grievance becomes politically meaningful.

Masculinity, however, operates not only at the level of identity but also as a political structure embedded in economic and institutional systems (Cornwall et al. 2011). Conflict spaces are deeply gender-coded, rendering men's dominance naturalised and often unexamined. A relational perspective is therefore essential to recognise that masculinities are not merely reflective of conflict dynamics but constitutive of them (Myrttinen et al. 2017; Myrttinen et al. 2025, 5–7). The present analysis focuses on the gendered constitution of masculine identity in conflict; how these dynamics are further shaped by class, age, ethno-religious identity, and sexuality constitutes an important direction for future research. Within the gendered logics analysed here, the moral imperative to fight functions as both justification and emotional grammar. Fighters' recourse to honour, duty, and protection frames violence as an ethical necessity rather than a political choice.

This moralised understanding of violence can be further illuminated through the concept of moral injury, which refers to experiences that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and produce lasting shame, guilt, and identity disruption (Litz et al. 2009, 696–699). Moral injury highlights how violence may be experienced not only as strategic action but as a response to perceived violations

of moral order that require repair. When interpreted through gendered norms of honour and protection, such moral disruption may generate a perceived obligation to restore dignity through violent action. This dynamic echoes Iris Marion Young's (2003) concept of masculinist protection, where political legitimacy is secured through the willingness to defend feminised subjects, and extends it by demonstrating how moral reasoning itself becomes gendered through experiences of grievance.

In the Syrian context, fighters' narratives reveal how political grievance is refracted through gendered ideals of honour and protection. The recurring slogan "our land is our honour" illustrates how political and material loss is experienced simultaneously as a crisis of manhood. Quest (2022) similarly shows how violence-centred masculinities sustain antagonisms between men and women, fighters and civilians, and perpetrators and victims. My interviews demonstrate how protectionist rhetoric reinforced militarised masculinity, framing the revolutionary (thāʾir) man as one who proves worth through the capacity to kill and die for honour. This parallels Theidon's (2009) findings from Colombia, where militarised masculinity fuses weapons, violence, and misogynist performances of power into enduring combatant identities that complicate disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration processes.

These dynamics highlight the persistent neglect of masculinity within disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes, where the symbolic and structural dimensions of hegemonic masculinity remain largely unaddressed. In Syria, as in Colombia, participation in armed groups is not simply an expression of grievance but a performative enactment of masculine identity. Recognising the relational and emotionalised nature of these identities is therefore critical for understanding how masculinity sustains conflict and for designing DDR frameworks that move beyond technical disarmament toward transforming gendered power relations.

While feminist security studies have long examined women's roles and the gendered impacts of war, significant gaps persist between analyses of gender ideologies in law and private life (Kandiyoti 1998; Richter-Devroe 2011) and studies addressing masculinity, violence, and authoritarianism (Haugbolle 2012; Hourani 2008). Turner (2019) further underscores how humanitarian discourses frequently feminise vulnerability, rendering men's insecurities and

emotional experiences politically invisible. Yet limited research examines how masculine identities themselves are constructed, contested, and mobilised through wartime politics, particularly in the context of civil war mobilisation.

In Syria, processes of 'othering' are often mediated through military affiliation, yet identity and belonging are premediated by an ethos of chivalric masculinity embedded in political culture and historical narratives. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's understanding of narration as a potent historical force, I argue that traditions of political and literary expression entangle individual experience with collective imaginaries, shaping how fighters narrate violence, honour, and belonging (Bhabha 1990, 1). Although personal narratives may distort empirical reality (Foster 1998, 38), they remain formative in defining 'proper behaviour' and moral obligation (Rowbotham 1973, 11). Such narratives provide the discursive terrain through which grievance becomes intelligible as a gendered experience.

This article does not present a monolithic model of masculinity (Aldoughli 2024a, 2019a, 2019b, 2024c). Masculine identities vary across race, sect, class, and sexuality and evolve through the dynamics of war (Thompson and Pleck 1995; Connell 1995). Periods of violent conflict amplify certain layers of identity over others (Ting-Toomey et al. 2000; Huddy 2001), while institutional structures and local norms shape multiple and fluid masculinities (Myrttinen et al. 2017). Taken together, structural constraints (Dolan), emotional processes of gender formation (Chodorow), and moral responses to perceived violation (moral injury) provide the mechanism through which grievance is transformed into gendered political subjectivity. This mechanism explains how structural experiences of dispossession and violence are internalised through affective and moral interpretation, producing gendered understandings of obligation, dignity, and political action.

To capture this dynamic process, this article develops two analytical typologies that illuminate distinct yet interconnected pathways of mobilisation: the grievance path and the combat path. These typologies are not fixed categories or empirically bounded identities but heuristic tools designed to trace evolving processes through which structural grievance becomes internalised as gendered political action. Rather than classifying individuals into discrete types, they identify recurring patterns in how fighters interpret experiences of humiliation, moral violation, and collective belonging. The use of typologies is therefore methodological and analytical, enabling

the study of fluid and relational processes of identity formation that cannot be reduced to static models of hegemonic masculinity or structural grievance alone.

The framework developed here identifies a sequential process through which structural conditions of violence and dispossession are translated into gendered mobilisation. First, structural conditions generate experiences of humiliation, loss, and identity disruption. Second, these experiences are internalised through emotional and moral interpretation shaped by gendered norms of honour, protection, and duty. Third, this emotional reconstruction of identity produces a perceived obligation to restore dignity through violence. The typologies developed below capture distinct moments within this process. Fighters following the grievance path are driven by deeply rooted experiences of political humiliation and dispossession, where mobilisation is perceived simultaneously as moral duty and political necessity.

Grievous masculinity denotes an emotionally constituted form of gendered subjectivity that emerges when experiences of humiliation, moral violation, and political dispossession are internalised as threats to masculine identity. It emerges when men experience emasculation and respond by reasserting manhood through protective violence. This is not a fleeting emotional reaction but a structured gendered logic through which humiliation becomes politicised and moralised. Distinct from protest masculinities (Connell 1995), which express marginalisation through oppositional behaviour, and from thwarted masculinities, which frame failure primarily as individual inadequacy, grievous masculinity transforms collective injury into moral entitlement to violent redress. It manifests in narratives of lost rujūlah (virility), vows to reclaim ʿirḍ and sharaf (honour), and accounts of humiliation and revenge. It constructs feminised figures (women, children, and the nation) as subjects requiring protection, while simultaneously emasculating enemy masculinities. Violence thus becomes sanctified as duty: a moral imperative to fight that promises the restoration of dignity and moral order.

Combat-driven masculinity, by contrast, emerges within the battlefield as a transformative arena in which masculine subjectivities are consolidated through risk, sacrifice, and collective violence. While grievous masculinity originates in experiences of loss and dispossession, combat-driven masculinity develops through the ritualised performance of violence, brotherhood, and camaraderie. Participation in combat generates new forms of belonging and recognition that

reinforce masculine identity through embodied practices of endurance and sacrifice. Together, these typologies reveal how masculinity and grievance operate as mutually constitutive logics of mobilisation, explaining both the decision to fight and the persistence of violence, while marginalising alternative or non-hegemonic masculinities within the imagined revolutionary community.

As such, structural conditions of dispossession (Dolan 2011), emotional processes of gender formation (Chodorow 1995), and moral responses to perceived violation (Litz et al. 2009) provide the mechanism through which grievance is transformed into gendered political subjectivity. The typologies developed below capture distinct moments within this process and provide an analytical framework for examining how experiences of humiliation and moral disruption are translated into gendered political action in civil war contexts.

Grievous Masculinity

Building on the conceptual framework outlined above, I treat fighters' narratives as sites where emotional injury becomes moralised through gendered norms of honour and protection, transforming grievance into a masculine obligation to fight. The aim is to trace how the moral imperative to fight (emerging at the intersection of grievance, humiliation, and masculine identity) materialises in the lived narratives of Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters. Drawing on 34 interviews, I show how emotions such as anger, shame, and emasculation are not only personal affective responses but also culturally mediated enactments of masculine honour. This section therefore situates grievance theory (Gurr 1970; Stewart 2008, 2010; Keen 2012) within feminist critiques of militarised masculinity (Dolan 2011; Theidon 2009; Cornwall et al. 2011), demonstrating that grievances in the Syrian conflict are experienced through, and articulated as, gendered moral claims.

A substantial body of scholarship has identified ideological and identity-based conflicts as fundamental drivers of violence in civil wars (Bensted 2011; Keen 2012). Additionally, other scholars have underscored that conflict is inextricably linked to the presence of perceived group differences or grievances, emphasizing that such conflicts cannot unfold without these underlying

disparities (Murshed and Tadjoeddin 2009; see also Gurr 1970; Stewart, 2008, 2010). However, while these analyses have contributed significantly to our understanding of civil conflicts, they often limit their focus to economic or culturally related inequalities, thereby overlooking the gendered dimensions of grievances and their entanglement with masculinist perceptions.

Furthermore, much of the existing research on armed groups has predominantly concentrated on their involvement in human rights violations, looting, and acts of violence, with media narratives frequently highlighting "tales of cruelty" (Ritholtz 2022, 2; Sky News 2022). Yet, as Angela Lederach compellingly argues, "violence is never the whole story" (2023, 17). This raises a critical question: what factors contribute to the emergence of such violent narratives? Scholars have explored this issue by examining how grievances, when intertwined with other experiences of conflict, shape fighters' perceptions of their identities, influence their reactions, and inform their decisions between engaging in war or pursuing peace (Petersen 2011; Suny 2004; Whitehouse 2018). These scholars argue that grievances, particularly those stemming from personal experiences or the experiences of those close to an individual, play a crucial role in motivating participation in armed rebellion. These grievances, often rooted in past injustices, tend to create expectations of similar occurrences in the future, thereby perpetuating the cycle of conflict.

Grievances can be understood as the lingering impact of events, whether they occurred in the past or are anticipated in the future, that significantly shape an individual's psychological and perceptual state. Essentially, grievances represent the enduring effects that remain after an experience. Petersen argues that these grievances leave behind traces that directly influence the trajectory of conflicts (2011, 6). He suggests that grievances are a key driving force, shaping the subjective motivations that lead individuals to engage in military actions. Petersen views grievances not just as residues of lived experiences, but as "a collection of cognitive agents and inclinations" that actively influence how individuals process information and form beliefs (ibid., 10).

The experience of violence often includes individuals' responses to the loss of their group members. While the importance of grievances arising from such violent experiences and losses is undeniable, their impact is frequently overlooked in academic studies, which tend to focus on

quantitative and statistical measures related to material factors. Petersen highlights that feelings of anger and resentment are crucial in understanding the motivations behind participation in hostilities, particularly in the context of conflicts like those in the Balkans. He identifies three key determinants: first, the experience of being subjected to violence; second, the experience of stigma and prejudice; and third, the experience of reversing that stigma (ibid., 11). The second determinant refers to the societal stigma an individual faces when they are unable to protect themselves, their family, or their group. This stigma can be countered by a perceived "reversal of status," achieved by taking up arms in self-defense, which creates a sense of superiority (ibid., 14–19).

The related question here is how do these negative emotions intertwine with fighters' perceptions of their masculinity? According to my interlocutors, political grievances overwhelmed them with 'intense emotions' (Interview 18), as their experiences of torture, repression, and direct material violence not only deepened their trauma but also reinforced their willingness to join armed groups. These grievances are not merely economic or culturally related but are deeply gendered, as they intertwine with hierarchical notions of masculinity. Horizontal inequality within this context has perpetuated feelings of political exclusion and emasculation, driving individuals to seek reassertion of their masculinity through participation in armed groups.

In conversations with current fighters among Syrian National Army (SNA) groups, their narratives illustrate how experiences of humiliation are interpreted through gendered expectations of masculine protection, producing what I conceptualise as grievous masculinity. One fighter recounted, "The police marched into our house at 9 o'clock. I was hiding in the loft where they wouldn't have found me, but I heard one security officer hitting my young sister, saying, 'If we don't find your treacherous brother, it is better to take you instead…you will provide us leisure while we find your brother' (Interview 1). This incident triggered profound feelings of emasculation and helplessness, leading the fighter to surrender himself and later resolve to seek revenge against the regime. Another fighter described witnessing security forces dragging a veiled neighbor from her home in her nightgown, saying, "I felt pity for her father and brothers, seeing their honor being trampled on. Her brothers, who were my friends, and I swore an oath to take revenge" (Interview 2). As theorised in the previous section, such moments of humiliation mark

the conversion of emotional injury into a moral imperative to fight, reframing vengeance as both ethical and masculine duty.

These wordings underscore the profound impact of this incident on his sense of masculinity. This process of 'emasculation' as a result of persistent shaming contributed to the fighter's decision to surrender himself, which was driven by an urgent need to protect his sister and reclaim his 'honor'. The subsequent torture he endured, compounded by threats of his sister's rape, deepened his resolve to seek revenge against the regime. This narrative reveals how the interplay of personal and political grievances, coupled with deeply ingrained masculinist values, can drive individuals to radicalize and take up arms. As Banerjee argues, masculinity "centers a gendered binary—martial man versus chaste woman" (2016, 2).

These accounts reveal how deeply personal experiences of emasculation and the societal expectation to protect women intersect with broader political grievances. The fighters' motivations are not solely rooted in opposition to the regime but are also profoundly influenced by gendered identities and roles. The interplay between personal grievances, gender expectations, and political violence offers a nuanced understanding of how masculinist values drive and sustain combatant behavior in the Syrian conflict. These findings empirically substantiate the theoretical claim advanced earlier that grievance and masculinity are mutually constitutive logics of mobilisation (Aldoughli 2024b, 2024d, 2025a; Dolan 2011; Theidon 2009).

This is evidenced by the fighters' awareness of long-standing grievances, in which experiences of grievances and political repression revealed the role of gendered identities in the dynamics of the Syrian civil war. One fighter explained, "We know the regime very well…I was 22 when the revolution started and there is no one day that passed without feeling oppression and fear" (Interview 3). Others mentioned the Hama Massacre as an "old living memory" and the "persecution and enforced disappearance of relatives and close friends in the 1980s by the regime" (Interview 4). Additional grievances cited included "lack of job opportunities" (Interview 5), "confiscation of their houses by the regime in central Damascus" (Interview 6), and the regime's repressive measures to relocate people to rural Damascus. In another instance, one fighter described the "excruciating pain felt after a policeman slapped him because he refused to give him a bribe" (Interview 7).

Social psychology views participation in combat as "a departure from the usual behavioral patterns within a specific social context (Webber et al. 2018, 272). It occurs when an individual undergoes an emotional event that triggers a sense of self-uncertainty. Murshed and Tadjoeddin (2009, 16) divided grievances into the components of relative deprivation, horizontal inequality, and polarization. Relative deprivation was emphasized by Gurr (1970: 24–37), who defined it as the discrepancy between what a group of people believe they deserve within society vs. the conditions that they actually experience. Gurr concluded that such relative deprivation causes intense discomfort and frustration among people who experience it, which builds up even further the longer the relative deprivation continues, eventually leading to violent outcomes. Subsequent empirical literature has found that perceptions of relative deprivation were extremely common in civil conflict situations (Horowitz 1985), though some scholars have noted that perceived deprivation does not always lead to war (Brush 1996). Here comes the construction of gendered identities during times of war and how it eventually exacerbates perceived grievances turning them into acts of violence.

The way these fighters narrated their reasons encompassed feelings of emasculation and helplessness. One fighter recounted: “The police marched into the mosque during a Friday prayer…they started hitting us with their sticks calling us traitors and coward men…they implied that we were receiving money for our protests and for demanding freedom and dignity’ (Interview 8). The fighter continued, saying, “me and my friends felt humiliated…we are not men that can be used as pawns…we have not sold our dignity (*karamah*)…yet…we are real men..we are men of the revolution (*rijal al-thawra*)’. This perception is further embedded in how the fighter constructs his identity as a heroic fighter who will protect the woman and the fatherland. This predominance of ‘heroism’ coupled with feelings of grievances in the fighters’ narratives reinforces models of strong military men ready to sacrifice and kill for the ‘revolution’. As one fighter insists:

> This revolution is about our honor…it is us…honor (*sharaf*) is about dignity and being ready to protect those weak and helpless people specially women, children and elderly. Our revolution is not only about changing the political system and overthrowing this oppressive

> regime…it is personal now…we can't go back in time and forget how the regime treated us and treated my family (Interview 9).

These manifestations of hegemonic masculinities as national exemplars constitute some of the basic tenets that become markers of defining 'men of the revolution' (*rijal al-thawra*), as one fighter insists (Interview 10). In this context, Hegemonic masculinity often includes a focus on competition, hierarchical order, and power relations among men themselves. It highlights the constructed boundaries between superior and inferior men based on physical strength. This version of masculinity became complicated with its interaction among perceived notions of the 'revolution,' manhood and militarism constituting ethos of soldiery forms that reinforces hegemonic masculinity. Hooper considers soldiering "characterized as a manly activity requiring the 'masculine' traits of physical strength, action, toughness, [and] capacity for violence" (Hooper 2001, 47). Indeed, fighters' perceptions of these grievances have been intertwined with their justification of using violence, as one fighter recounts the first time he carried a gun: 'I was a university student studying civil engineering..never for a minute in my life I imagined myself carrying a gun! As you know I am from the city so never in my family we even tried hunting! But when I witnessed my girlfriend harassed by shabiha in one of the early peaceful protests in Rukn el-Deen [district in Damascus], I told my friends that our peaceful approach won't work with this violent regime!' (Interview 11).

Another fighter laments how he was ashamed of himself for his inability to protect his girlfriend during a protest and how he felt that he let down his girlfriend. He said:

> I know my girlfriend might understand that I can't protect her because the shabiha were all holding arms, but I still felt helpless…this helplessness vanished when I decided to join the Free Syrian Army in 2012 (Interview 12).

While these wordings clearly emphasise masculinist protection, but also the fighter's perceptions of his identity played a determining role in fashioning ideas of war (see Mosse 1993, 4). This elevation of militarism, sacrifice and heroism are consistent with not only the rise of militarized

masculinity, but also captures deep grievous perception of 'lost virility (*rujulah*).' This was manifested in his wordings: 'we lost our houses and everything…yet I will never accept to lose my virility (*rujulti*).'

This sense of lost virility was intertwined with experiences of physical torture. One fighter, who was detained for seven months beginning in July 2011 in Tadmur prison, recalled his arrest following his participation in a protest held on the 'Friday of Freedom for Detainees' (Asra al-Hurriyah). After the beatings and abuse began... I was detained for 7 months…upon my release…we, the revolution coordination committees held meetings and started coordinating with armed groups…I will never forget the torture and the humiliation I endured' (Interview 13). After his release, the fighter expressed how his views changed regarding women's participation in the protests: 'we started informing the women that it was difficult for them to join us and be with us... We had women who were not veiled, and they were forced to veil themselves to hide their identities... I felt that I had to protect them... They were not my sisters or close relatives, but they were our honor. From there, we decided to carry sticks and set up burning tires to prevent the shabiha and regime forces from reaching us' (Interview 13). This sense of masculinist protection was echoed by another fighter who expressed his emotions upon witnessing the physical torture of one woman that

> I witnessed an incident where security forces were dragging a girl out of her house. She was my neighbor's daughter, and she was veiled... The security forces pulled her out in her nightgown... I felt pity for her father and brothers, seeing their honor being trampled on. Her brothers, who were my friends, and I swore an oath to take revenge (Interview 14).

While these experiences can be conceptualized as grievances, the decision to join armed groups was more closely linked to how these individuals perceived their identities as men. The interplay between political grievances and masculinist perceptions was extended not only to the intersection of masculinity and grievances, but marks the evolutionary and transformational ideational process at the micro-level mobilization of fighters, as one fighter explicitely stated: 'I will never forget the minute where a peaceful protest was attacked by security forces, saying: 'I did not care if I was to be detained by shabiha, but what scares me as a man belongs to the

revolution that we are so weak and cannot defend ourselves' (Interview 15). For grievance theorists, rivalry and perceptions of injustice between various social identity groups are regarded as a central factor in the onset and especially the continuation of violent conflict. This was further espoused by the feelings of despair and uncertainity engulfing the Syrian context as a result of geopolitical stagnation and inaction from the international community:

> After 12 years of inaction..we must not wait for anyone to rescue us! We must not expect protection from anyone or any state…then we are not men enough….at the beginning of the militarization of the revolution, it was to protect my land and family; I felt that we were forced! Now, I kept fighting because of the geopolitics of the region and inaction of this world! Thow can we let down our people and our revolution… I personally and many men like me…we must act as true men (Interview 16).

In this context, feelings of relative deprivation emerged as much from perceived social discrimination as from material conditions, and they were heightened when state authorities were seen as disregarding or disparaging the group's identity; here it is identity of men (see Regan and Norton 2005). In essence, the concept of "grievous masculinity" illuminates the profound ways in which personal and collective grievances intertwine with masculine identities to drive the motivations of Syrian fighters. These grievances, often rooted in experiences of emasculation, political repression, and societal humiliation, are not merely emotional reactions but are deeply embedded within the fighters' perceptions of their roles as protectors, avengers, and defenders of honor.

While *grievous masculinity* emerges from humiliation, loss, and emasculation, the battlefield becomes the site where these emotions are reconstituted into solidarity and ritualised violence: a process I conceptualise as *combat-driven masculinity*.

Combat-Driven Masculinity

There is a contentious debates surrounding the extent to which the saliency of group identities correlates with the rise of civil conflicts (Stewart 2013; Huddy 2001). Other scholars have importantly pointed out that without the felt affiliation and organizing principle of group identity, the collective action necessary for factions to undertake a war would not be feasible (Sanín and Wood 2014). In an empirical sense, it is incontrovertible that military factions participating in

conflicts rely heavily on identity concepts and in-group formations to maintain participants' motivation and loyalty (Dyrstad and Hillesund 2020). This form of brotherhood resonates with Higate's (2003) notion of fratriarchy and the role of combat experience in shaping the identity of warrior. This aligns with the theoretical framing of *combat-driven masculinity*, where the experience of fighting and surviving together transforms the individual from a victim of emasculation into an active bearer of masculine virtue and moral worth (Theidon 2009; Duriesmith 2015). Combat thus becomes both the arena and the ritual through which masculinity is reconstituted and sanctified.

In response to political grievances and the enforced demographic changes and displacement (*nuzūḥ*), fighters often experience a profound loss of identity, which drives them to affiliate with armed groups as a means of reclaiming this lost sense of self. War not only reshapes identities and the boundaries between self and other but also introduces combat as a significant motivator for joining these groups (King 2013). In such contexts, combat becomes a powerful mobilizing tool, fostering familial bonds among fighters that mitigate feelings of identity loss. The debate among scholars regarding whether fighters are primarily motivated by group loyalty or ideological commitment remains unresolved (Pawiński and Chami 2019, 299). The Syrian conflict, as illustrated by the sample in this study, offers a compelling example, particularly given the protracted nature of the conflict. Fighters frequently cite both the revolutionary cause and the protection of their comrades as equally important motivations. One fighter, for instance, explained: "sometimes I think about how I am enduring all these traumas and loss! Our failure to overthrow the regime and the continuity of injustice would have killed me if it was not for my comrades that relieves me."

Over the past two decades, a central debate among sociologists has focused on whether war produces gendered identities or whether pre-existing gendered identities intensify violent behavior. At the heart of this discussion lies the question of how combat experience reshapes individuals' perceptions of themselves and others. The Syrian case is not an exceptional one, I found parallels with the findings of Whitehouse and his colleagues regarding over 170 Libyan fighters. Their study suggests that the "fighting together" hypothesis serves as a significant motivator for individuals to continue their involvement. Scholars argue that battle experiences are foundational for the social cohesion of a group triggered by the experience of fighting (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014, 677). Such combat experiences generate a strong sense of unity that transcends

racial and ethnic boundaries. One fighter, recounted a pivotal moment: “In a battle I will never forget, I was notified of an impending attack on our base. I could have left, but if I did, I would not have been able to warn my comrades. I felt that it was better to die knowing that I had not betrayed them” (Interview 17).Moreover, the readiness for self-sacrifice establish bonds that extend beyond familial and blood relationships, leading to a shared sense of destiny within the group.

The meaning of conflict often becomes crystallized within the boundaries of the battlefield, where the symbolism of war, embodied in the notions of victory and defeat, has a profound influence on the trajectory of the conflict (Larsen 2004, 473). The spaces delineated during battles not only shape the course of war but also play a crucial role in shaping the identities of the fighters. This creates a spatial-identity relationship that is intimately connected to the experience of combat. Furthermore, the symbolic meanings of war, along with the resulting "mentality" and "behavior," are essential in the formation of a fighter's identity (Hedetoft 1993). However, while these insights are valuable, they overlook how masculinity intersects with combat experiences and the reformation of identity. The identity constructed through the experience of combat and war raises critical questions: Does this newly constructed identity drive individuals to engage in combat, or does the act of fighting itself reinforce masculinist attitudes, or perhaps both? The evidence suggests that when ordinary individuals join military groups, many of whom had no prior military affiliation before the 2011 revolution, their relationships with fellow fighters often take on familial characteristics. Once the concept of "family" becomes entrenched in the fighter's mindset, it serves as a powerful motivator, driving them to make significant sacrifices, including self-sacrifice, for their group. These findings enhance our theoretical understanding of the "behavior" that emerges from participation in military action.

In asking the fighters about their bonds with their fellow fighters, they all narrated stories related to how going to battles together have strengthened their familial and blood ties with their comrades. These family ties contributed to gendering the nation as a ‘brotherhood entity’ that defines relations among fighters in expressions of kinship and family: "They are like parents to me... Better than my relationship with my own family" (Interview 18); "blood brothers’’ (Interview 19); "brotherly relationship" (Interview 20); "we are brothers" (Interview 21); "they are like brothers, and our bond is stronger than family ties" (Interview 22); "they are like brothers to me, I

would give up everything for them, even stronger than my relationship with my own parents" (Interview 23); “brothers” (Interview 24); "our relationship is incredibly strong" (Interview 24); Another fighter added, "My relationship with my fellow fighters is stronger than my connection with my biological brothers and sisters. It's so strong that I've saved some of their names in my phone as 'my brother so-and-so,' and I don't exaggerate when I say that I would sacrifice everything for them" (Interview 25). One fighter reflected on the bond formed in the heat of battle, saying, "The battlefield forges a brotherhood that is stronger than blood. I’ve lost count of how many times we’ve pulled each other from the brink of death, and each time it happens, it solidifies our commitment to the cause" (Interview 26).

It is important to recognize that the images of sacrifice that occupy the fighter's mind during battle function as mechanisms for memory formation. Although this memory may be inherently militarized, it plays a crucial role in shaping their self-perception and identity A different fighter described how these experiences altered his sense of purpose: "Before the war, I fought for my own survival. Now, I fight for the memories of those who are gone. Their sacrifice is what drives me; it’s what gives me the strength to keep going, even when it seems impossible" (Interview 27). This process of memory creation through the experience of combat underpins the combatants' understanding of their own roles and actions within the context of conflict. This manufactured identity, constructed through the experience of battle, has been exacerbated through idealizing acts of sacrifice and heroism that intersects with their perception of being ‘revolutionary men’. One fighter echoed this sentiment, stating, "Every battle etches new memories in my mind. Each time I lose a comrade, it reinforces why I fight. Their sacrifices are a reminder that we must continue, not just for ourselves, but for everyone who has fallen" (Interview 28).

This experience of fighting together became synonymous with the male realization of manhood and masculinity. One fighter illustrated this by stating, "in the heat of battle, I am not just defending my land or my people; I am proving to myself and to others that I am a man, a protector. The blood we shed binds us as brothers, and each sacrifice strengthens the memory of who we are meant to be—warriors, not victims" (Interview 29). It is remarkable that many of the incidents mentioned in the interviews focused on fighters risking their lives and sacrificing

themselves to save others. As one fighter explained, "during battle, when the enemies are in front of us, our thoughts are focused on one thing: advancing and achieving victory. We must protect our comrades from death; it's either death or victory, with no other option" (Interview 30). Sometimes, these acts of solidarity extended to strangers, and at other times, to neighbors (Interview 31).

This relationship of solidarity and sacrifice transcended even the differences that existed before the revolution. One story illustrates this transformation: "In one of the battles I participated in, the commander of the battalion I was fighting alongside was a young man from a clan different from ours. Before the revolution, there was a history of bloodshed between us where 8 were dead among us. Yet, in that battle, I found myself in a situation where I needed to survive, and he bravely covered the fire to help me escape, even though he got shot in the process. During that battle, I forgot all about revenge; everything changed. We had a common purpose and a shared enemy, and our past tribal dispute no longer mattered" (Interview 32). The earlier quotes from the group of fighters demonstrate a consensus that the process of "remembering" the battles in which they were in danger of dying or witnessing one of their comrades die is a transformative and pivotal moment in their decision to continue fighting (Interview 33). The nexus of masculine brotherhood and violence become salient in fighters' performances of combat, which cannot be explained in purely materialistic acts. Rather, this sense of brotherhood is grounded in a felt need to re-entrench and affirm the gendered and politicized psychological identity matrixes interwoven with readiness to die, an outlook that elevates the image and power of an active martial man. As one fighter illustrated: 'I will never forget how my friend was killed in front of my eyes in the battle to liberate Aleppo…I tried to shield him, but I could not…I lost my family in the early protests and these fighters became my only family now…I will never forget…or stop fighting to avenge their death' (Interview 34).

Conclusion

This article has examined how masculinities shape Syrian fighters' participation in armed mobilisation by conceptualising grievance as a gendered and emotionally constituted process. By centring fighters' narratives, it demonstrates that participation in violence cannot be fully understood through material or ideological explanations alone, but must be analysed through the

relational and affective processes through which experiences of humiliation, loss, and moral violation become internalised as threats to masculine identity. In this framework, masculinity is understood as an emotionally constituted form of gendered subjectivity expressed through practices of protection, sacrifice, and violence, rather than as a fixed social role or stable identity.

Building on this conceptualisation, the article developed two analytical typologies (**grievous masculinity** and **combat-driven masculinity**) as heuristic tools for tracing distinct yet interconnected processes of mobilisation. Grievous masculinity captures how experiences of collective humiliation and dispossession are internalised as moral injury, producing a perceived obligation to restore dignity through violence. Combat-driven masculinity, by contrast, emerges through participation in warfare itself, where masculine subjectivities are consolidated through embodied practices of risk, sacrifice, and brotherhood. These typologies are not fixed categories but relational processes that illuminate how structural conditions, emotional experience, and gendered norms interact to produce political subjectivities oriented toward violence. By identifying these processes, the article contributes to debates in the masculinities literature by specifying how emotional and moral dynamics mediate the relationship between structural grievance and armed mobilisation.

The findings also extend existing scholarship on masculinities in armed conflict. While dominant approaches emphasise gender norms, institutional structures, or hegemonic configurations of masculinity, this study highlights the central role of emotional experience in transforming grievance into gendered political action. It therefore bridges feminist security studies, civil war scholarship, and critical masculinity studies by demonstrating how masculine identities operate as affective and moral economies that sustain both the decision to fight and the persistence of violence.

Empirically, the analysis draws primarily on thirty-four interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024 with Syrian National Army fighters, capturing wartime processes of mobilisation and identity formation. These findings are complemented by follow-up fieldwork conducted in Syria after the fall of Bashar al-Assad in 2025, including re-interviews with former fighters who had transitioned into administrative and military roles. These follow-up observations indicate that the masculinities identified in the earlier phase of the research have not dissipated but have been reconfigured within

Syria's post-Assad political order. The distinction between these empirical phases clarifies the temporal scope of the study while illustrating the persistence and transformation of militarised masculinities across political transition.

Following the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, these dynamics entered a new historical phase. Efforts by Interim President Ahmad al-Shar'a to transform revolutionary fighters into state actors sought to redirect the energies of struggle toward governance and reconstruction. Yet the emotional and social infrastructures of grievance and combat proved resistant to institutional transformation. Subsequent violence in the coastal region and mass mobilisation in Sweida illustrate how grievous masculinity, once directed against the regime, has been reconfigured into sectarianised forms of vengeance, while combat-driven masculinity has been reactivated through renewed mobilisation and collective defence. These developments demonstrate that the moral imperative to fight remains embedded in Syria's political and emotional landscape, persisting even as fighters assume positions within state institutions.

The persistence of these masculinities underscores the importance of examining the gendered legacies of conflict beyond the battlefield. Rather than disappearing with political transition, militarised masculinities may be reconstituted within postwar governance, shaping authority, legitimacy, and patterns of violence. The trajectories of Syrian fighters (from revolutionaries to state actors and, in some cases, to renewed combatants) reveal how masculinities are historically contingent yet durable frameworks through which political belonging, protection, and domination are negotiated.

These findings carry broader implications for post-conflict reconstruction and security sector reform. International stabilisation initiatives have largely prioritised institutional restructuring while neglecting the gendered logics that sustain armed mobilisation. By demonstrating how masculinities function as drivers of mobilisation and political authority, this study suggests that postwar reform efforts must engage not only with organisational structures but also with the emotional and symbolic dimensions of identity, grievance, and belonging.

More broadly, the framework developed here offers a basis for analysing how gendered subjectivities shape mobilisation in other conflict contexts characterised by experiences of

humiliation, dispossession, and political transition. Future research could further examine how these processes intersect with class, sectarian, and regional identities, and how militarised masculinities evolve across different armed groups and post-conflict settings.

By conceptualising masculinity as an affective and relational process through which grievance becomes moralised and politicised, this article advances theoretical debates on gender and political violence while providing an empirically grounded account of the mechanisms linking emotional experience, identity formation, and armed mobilisation. Understanding these processes remains essential for analysing both the dynamics of war and the challenges of building durable peace in post-conflict societies.

*There is no conflict of interest.

*This publication was produced as part of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development from the UK government.

*I received ethical approval from Kings' College and verbal consent has been given by all participants. Project number: *LRS/DP-22/23-34063*

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my interlocutors for sharing their narratives and entrusting me with their experiences. I also wish to thank the Swedish Dialogue Institute, where I presented an earlier version of this research at the workshop held in Amman in October 2024, and the XCEPT (Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends) team for their funding support and the insightful discussions across many XCEPT workshops, which have significantly shaped the development of

this article. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and thoughtful feedback during the review process.

References

Achcar, G. (2016). Morbid symptoms: Relapse in the Arab uprising. Stanford University Press.

Aldoughli, R. (2019a). Interrogating the constructions of masculinist protection and militarism in the Syrian constitution of 1973. Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, 15, 48–74. https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-7273706

Aldoughli, R. (2019b). The symbolic construction of national identity and belonging in Syrian nationalist songs (from 1970 to 2007). Contemporary Levant, 4, 141–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2018.1554233

Aldoughli, R. (2020). Departing 'secularism': Boundary appropriation and extension of the Syrian state in the religious domain since 2011. British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 49, 360–385. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1805299

Aldoughli, R. (2021a). Securitization as a tool of regime survival: The deployment of religious rhetoric in Bashar al-Asad's speeches. Middle East Journal, 75, 9–32. https://doi.org/10.3751/75.1.11

Aldoughli, R. (2021b). What is Syrian nationalism? Primordialism and romanticism in official Baath discourse. Nations and Nationalism, 28, 125–140. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12786

Aldoughli, R. (2023). Missing gender: Conceptual limitations in the debate on 'sectarianism' in the Middle East. Middle East Critique, 33, 143–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2023.2243178

Aldoughli, R. (2024a). Romanticizing masculinity in Baathist Syria: Ideology, identity, and gender. Manchester University Press.

Aldoughli, R. (2024b). Fighting together: Emotionality, fusion, and psychological kinship in the Syrian civil war. Small Wars & Insurgencies, 35, 1179–1211. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2374036

Aldoughli, R. (2024c). 'Loyalism' as masculinist identity politics: Navigating the use of symbolic discourse in the Syrian war. Contemporary Levant, 10, 76–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2024.2374213

Aldoughli, R. (2024d). The end of the 'revolution' (al-thawra) but not revolutionaries (thuwwar): Insights from Syrian fighters. Conflict, Security & Development, 24, 397–424. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2416027

Aldoughli, R. (2025a). Fighting beyond borders: Unravelling the complex drivers of Syrian fighters in foreign conflicts. Critical Military Studies. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2461832

Aldoughli, R. (2025b). From fallen statues to masked men: Masculinity and authority in post-Assad Syria. Al-Jumhuriya, 14 April. https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2025/04/14/from-fallen-statues-to-masked-men/ (Accessed 9 March 2026)

Aldoughli, R. (2025c). Syria's new men: Masculinities and the post-Assad political order. Middle East Report Online (MERIP), 16 April. https://www.merip.org/2025/04/syrias-new-men/ (Accessed 9 March 2026)

Aldoughli, R. (2025d). Syria's new rulers are working to unify military power: The country's future depends on balancing the need for central authority against the grievances of its many factions. New Lines Magazine, 25 February. https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power/ (Accessed 9 March 2026)

Aldoughli, R. (2025e). Syria needs security – can Al-Sharā'a build a united army to provide it? The World Today, 10 March. https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2025-03/syria-needs-security-can-al-sharaa-build-united-army-provide (Accessed 9 March 2026)

Aldoughli, R. (forthcoming, 2026). Who owns Sunnism? Sectism, authority and rivalry in the Syrian war. I.B. Tauris.

Atran, S. (2010). Talking to the enemy: Violent extremism, sacred values, and what it means to be human. Penguin UK.

Banerjee, S. (2016). Gender, nation, and popular film in India: Globalizing muscular nationalism. Routledge.

BBC Arabia. (2020). Testimonies of Syrian mercenaries involved in battles in Nagorno-Karabakh. https://www.bbc.com/arabic/world-55244326 (Accessed August 2022)

Bensted, R. (2011). A critique of Paul Collier's 'greed and grievance' thesis of civil war. African Security Review, 20, 84–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2011.569032

Bhabha, H. K. (Ed.). (1990). Nation and narration. Routledge.

Brounéus, K. (2011). In-depth interviewing: The process, skill, and ethics of interviews in peace research. In K. Höglund & M. Öberg (Eds.), Understanding peace research: Methods and challenges (pp. 130–145). Routledge.

Brush, S. G. (1996). Dynamics of theory change in the social sciences: Relative deprivation and collective violence. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 40, 523–545. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002796040004003

Chodorow, N. J. (1995). Gender as a personal and cultural construction. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 20, 516–544. https://doi.org/10.1086/494990

Cockburn, C. (2004). The continuum of violence: A gender perspective on war and peace. In W. Giles (Ed.), Sites of violence: Gender and conflict zones (pp. 24–44). University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520230729.003.0002

Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2004). Greed and grievance in civil war. Oxford Economic Papers, 56, 563–595. https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpf064

Connell, R. W. (1995). Masculinities. University of California Press.

Cornwall, A., Edström, J., & Greig, A. (Eds.). (2011). Men and development: Politicizing masculinities. Zed Books.

Dolan, C. (2011). Militarized, religious and neo-colonial: The triple bind confronting men in contemporary Uganda. In A. Cornwall, J. Edström, & A. Greig (Eds.), Men and development: Politicizing masculinities (pp. 155–169). Bloomsbury Academic.

Duriesmith, D. (2018). Hybrid warriors and the formation of new war masculinities: A case study of Indonesian foreign fighters. Stability: International Journal of Security & Development, 7, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.633

Duriesmith, D., & Ismail, N. H. (2019). Militarized masculinities beyond methodological nationalism: Charting the multiple masculinities of an Indonesian jihadi. International Theory, 11, 139–159. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971919000010

Duriesmith, D., & Ismail, N. H. (2022). Masculinities and disengagement from jihadi networks: The case of Indonesian militant Islamists. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2037407

Elshtain, J. B. (1985). Reflections on war and political discourse. Political Theory, 13, 39–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591785013001003

Enloe, C. H. (1983). Does khaki become you? The militarisation of women's lives. South End Press.

Enloe, C. H. (1990). Bananas, beaches and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics. University of California Press.

Gordon, E. (2023). Gendered aspects of war and international violence. In The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of sociology (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosg025.pub2

Grieg, J. M., & Regan, P. M. (2008). When do they say yes? An analysis of the willingness to offer and accept mediation in civil wars. International Studies Quarterly, 52, 759–781. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2008.00525.x

Grinstead, N. (2018). Rebel infighting in northern Syria: The war of abolition. ACLED.

Gurr, T. R. (1970). Why men rebel. Princeton University Press.

Haugbolle, S. (2012). The little militia man: Memory and militarized masculinity in Lebanon. Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, 8, 115–139. https://doi.org/10.2979/jmiddeastwomstud.8.1.115

Hedetoft, U. (1993). National identity and mentalities of war in three EC countries. Journal of Peace Research, 30, 281–300. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343393030003004

Henry, M. (2017). Problematizing military masculinity, intersectionality and male vulnerability in feminist critical military studies. Critical Military Studies, 3, 182–199. https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1301590

Higate, P. R. (Ed.). (2003). Military masculinities: Identity and the state. Praeger.

Higate, P. R. (2012). Drinking vodka from the 'butt crack': Men, masculinities and fratriarchy in the private militarized security company. International Feminist Journal of Politics, 14, 450–469. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.699785

Horowitz, D. L. (1985). Ethnic groups in conflict. University of California Press.

Hooper, C. (2001). Manly states: Masculinities, international relations, and gender politics. Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/hoop12074

Hourani, N. (2008). The militiaman icon: Cinema, memory, and the Lebanese civil wars. CR: The New Centennial Review, 8, 287–307. https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.0.0014

Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. Qualitative Health Research, 15, 1277–1288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687

Huddy, L. (2001). From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory. Political Psychology, 22, 127–156. https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00230

Humphreys, M., & Weinstein, J. M. (2006). Handling and manhandling civilians in civil war. American Political Science Review, 100, 429–447. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055406062289

Jan, A. (2025, August 31). YPJ: Kurdish women leading the fight against ISIS and defending rights. North Press Agency. [URL required — please verify and add access date]

Keen, D. (2012). Greed and grievance in civil war. International Affairs, 88, 757–777. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01100.x

King, A. (2013). The combat soldier: Infantry tactics and cohesion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Oxford University Press.

Larsen, S. E. (2004). Landscape, identity, and war. New Literary History, 35, 469–490. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2004.0040

Lederach, A. J. (2023). Feel the grass grow: Ecologies of slow peace in Colombia. Stanford University Press.

Maringira, G. (2021). Soldiers, masculinities, and violence. Current Anthropology, 62(S23), S104–S111. https://doi.org/10.1086/713816

Mayer, T. (2000). Gender ironies of nationalism: Sexing the nation. Routledge.

Mosse, G. (1993). Confronting the nation: Jewish and Western nationalism. University Press of New England.

Murshed, S. M., & Tadjoeddin, M. Z. (2009). Revisiting the greed and grievance explanations for violent internal conflict. Journal of International Development, 21, 87–111. https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1478

Myrttinen, H., Khattab, L., & Naujoks, J. (2017). Re-thinking hegemonic masculinities in conflict-affected contexts. Critical Military Studies, 3, 103–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2016.1262658

Myrttinen, H., Vess, J., Greig, A., & Dolan, C. (2025). Masculinities in conflict and peacebuilding: An introduction. In H. Myrttinen, J. Vess, A. Greig, & C. Dolan (Eds.), Routledge handbook of masculinities, conflict, and peacebuilding (pp. 1–15). Routledge.

Nilsson, M. (2024). Jihad and heroic hypermasculinity: Recruitment strategies, battlefield experiences, and returning home. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2356817

Parsons, G. (2023). Combatants, masculinity, and just war theory. Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy, 26, 267–292. https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v26i2.2653

Pawiński, M., & Chami, G. (2019). Why they fight? Reconsidering the role of motivation in combat environments. Defence Studies, 19, 297–317. https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2019.1620497

Petersen, R. D. (2011). Western intervention in the Balkans: The strategic use of emotion in conflict. Cambridge University Press.

Peterson, V. S., & Runyan, A. S. (1993). Global gender issues. Westview Press.

Pini, B. (2005). Interviewing men: Gender and the collection and interpretation of qualitative data. Journal of Sociology, 41, 201–216. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783305053238

Prügl, E. (2023). Gender as a cause of violent conflict. International Affairs, 99, 1885–1902. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad168

Quest, H. (2022). Moving beyond antagonisms: Changing masculinities in post-conflict militaries. International Peacekeeping, 29, 463–487. https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2022.2057841

Reardon, B. (1985). Sexism and the war system. Teachers College Press.

Regan, P. M., & Norton, D. (2005). Greed, grievance, and mobilization in civil wars. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 49, 319–336. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002704273441

Richter-Devroe, S. (2011). Palestinian women's everyday resistance: Between normality and normalisation. Journal of International Women's Studies, 12, 32–46.

Ritholtz, S. (2022). The ontology of cruelty in civil war: The analytical utility of characterizing violence in conflict studies. Global Studies Quarterly, 2, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac014

Rowbotham, S. (1973). Hidden from history: 300 years of women's oppression and the fight against it. Pluto Press.

Rowe, W. E. (2014). Positionality. In D. Coghlan & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), The SAGE encyclopedia of action research. SAGE Publications.

Ruddick, S. (1983). Pacifying the forces: Drafting women in the interests of peace. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 8, 471–489. https://doi.org/10.1086/493987

Sanín, F. G., & Wood, E. J. (2014). Ideology in civil war. Journal of Peace Research, 51, 213–226. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313514073

Sjoberg, L. (2012). Gender, structure, and war: What Waltz couldn't see. International Theory, 4, 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297191100025X

Sky News Arabia. (2022). Theft, rape, and kidnapping… Different roles of Syrian mercenaries in Libya. https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1499996 (Accessed December 2023)

Stewart, F. (2008). Horizontal inequalities and conflict: Understanding group violence in multiethnic societies. World Bank.

Stewart, F. (2010). Horizontal inequalities as a cause of conflict: World Development Report 2011. World Bank.

Suny, R. G. (2004). Why we hate you: The passions of national identity and ethnic violence. University of California.

Theidon, K. (2009). Reconstructing masculinities: The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia. Human Rights Quarterly, 31, 1–34. https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.0.0053

Thompson, E. H., & Pleck, J. H. (1995). Masculinity ideologies. In R. F. Levant & W. S. Pollack (Eds.), A new psychology of men (pp. 129–163). Basic Books.

Tickner, J. A. (1992). Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security. Columbia University Press.

Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. Sociological Theory, 30, 167–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914

Ting-Toomey, S., Yee-Jung, K. K., Shapiro, R. B., Garcia, W., Wright, T. J., & Oetzel, J. G. (2000). Ethnic/cultural identity salience and conflict styles in four U.S. ethnic groups. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 24, 47–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(99)00023-X

Turner, L. (2019). Syrian refugee men as objects of humanitarian care. International Feminist Journal of Politics, 21, 595–616. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1567627

Waling, A. (2019). Problematising 'toxic' and 'healthy' masculinity for addressing gender inequalities. Australian Feminist Studies, 34, 362–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1679021

Webber, D., Babush, M., Schori-Eyal, N., Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis, A., Hettiarachchi, M., Bélanger, J. J., Moyano, M., Trujillo, H. M., Gunaratna, R., Kruglanski, A. W., & Gelfand, M. J. (2018). The road to extremism: Field and experimental evidence that significance loss-induced need for closure fosters radicalization. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 114, 272–287. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000111

Whitehouse, H. (2018). Dying for the group. Cambridge University Press.

Whitehouse, H., & Lanman, J. A. (2014). The ties that bind us: Ritual, fusion, and identification. Current Anthropology, 55, 674–695. https://doi.org/10.1086/678698

Wilcox, L. (2010). Gender, just war, and the ethics of war and peace. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.192

Yanow, D. (2014). Interpretive analysis and comparative research. In I. Engeli & C. Rothmayr (Eds.), Comparative policy studies: Conceptual and methodological challenges (pp. 131–159). Palgrave Macmillan.

Yazan, B. (2015). Three approaches to case study methods in education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake. The Qualitative Report, 20, 134–152. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2102

Young, I. M. (2003). The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 29, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1086/375708

Interviews cited

1. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, March 2022.

2. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Antakya, April 2022.

3. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Kilis, May 2022.

4. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Turkey–Syria border, June 2022.

5. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, July 2022.

6. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Antakya, September 2022.

7. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Kilis, October 2022.

8. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, November 2022.

9. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, January 2023.

10. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Antakya, February 2023.

11. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Kilis, March 2023.

12. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, April 2023.

13. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Antakya, May 2023.

14. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, June 2023.

15. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Kilis, August 2023.

16. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Antakya, September 2023.

17. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, October 2023.

18. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Turkey–Syria border, November 2023.

19. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, December 2023.

20. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Antakya, January 2024.

21. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Kilis, February 2024.

22. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, March 2024.

23. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Antakya, April 2024.

24. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, May 2024.

25. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Kilis, June 2024.

26. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Antakya, July 2024.

27. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, August 2024.

28. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, September 2024.

29. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Antakya, October 2024.

30. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Kilis, November 2024.

31. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, March 2023.

32. SNA fighter, Second Corps, interview by author, Antakya, October 2022.

33. SNA fighter, Third Corps, interview by author, Kilis, August 2024.

34. SNA fighter, First Corps, interview by author, Gaziantep, May 2024.