

# How Kurdish female fighters are represented by the Media

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this dissertation was to investigate how Kurdish female fighters are represented in the media. According to Dilar Dirik (2014), the Western media has given a great deal of attention to Kurdish female fighters, but, according to Emanuela C. Del Re (2015), it has “focused on the sensational aspects rather than on analysis of the facts”. The objective of this paper was to determine whether the Italian, English and Turkish press provide in-depth analysis when they describe their motivations and reasons for fighting or whether they merely treat their ideas in a shallow way.

The method adopted by the author to conduct the research was quantitative content analysis. Moreover, the author sought to analyse whether the Italian media and the English media shared the same perspectives and used the same frames when describing the female fighters.

Finally, the research was aimed at determining whether there was a perspective shared by all Western newspapers and whether this was different from that of the Turkish media. Ultimately, it was found that female emancipation was not treated merely a good tool to improve the PKK’s image in the international press coverage and thus in Western public opinion.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

**ISIS Islamic State**

**KDP Kurdistan Democratic Party**

**KRG Kurdish Regional Government PKK Kurdistan Workers'  
Party**

**PYD Democratic Union Party**

**YPG People's Protection Units**

**YPJ The Women's Protection Units**

**PKK Kurdistan Workers' Party**

**AKP Justice and Development Party**

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## 1.1 Introduction

In this chapter the author will examine the Kurdish question, the war in Syria and The Rojava Revolution.



## 1.2 The Kurdish question

Kurdistan, “the country of the Kurds”, is not a state: it does not have any legal status. It is a region surrounded by four different political, cultural and ethnic worlds which have been fighting for centuries: the Arabic, the Persians, the Turkish and the Russian. The Kurdish region is divided among the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. According to Öcalan (2001), the name “Kurdistan” relates to the Summerian word *kur*, which meant something similar to “mountain”.

Since the rise of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Kurds succeeded in establishing some regional autonomy. The Ottomans managed their internal affairs through a system of millets, which are protected communities. The Kurds had, just like other ethnic minorities, no official status, and thus they belonged to the Muslim-majority millet. They were permitted to govern many of their own affairs. However, after the First World War, the Ottoman Empire came to an end and the European powers feared a new large Muslim empire; thus, they divided the Ottoman Empire in order to prevent a challenge of the status quo.

In 1920, therefore, although in a different form to that expected, the nation state of Kurdistan seemed to be born, without taking into account the socio-cultural complexity of the Middle East. In 1920, the Treaty of Sevrés regulated the terms of the peace reached with the Ottoman Empire, essentially determining its dismemberment. The treaty provided for the creation of a new state identity, Kurdistan, which should have extended to an area straddling the states currently existing in the Middle East. In particular, Articles 62 and 64-18 of the treaty explicitly provided for the construction of a Kurdish national state which would initially have been placed under the protection of mandatory European powers, in order to obtain complete independence thereafter. In 1923, the Treaty of Sèvres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne. This treaty defined the new borders of the region but did not mention Kurdistan, nor even the existence of the Kurds. Ottoman-era Kurdistan was divided between four states: Iran, which was already a sovereign state; Turkey, established in 1922 by Kemal Atatürk; Iraq; and Syria (the latter two initially being ruled by mandate by



Britain and France, but becoming independent at a later stage). The Kurds had become a series of peripheral border populations without a central state.

(Federici V,2015)

According to Mirella Galletti (2004), until the 1990s, the Turkish government defined the Kurdish as “Turkish from the mountains”, denying their existence in Turkey. In Iran, Kurdistan was considered to consist of an area which was much smaller than that claimed by Kurdish nationalists. The same applied to Iraq. All of the central governments involved tried to assimilate the Kurdish areas, as they were considered important from economic and strategic points of view. The hegemonic powers (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) denied the Kurdish their existence over the years, imposing punishments on Kurds if they referred to their roots. According to Öcalan (2001), the Persians declared the Kurds to be an ethnic subgroup of the Persians, while the Turkish regime derived its claim from the alleged campaign to conquer Anatolia, claiming there had been no other people there before the Turks arrived.

## **Iran**

In 1925, Reza Shah seized power in Iran via a coup. He started secularising Iran and creating a homogenous country. The Kurdish language and culture were prohibited, and Kurdish political leaders disappeared. In 1941, the British and Soviet armies entered Iran. The Kurds were happy to feel themselves liberated from the oppressive Shah, and they experienced greater freedom under Soviet occupation. In 1945, the Iranian Kurds formed the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) under the leadership of Qazi Mohammed.

(McDowall, 2004)

Although other political parties were active, the KDPI was the most important. Many of today's Kurdish political parties, such as the KDP in Iraq, trace their history to the Iranian KDPI. Iran contains the second-largest number of Kurds in the world, but over the years, it has fought the Kurdish nationalist movement and further demoralised it by assassinating its main leaders, including Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou in 1989 and his successor, Sadeq Sharafandi, in 1992.

(M.Gunter, 2004). In fact, the Islamic revolution of 1979 did not improve the lives of the Iranian Kurds. Khomeyni, the leader of the revolution, denied the concept of a nation in Iran, replacing it with “umma”, a religious community. During 1979-1989, the war between Kurdish nationalist movement and the Islamic Republic caused the death of 50,000 people.

## **Iraq**

Iraq, one must remember, is an artificial state put together by the British after World War I from the three former Ottoman vilayets of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra (Dodge T, 2003). It became independent in 1932, but the British administration retained power over the country through indirect rule. In 1958, the monarchy was overthrown by a military coup, led by a group known as the Free Officers. In 1963, and again in 1968, the Ba’ath Party gained power in Iraq. In 1963, the Ba’ath had come to power in Syria, and the party gained tremendous influence over the fate of the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq. The parties emphasised Arab identity and unity whilst denying the existence of Kurdish nationality. In both Iraq and Syria, Arabic was made the official language, Kurdish culture was suppressed and the Kurds were forced to become Arabs. Although the Iraqi Kurds had no rights, they experienced a few years of relative freedom under the Ba’ath Party. For instance, in the 1960s, when the Kurds in Iran were oppressed, KDPI moved its headquarters to Iraqi Kurdistan, where it founded the KDP. The KDP would soon become the most powerful nationalist Kurdish organisation.

According to Mirella Galletti (2004), the Kurds in Iraq represent the point of reference for Kurdish nationalism in all countries. However, in 1975, increasing criticism aimed at the party’s right-wing politics in Iraq resulted in the establishment of the leftist Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani. The situation further deteriorated when Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979. The repression of the Kurds occurred in two ways: Arabisation and deportation. The latter involved Kurdish people who lived in Iraqi Kurdistan

towards the region of southern Iraq. They were deported, being unable to bring their goods with them, and all of their belongings were taken.

One of the common methods of Arabisation is via marriage: every Arabic person who married a Kurdish woman received a large amount of money. Despite the Kurdish women becoming very popular, according to Mirella Galletti (2004), they generally preferred to take their own lives rather than marry an Arabic person, because they would be refused and rejected by their families, and by the Kurdish society, if they did so.

During the genocidal Anfal Operation, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were deported; their villages were destroyed, and many were killed. The name Anfal is taken from the Quoran which authorised the confiscation of the belongings of infidels; it is used to provide religious justification for what is happening. Chemical weapons were also used against the Kurdish people. (Galletti M, 2004)

After the failed Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and the invasion of Kuwait, both Kurds in the north and Shi'ites in the south took the opportunity to rebel. The international community eventually established a safe haven and a no-fly zone in northern Iraq. A UN resolution in 1991 demanded that the Iraqi central government immediately end the oppression of the Kurdish people in the area. Never before had the Kurds received international protection on this scale. In 1991, they established a de facto autonomous region and an independent government, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), with the protection of the international coalition. It was beyond the reach of the regime of Hussein, which was toppled by the American invasion in 2003. In the same year, after 12 years of political autonomy, the Kurds gained the right to have their own parliament, budget and army in the new constitution. They institutionalised self-rule in the KRG.

Since the recognition of the KRG in Iraq, the Kurds in Iran became more active again. A new movement, the Party for Freedom and Life in Kurdistan (P-JAK), which was found to have links with the Turkish PKK, started military action against the Iranian regime. Iran naturally viewed the establishment of the KRG

with suspicion, just as in Turkey which also faced challenges from the Kurds. The situation, however, remains precarious, because nobody recognises this state. Turkey has even warned if the Iraqi Kurds declare their independence, it will lead to future warfare. Iran and Syria also oppose Iraqi Kurdish independence because of the instability it would create in the Middle East.

There are two main Kurdish parties in Iraq: the Iraqi Kurdish parties Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic party (KDP) and Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). They are the surname of the two political rivals: Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani. Although they fought together in the civil war from 1994 to 1998, they remain divided on the ideal model of the Kurdish state. Barzani and Talabani have both realistically denied any claims of independence, opting instead for federalism in a post-Saddam democratic Iraq. (Gunter M, 2003) According to Mirella Galletti (2004), there is a strong ideological discrepancy between the PKK, which has a Marxist background, and the Kurdish parties in Iraq, which are more conservative and/or of "democratic inspiration". Instead, Turkey perceives KRG as another step toward Kurdish independence.

## **Turkey**

In 1922, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a former Young Turk, created Turkey with the support of colonial European powers. Atatürk wanted to establish a homogenous nation-state, and began a process of modernisation, releasing the nation from the Islamic Ottoman heritage. After initially promising the Kurds a certain amount of autonomy if they supported his ideas, Atatürk realised it was necessary to eliminate minorities if he wanted to achieve political unity for his new nation. The Turkish regime started to purge Turkey of non-Turkish influences, which meant that the Kurdish language was forbidden. The education of Kurdish language was also banned, and Kurdish political movements were not tolerated.

In the 1970s, Kurdish left-wing activists began to organise themselves on a national scale to find a revolutionary solution to their problems in Turkey. In 1978, they established the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK. The leader of the PKK is Abdullah Öcalan, who has been in prison since 1999. After the military

coup in 1980, the majority of the members of the party escaped and found refuge in Syria and Lebanon. The PKK became a key player in the Kurdish resistance against Turkish oppression. In the repression that followed, thousands of Kurdish fighters, but also civilians, were murdered, and even more Kurds became refugees as a result of clashes with the state. Many of them sought refuge in Syria. The conflict between the government and the PKK stabilised in 1999 when Abdullah Öcalan was arrested. Peace negotiations started, and the PKK seemed to abandon its violent strategy. Around 2003, it adopted a more libertarian ideology (Chapter Two of this paper will focus on the changing ideology of the PKK). After years of further repression by the Turkish regime, the conflict resumed in 2004. In 2012, new negotiations began, but these efforts also ended without success. (Eleuthera,2017)

### **1.3 The war in Syria**

In the same year that Öcalan (2011) wrote the *Democratic Confederalism*, in Syria, a protest started due to the continuous massacres perpetrated by Bashar al-Assad's regime against the protesters. They were Syrian civilians in general, not only Kurds. It was the beginning of a civil war, involving four military fronts: ESL, ISIS, Kurdish people in Rojava where in 2012 the PYD and YPG took the control. In 2014, while ISIS had already conquered most of the northern territory of Syria and of Iraq, the PKK and YPG started coordinating with the Peshmerga of northern Iraq. Their operation blocked the siege of ISIS on Mount Sinjar, where Yazidis were refugees. At the end of October, when the YPG was demonstrated to be effective against ISIS, the US started to send it troops and equipment to fight ISIS with bombs around Kobane. (Dirik D, Levi Strauss D., Taussig M, Lamborn Wilson P,2017), As Bill Weiberg stated, in this situation, the US assisted a bizarre event whereby American imperialism aided anarchists. (Dirik D, Levi Strauss D., Taussig M, Lamborn Wilson P, 2017 ) Erdoğan , the Turkish president, did not approve of this situation. In October, due to US pressure, he had to allow Peshmerga to travel through Turkish territory to reach Kobane, but at the same time, he refused entry into Syria of the PKK fighters who wanted to be part of the defence of the city. The border

with Syria had been closed, and the 400,000 people who wanted to escape had to pass a strict checkpoint. If suspected to be part of YPG, they were arrested. Erdoğan defined as terrorists both PYD members and ISIS members alike.

The strategy put in place by Erdoğan is based on an alliance with the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian opposition against Assad, and Erdoğan asked the US to create a no-fly zone in exchange for Turkey's participation in the fight against ISIS. He wants to create a buffer zone controlled by Turkey in northern Syria exactly in the area controlled by TEV-DEM. Although the PYD-YPG and the Free Syrian Army participated in the defence of Kobane, between them, there was a certain amount of tension, because Hazed-al-Assad, Bashars's father, supported the PKK despite it depriving the Syrian Kurdish people of their civil rights. (Dilar Dirik, David Levi Strauss, Michael Taussig, Peter Lamborn Wilson,2017). According to Bill Weinberg, both Assad and Erdoğan are using the technique of *divide et impera* (divide and rule) based on the rivalry between the Kurdish and Arabic people. At the same time, the rise of ISIS has led to an alliance between the US and Iran, while the PKK has found an ally in the PJAK. This party has been fighting against the regime in Teheran.

Western countries have been contributing in the form of a military coalition to restrain ISIS. For instance, Italy donated guns to the Kurdish forces in the war-torn territory (E. Del Re2015) . In order to justify the fact that the US provided support to the PYD against ISIS even though the PKK is listed as a terrorist party, the PYD had been considered a different organisation from the PKK.

Thornton (Dilar Dirik, David Levi Strauss, Michael Taussig, Peter Lamborn Wilson,2017 ) asserts that the Kurds are suffering the majority of the casualties in the war, and so they have become essential for the coalition partners. Furthermore, this support of the US and European coalition partners could cause confusion as regards understanding why they would help "terrorist groups". In one way or another, the Syria-based Democratic Union Party, the PYD, has a relationship with the PKK even though there has not been a direct interconnection. As Güleç (2014) states, the PYD is known as the Syrian wing of the PKK, but in an ideological relation. According to the US Department of State ("Country Reports on Terrorism": 329), the PKK is still listed as a foreign

terrorist organisation. A report by the state in 2015 mentioned the PYD and the YPG. It indicates that the Turkish government regards the Syria-based PYD and its military wing, the YPG, as terrorist organisations. Nonetheless, neither the PYD nor the YPG have appeared on any list of terrorist organisations. Moreover, Peshmerga from Iraqi-Kurdistan, who came to Kobane to help YPG has appeared on the list ("Country Reports on Terrorism": 149). When there had been conflicts in Kobane and interventions from the PYD in the city, the US Department of State's spokesperson, Marie Harf, clarified in 2014 that the "PYD is a different organization from PKK legally, under United States law" ("Daily Press Briefing" - October 20). However, in 2016, John Kirby explained, "we don't, as you know, recognize the PYD as a terrorist organization". He also stated, "we see Kurdish fighters on the ground that have been successful against Daesh as an important partner in this fight".(Daily Press Briefing" - February 8)

On 26 January 2015, the Kurdish forces had gained an important victory against ISIS in Kobane, and in October, the YPG created a new alliance with the most progressive forces of the Free Syrian Army. The new coalition has taken the name of SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), and it is pursuing the project of a united, multi-ethnic Syria. In September, the situation had been further compromised after Russia supported Assad. Although most of these attacks were directed against ISIS, they also damaged cities and involved civilians.

In the war two rival Kurdish groups, the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government) in Iraq and the PYD (Democratic Union Party, or *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) in Syria, have fought together (Gunter: 105).

These defensive forces have also aroused the interest of the international media, especially their female units. The PYD's armed wing, the YPG, is the male unit. Its female wing is YPJ (the Kurdish Women's Protection Unit). It was formed in 2012 against deadly attacks from the Syrian president Assad, the al-Nusra Front and ISIS (Griffin 2014). Salih Muslim is the leader of the PYD, and he has also had a voice in decisions about YPG and YPJ (Thornton: 877).

Conversely, Peshmerga is the military force of the KRG. Its commander in chief is Masoud Barzani, and its origins were in the late 1800s, although it was formally formed in the 1920s, after World War I ("Profile: Who are the Peshmerga?" 2014). Although the fighting female unit from Peshmerga is few in number in Kobane, it has also attracted the media's interest, but not as much as the YPJ women have done. As regards the relationship between the PYD and Peshmerga, the support from Peshmerga started in mid-January 2015.

Peshmerga went into Kobane to defend the city in accordance with Masoud Barzani's claim and both Salih Muslim's and the PYD's consent (Thornton: 875-877). According to Çandar (2014), the deployment of Peshmerga forces could not have changed the military balance, because only 150 fighters of Peshmerga entered Kobane. Even so, Peshmerga's presence in Kobane is a historical event not in a military sense, but in relation to Kurdish national unity.

In January 2018, Turkey began a massive military assault, Operation Olive Branch, on a Kurdish-controlled enclave of Afrin in northern Syria (Aljazeera, 2018). Turkey had been threatening the Kurdish forces throughout their advance, along with the liberation of areas from ISIS in northern Syria, because, for Turkey, Kobane and Afrin are connected to the PKK.

#### **1.4 The Rojava Revolution**

The Syrian Kurds, during the war, took control of a territory called Rojava. Rojava is now divided in cantons regulated by the Öcalan's *Democratic Confederalism* based on a social contract that institutionalises gender equality, ecology and pacific conviviality between different religions and cultures. On the night of July 18, 2012, the YPG took control of the roads leading in and out of Kobane City. "They fight not just against ISIS but also against the patriarchal system of which ISIS is an expression. With the YPJ, it was demonstrated that the women can do everything". (Dirik D, Levi Strauss D., Taussig M, Lamborn Wilson P, 2017) According to Öcalan, women have had an important role within Kurdish society since the Neolithic agricultural era, but this strength was drawn from the agricultural revolution.



The People's Defence Forces (YPG) and the Women's Defence Units (YPJ) have led the resistance in Kobane. In total, 35% of the fighters are women. (Dilar Dirik, 2015) The YPG units were crucial to creating a safety corridor to rescue the Yazidis in the Sinjar Mountains. In the YPJ and the YPG, gender equality is a central part of education and training. Inspired by Öcalan's idea, the Rojava cantons enforce co-presidencies and quotas, and they have created women's defence units, women's communes, academies, tribunals and cooperatives. (A Tangled Wilderness, 2015) The name Yekîtiya Star (the Star Union), began to be used in 2004 (the star is connected with the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar). The Rojava Umbrella Women's Movement was founded in 2005, and, under the Ba'ath regime, Yekîtiya Star activists were arrested and tortured. Today, all women in western Kurdistan who are involved in TEV-DEM's social, political and military work are also members of Kongreya Star (Congress of Free Women). It is a fundamental principle of the Kurdish women's movement to build women's institutions in every area, so that women can disengage intellectually, emotionally and spiritually from the authority and violence of patriarchal domination. (M. Knapp, 2016)

Once the protest started, the process of democratic autonomy in Rojava has served as an experiment by which to create a society without a nation-state, according to the Öcalan's theory of democratic confederalism. In it, men and the women have the same decision-making power, and Rojava is based on the principle of co-direction. The women can elect a female co-director, while the male co-director is elected by everyone, without gender distinction. Men who have committed violence against women are not part of the administration. The first acts of the government was to criminalise forced marriage, domestic violence, polygamy, child marriage, honour killings and bride prices. In addition, non-Kurdish women are encouraged to take part in administration and to organise autonomously.

In the light of these developments, we will not examine the academic literature relating to the reporting of developments in Rojava.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 How Kurdish female fighters are framed by the Western media

In conducting the research on this topic, the author began by researching Kurdish female fighters in Syria and how they are represented in the Western and Turkish media. According to Dilar Dirik (Dirik 2014) and Emanuela C. Del Re, the Western media had given a big deal of attention to the Kurdish female fighters but “focused on the sensational aspects rather than on analysis of the facts” (Del Re 2015). Some Turkish media outlets, such as the *Daily Sabah*, accused the Western media of being blind and that the *New York Times* is failing into a trap: “Adapting feminist discourse for their own purposes, a terrorist woman can now be praised as a freedom fighter who kills for women's liberation and empowerment, which is what the two *New York Times* articles, directly or not, also do with eulogies to the YPJ fighters” (Daily Sabah 2018). At a time when the activism of the Kurdish people has become important to international debate, especially in relation to the struggle against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, it is crucial to analyse the roots of female involvement within the Kurdish movement and the impact of this phenomenon on the Kurdish reality as a whole.

Zubeyde Sari, in the article “Women of Rojava”, published in *Ozgur Gundem*, September 2013, stated that “*This may be the first time in history that women have played such an active role in organizing a revolution. They fight on the fronts, they serve as commanders, and they participate in production. There is no place in Rojava where women are not to be seen. They are everywhere and part of everything*” (Zubeyde Sari, 2013). Actually, there are various examples of active female fighters in Western Europe, as in the history of Italy and the 1916 Rebellion in Ireland. In that case, why do Western societies perceive it as innovative and revolutionary?

For instance, Rehana, known as the “Kobane angel”, has become the symbol of the Kurdish resistance against Isis. Her image as a beautiful young woman in uniform has travelled the world. She has become a legend, and her epic story is based on the idea that she has killed more than 100 members of ISIS, highlighting the two-faced angel with her brutality in war. This could give rise to the question: are these myths used to manipulate public opinion? Did Rehana and the other female fighters really do what the legends claim? (Emanuela C. Del Re 2015)

It is possible to identify an opportunistic interpretation indicating that Kurdish actors have taken advantage of online forums and channels to increase the visibility of their cause. For instance, according to the *Daily Sabbah*, there is a “*feminist rhetoric [used] as a tool to aestheticize terror*” (Daily Sabbah 2018). The news story of ‘the angel of Kobane’, Rehana, has spread widely across social media sites, and it was even picked up by mainstream media outlets before a news story establishing the truth was published. In the story, Rehana was constructed as the heroic incarnation of a female combatant. It can be observed that Kobane was a turning point in the representation of Kurdish combatants and their role in the armed conflict in Syria. The representation of female combatants played a significant role in this regard. The fact that an Israeli-Canadian woman has joined the peshmerga has recently become part of the legend. The *Israeli Times* newspaper insisted that the woman had a criminal record. The newspaper then took the opportunity to destroy the myth by claiming that the resistance in Kobane has the goal of distracting ISIS from more strategic objectives and indicating that this would explain the deal of attention dedicated to Kurdish fighters (Del Re E.C 2018).

According to the scholar Dilar Dirik, the Western media seems to depict the Kurdish women fighters without giving voice to their ideology via proper analysis: it is “Typical of western media's myopia, instead of considering the implications of women taking up arms in what is essentially a patriarchal society – especially against a group that rapes and sells women as sex-slaves – even fashion magazines appropriate the struggle of Kurdish women for their own sensationalist purposes” (Dirik D. 2014). Dirik has written the following about

her own life: “The truth is, no matter how fascinating it is – from an orientalist perspective – to discover a women's revolution among Kurds, my generation grew up recognizing women fighters as a natural element of our identity. Although there is still a long way to go, what some now ignorantly call ‘tokenism’, has in fact shaped the consciousness of millions of Kurds” (Dirik D. 2014).

The aim of this research is to analyse how the Western media depicts the Kurdish women, considering whether it presents their ideas in depth, giving them the right context and importance, or whether it is merely presents them as an exotic phenomenon without analysing their reasons and the ideology behind their actions. It considers how the female combatants have been framed in the Western media and the extent to which these representations are gendered. It asks: are the women just being used to appeal to the Western media, or do they have an important role in what is referred to as the “Rojava Revolution”? If the media takes into consideration their ideas, which theory does it use to analyse them?

## **2.2 The difficult scenario of the Western media's myopia**

The attraction of the West to fighting women has a long history that seems to be related to the persistence of exoticism. For example, Emanuela Del Re reports that during the conflict in the Balkans, the press focused on the heels they used or on their red nail polish while loading an AK47. Gaddafi travelled the world with an Amazon escort since 1970, and it was stated they were willing to die in order to protect him. Only later was it discovered that they were also abused and raped by him (Del Re,2015). The charm of the combination of military uniform and femininity is perhaps derived from the figure of Joan of Arc. Women in developing countries are perceived by the West with a new aura and as the apotheosis of the contrast between femininity and military uniform (Del Re 2018).

In Western thought, the body has historically been associated exclusively with women, while men have been associated with the mind. Susan Bordo, a

modern feminist philosopher, elaborates on the dualistic nature of the mind/body connection by examining the philosophies of Aristotle, Hegel and Descartes, revealing that such binary distinctions as spirit/matter and masculine activity/feminine passivity have served to consolidate gender characteristics and categorisation. While men have historically been associated with the intellect and the mind or the spirit, women have long been associated with the body; the term negatively soaked has subordinated to the mind/body dichotomy. The notion of the body (but not the mind) being associated with women has served as a justification for retaining women as interchangeable properties, objects and raw materials (among men). For example, women's bodies have been objectified throughout history through the changing ideologies of fashion, diet, exercise programmes, cosmetic surgery, pregnancy and so on. This contrasts with the role of men as moral agents responsible for work or being allowed to fight in bloody wars. The idea of a woman being able to determine whether her body will be treated as decoration and to be protected is associated with the bodies of women of a middle or upper class. Conversely, there is another concept of the body that recognises its use in exploitative labour and is generally associated with the bodies of women in the working class or with black women (Bordo S 1993).

The film industry has adopted a narcissistic way of portraying women as objects for men. Sexual objectification means looking at a person as an object merely for sexual pleasure and as an object for use. Sexual objectification is comparable with the "male gaze", and both theories have effects on men and women in our culture today. Feminists perceive sexual objectification as being a major part of the patriarchal order in which women are not equal to men. Sexual advertisements have also led to the "male gaze" and sexual objectification, which, in turn, have created consequences described by feminist theories, causing psychological problems for some women in our culture.

The "male gaze" was a phrase originally coined by Laura Mulvey, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", and her interpretation of the term relates to women as a spectacle in film. Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts wrote an essay, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding

Women's lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks" (Fredrickson, Roberts 1997), in which they focus on the consequences of the "male gaze" and viewing women of different ethnicity as sexual objects. As a result of sexual objectification, women have a self-image that they are constantly monitoring, which causes stress and mental disorders. Sexual objectification and gender oppression have the same consequences for women, which results in employment discrimination and sexual violence. Frederickson and Roberts agree that sexual gazing is what enables sexual objectification, and when these acts occur, women's body parts are what define them as people rather than their personalities.

The objectifying gaze, according to Fredrickson and Roberts, is noticeable in three different instances. The first is in public places involving an actual social encounter, and in most cases, women of colour are more likely than a white one to receive a sexual comment with such a gaze. The second scenario is objectification in the media that portrays the likeness of a real encounter in which a male is gazing at a female while the female does not notice the attention, as her attention is directed at something else. The "male gaze" is also a suitable phrase to describe the third instance of objectification in society. Fredrickson and Roberts describe the third instance in terms credited to Laura Mulvey, and the "male gaze". They knew this visual sexual objectification in the media as being the most threatening in our culture. The "male gaze" is not limited to pornography; in fact, it is portrayed throughout many films, live television and advertisements. While men are mostly represented in detailed facial view, women are mainly shown as body parts alone. These media tactics are actually provoking sexual objectification in our culture today.

Emanuela Del Re quotes an article of As'ad Abukhail, from October 2014: "who are you fooling? Did you spend ages classifying the Palestinians (secular and Marxist) as terrorists and now you want to attribute a tribute in the name of feminism and liberalism to the Kurdish female fighters?" According to Nacos (Nacos, 2005), in "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns", in the media, the reader is explicitly told that terrorism is the domain of men. The implicit message is inescapable: females do not fit the

terrorist profile. Nacos found evidence of the prevalence of gender stereotypes, such as the compassionate nature of females and male's natural aggressiveness, that cause people to expect men and women to behave differently. As a result, "Women in politics are commonly seen as compassionate, practical, honest, and hard-working, while men are seen as ruthless, ambitious, and tough leaders". Nacos argues that "*Indeed, women are 'most newsworthy when they are doing something 'un-lady like' "*".

Researchers also found that the media reports much more on the physical appearances (their figure, their hairstyle, their make-up, their attire, their overall appearance) and the personal traits of female candidates and office-holders, whereas male politicians receive more issue-oriented coverage. Many Middle Eastern women are covered up so that hairstyles and such things are hardly an issue, but the female fighters represent an exception in this context. Generally, Nacos noticed that female politicians are far more often defined by their family status than male politicians and are typically identified as the wives of a multimillionaire husband, the daughters of a well-known politician, the unmarried challengers of male incumbents or the mothers of several children. Finally, even after reporting the initial news that a woman has accomplished another "first", the media tends to always identify these females as exceptional, because such achievements are not expected of females. By defining them together as "Black Widows" with personal grievances, the media ignores the fact that some, or perhaps many, of these women were not at all motivated by personal but political grievances. This is a point the author will try to verify.

Related to the previous category is the popular image of the woman terrorist acting for the sake of love – not for deeply held political reasons. Sometimes, a woman turns to terrorism out of simple boredom, and the media represents boredom as one of the pathetic rights and privileges of the middle-class woman (Nacos 2005). Although women figure prominently in the history of terrorism, the female terrorist continues to be perceived as an exception to the rule. According to these studies, these Kurdish women fighters seem to be glorified by the international media because they are contesting the traditional portrayal of Middle Eastern women who are not "emancipated". By taking up arms, they

are also contradicting gender and ethnic stereotypes, and this makes them newsworthy (Del Re, 2015).

Dilar Dirik begins an article by talking about Rehana, who, according to the Western media, has killed more than 1,000 fighters for ISIL. She claims that they present this woman as a phenomenon worthy of a novel, so they do not emphasize her political ideas and aspirations: *“They cheapen a legitimate struggle by projecting their bizarre orientalist fantasies on it – and oversimplify the reasons motivating Kurdish women to join the fight. Nowadays, it seems to be appealing to portray women as sympathetic enemies of ISIS without raising questions about their ideologies and political aims”*. Edward Said, in *Covering Islam*, also wrote that the Western media still uses the dominant Orientalist point of view. This perspective developed by E. Said suggests that Western literature tends to describe the Middle East and the Far East as bizarre and curious, depraved. The Western media does not portray the reality of the East accurately, but has created an exotic picture, so it is not able to fully understand this different culture, but has rather created a charming narrative regarding it (Said). For Dilar Dirik, it is happening again when the Western media speaks about the Kurdish female fighters, because they are attracted by the image of a woman who is different from what is described in the Oriental fantasy.

Emanuela Del Re underlines the fact that participation in the Syrian conflict and against ISIS has been subject to different interpretations. Kurdistan has allowed women Peshmerga to fight in the front line, but there is concern that they risk too much and are often kept away from being clearly exposed to the battle front. One of the elements of the myth is that women have a bullet to kill themselves if they are captured. There are also stories of women who have used themselves as a last act of heroism who inspire generations. Another narrative is that suicide bombings are part of the Kurdish fighting culture, while another legend tells that the ISIS escaped in front of the women not because they fear them, but because they are afraid that they will not enter paradise if they are killed by a woman. All of this reduces the value of the female fighter (Del Re, 2015).

As Dirik points out, it does not help Kurdish women when they are glorified as enemies of the ISIS if their political struggle is not then deepened and



supported. In fact, these kinds of discourses aim to reproduce certain visuals and stereotypes of Muslim women. There is still a persistent representation of barbaric and uncivilised Islamic societies, along with passive Muslim women within a repressive society. As Said claims in *Orientalism*, Arab women are represented as exotic, erotic and suppressed objects. People tend to believe that the reports present the truth, while they are actually a product of a certain discourse representing the reality that shapes a structured meaning (Said).

In fact, there has always been extensive news coverage in the Western media about the Middle East portraying Muslim women as suffering from wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, etc. Journalists frequently picture Arab women as suffering and desperate. In his article "The Visual Representation of Muslim/Arab Women in Daily Newspapers in the United States" (Falah, GW 2005), Falah states that "Arab and Muslim women are rarely portrayed as having "normal" lives [...] Instead, images of Muslim women are used almost exclusively to communicate the abnormality of life in Muslim societies marked by violence, religious fanaticism, and political turmoil". The Western media and human rights activists often victimise Muslim women, using the veil as a symbol of oppression. Several images ignore the diversity of women and present them collectively in a stereotypical way. There is a wide range of images of Arab women in war situations, whereby Falah emphasises two types of narratives: the passive victim and the active activist. The passive woman is often illustrated as an oppressed victim of religious fundamentalism or dictatorships, while the active woman is often involved in demonstrations or social movement. There is a construction of identity within ideological bias and power by framing the Arab women in certain war situations. Mirella Galletti, in "Western Images of the Women's role in Kurdish Society", suggests that Kurdish nationalists contributed to the spread of such stereotypes as the idea that the Kurdish women were different from their Middle Eastern counterparts (who were perceived as subject to total male control due to the influx of Islam and the backwardness of their society) and the myth of the ancestral freedom of Kurdish women. They did this for several reasons, but above all, because they wished to point out similarities in the cultural heritage between the West and Kurdish society and to obtain a wider consensus throughout the Kurdish national movement.

Dirik emphasises that this tendency to consider the Kurdish militants a form of public relations strategy does not take into consideration the different tendencies between the Kurds of various regions or that Kurdish women have always fought. Dirik claims that the Eastern media takes the most attractive women into consideration and begins a process of exoticism, treating them as Amazons. Instead, Dirik asserts that his generation has known Kurdish women as fighters. Dirik recalls Kara Fatama, for instance. Dirik claims that almost half of the PKK's forces are women. She also reports the case of the women in Iraq, Deli and Peshmerga. They often receive criticism for not drawing women into fighting at the front, but between 1970 and 1980, they took up arms with their husbands to fight against the Hussein regime. Treating Kurdish women as a form of public relations means treating Kurds as a homogeneous people by ignoring differences between them.

### **2.3 Historical roots of the Kurdish women's movement**

For the purpose of synthesis, and due to the greater availability of sources, the analysis will focus on the historical and ideological roots of the Kurdish women's movement in Turkey and, in particular, on the history of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) political militants. This paper will take into consideration the article "The roots of the revolution of the Kurdish women", written by Francesca La Bella, and the article "Re-defining the role of women within the Kurdish national movement in Turkey in the 1990s", by Necla Acik, who gives an insight into how some Kurdish newspapers close to PKK have framed the women participating in political fighting.

According to the article by Francesca La Bella, "a careful examination of the literature on the subject highlights, in fact, the leadership of Kurdish women in Turkey in the creation of a specific theory of women's liberation. By borrowing part of the socialist tradition, this theory has undergone numerous transformations due to the interpenetration between general theory and local reality succeeding in delineating a process of female empowerment with peculiar characteristics". For a correct understanding of these dynamics, it is therefore necessary to examine the historical and social contingencies at the

root of this experience. According to Francesca La Bella, “At the beginning of the last century, the liberation of women was used as an instrument to subordinate them to the Turkish nation. The Turkish generals have appealed to the Turkish women formally ‘emancipated’ by the state to highlight the gap between Turkish modernity and Kurdish underdevelopment. When thousands of Kurdish women began to expand the ranks of the PKK and its guerrilla army in 1990, Turkey launched a broad offensive against the guerrillas. While men were labelled terrorists, official nationalism reduced women to prostitutes. From a patriarchal perspective, women could not be considered terrorists and their rebellion against the indivisibility of the Turkish nation had to be degraded in sexist terms”.

In parallel, the Kurdish nationalists themselves have prevented the evolution of an independent female movement. Although, during the course of its history, Kurdish society was mainly dominated by male figures, there are several examples of women who have achieved significant positions within the community. Many Kurdish authors have interpreted these cases as evidence of the position of respect held by women and as examples of a long tradition of equality. According to Francesca La Bella, Kurdish nationalists have contributed to the diffusion of such stereotypes for different reasons, but mainly to underline the common cultural roots between the West and Kurdish society and to obtain support for their own national liberation movement. It was a contradiction with their eyes turned to tradition; the nationalist parties have thus postponed women's emancipation, perpetuating the myth of the ancestral freedom of Kurdish women (La Bella, 2016).

According to Francesca La Bella, the actions of the Turkish state and the activity of Kurdish nationalists have been closely intertwined. The Turkish state has adopted an aggressive policy of assimilation towards the Kurds, and the reaction of the Kurdish nationalists has been one of strong adherence to tradition. This social defence mechanism has strengthened women's subjugation by turning them into symbols of Kurdish identity against Turkey's imperialist control.

Women, who were almost totally illiterate, spoke Kurdish at home because it was the only language they knew, and in this way, they preserved the historical memory of their own people. Kurdistan is not an exception. It has always been considered more important to make men study, and the public space has been considered the exclusive preserve of the latter. Women were viewed as the private property of their family, and then her husband, being relegated to the household, deprived of the opportunity to work and subjected to continuous violence in body and spirit. Because of this, Kurdish women, on the one hand, have been subject less to state assimilation policies and, on the other, have had a further stimulus to mobilisation. In conflict, therefore, they found the possibility of changing their condition, even towards their own men.

In this sense, it is necessary to underline that, in a society that is still strongly patriarchal, the condition of militant women is considered by many analysts to be different from that experienced by the Kurdish female population as a whole. In addition, an active military experience distinguishes any group, whether women or men, from an inactive civilian group. The tools of emancipation are the political and military involvement of these women. The PKK has, therefore, marked a significant break with the past, actively mobilising women, and, at the same time, the armed wing of the PKK, the ARGK, has, since the beginning, recruited a significant number of young female fighters. In training camps, women worked and fought alongside and equally with men, sometimes becoming military commanders.

According to Necla Acik (Acik 2016), in *Re-defining the Role of Women within the Kurdish National Movement in Turkey in the 1990s*, the mobilisation of women in the Kurdish national struggle in the 1990s was accompanied by varying and often contradictory discourses. The feminist journals, addressing a more educated, middle class audience, focused on women as independent agents who fought against national oppression as well as against sexism coming among their own ranks. For these feminists, liberation included personal emancipation and the politicisation of the private life. The *YÖK* newspaper, conversely, was affiliated with the PKK that led an armed struggle. This was an organisation with a high level of influence over the Kurdish population at its

disposal. It successfully mobilised Kurdish women from the rural areas and the cities, including sections of Kurdish society that had never been this politicised before. It delivered a solution to the problems of national oppression and gender inequalities by re-constructing and linking a matriarchal society with the current struggle of the Kurds.

The PKK launched its armed struggle in 1984, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it heavily recruited women as guerrilla fighters. Within a decade of the start of the armed campaign, the Kurdish national movement reached its peak with the *Serhildans* (Kurdish for “uprising”) that took place during the period between 1990 and 1993. In these mass uprisings, women became even more visible in the public sphere, in particular as political activists. It was during this period that female branches within established Kurdish organisations were expanded or were formed if they did not already exist. More importantly, for the first time it led to the emergence of independent Kurdish women’s groups and organisations in Turkey.

Necla Acik underlines that, because women have historically been the ones most oppressed and humiliated, they must possess will and determination and exert the greatest efforts in order to modify their situation. Because they are the most vulnerable targets for the enemy, they must fight hardest to overcome their weakness. Because they create life, they must work the hardest for its preservation. These lines of argument have been employed by PKK and used as a powerful argument to justify and increase the mobilisation of women in the national struggle. This allocation of the maternal role to women and its accentuation have been criticised by the feminist journals.

However, at the same time, they also reproduced fixed images of “womankind” and identified women as possessing rigid features. The idea that women are “pacifists” by nature, whereas men are “warlike”, is particularly evident in the discourse surrounding war and peace. From the woman-as-pacifist classification, a female identity is derived that possesses a better aptitude for peaceful co-existence and tolerance than the male identity allows. This has a fundamental overlap with the historical notion of the women of the “golden era”,

and as such, the feminist and non-feminist journals, in similar ways, essentialised images of Kurdish women.

The celebration of a female culture and a female identity serves to form a basis for women's systematic organisation. Necla Acik underlines that such definitions do not necessarily lead to the hoped-for emancipation but can actually prove themselves to be detrimental to women's attempts to actively participate in political and societal processes. She claims that the creation of a golden age or a Kurdish historiography is typical to nation building processes and perhaps constitutes the fundamentals of any nation-building project. Kurds claim Mesopotamia as their homeland for many centuries, which often symbolises the golden era of the past.

In the historiography narrated by PKK-affiliated publications, Kurdish oppression was, and continues to be, considered analogous with the oppression of women. Ancient Mesopotamia, representing the golden era of the Kurdish nation, is described as a matriarchal society governed by fairness, attachment to the land and the equality of both men and women. Due to their ability to give birth and close association with nature and the earth, women in matriarchal Mesopotamia were believed to be in possession of the secret of life itself. This guaranteed them decision-making roles in the organisation of social life, which they exercised in favour of both sexes, without any domination or exploitation. However, according to this narrative, this ideal situation came to an end despite fierce resistance by these women, who eventually lost their power. The matriarchal society was replaced by a patriarchal and oppressive system. In the PKK narrative, this also marks the period of the end of Kurdish liberation and the beginning of Kurdish oppression. The Kurds are said to have lost their identity in the same way that the women of the past were robbed of their self-determination (Acik N 2016).

The mass mobilisation of women in Kobane is the legacy of the decades-long resistance of Kurdish women as fighters, prisoners, politicians, leaders of popular uprisings and tireless protesters, unwilling to compromise on their rights. According to Dirik, "Appreciation for these women should not only praise

their fight against ISIS, but it should also recognize their politics. Those seeking to honour the bravest enemies of ISIS can begin by actively supporting the resistance in Kobane, remove the PKK from the terror list, and officially recognize the Syrian Kurdistan administration.”

## **2.4 The ideological roots of the Kurdish women's movement**

There is a strong relationship between the political development of the Kurdish movement, particularly the women’s movement, and the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of PKK. For Öcalan, sexism is one of the main pillars of the nation state. “In short, the campaigns for excluding women and for manufacturing reverence for the conquering, warrior male authority structure were tightly interwoven. The state as an institution was invented by males” (Öcalan 2014). Having moved away from the initial male goal to obtain an independent Kurdistan, he now argues that the establishment of an independent nation-state does not improve the freedom of its people. According to Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, in *“The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): National Liberation, Insurgency and Radical Democracy Beyond Borders”*, the reach of the organisation was such that by the 1990s, the “liberation of Kurdistan” was no longer unthinkable. However, in the 2000s, the period following the arrest of its founder and leader, Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK has experienced severe difficulties. Yet, rather than leading to the weakening of the movement, these difficulties led to a process of reinvention. Its ideology, organisational structure and commitment to political-military struggle, all very much at the heart of the controversy, have been transformed. This has been made possible mainly through the elaboration of new ideological and political approaches, which created opportunities for the PKK to enlarge its scope of interest and activities, thereby creating more space for a Kurdish public sphere.

With the concept of democratic confederalism, PKK seems to be trying to improve its international image and to be taken off the list of terrorist organisations. In an Italian article, for example, it states that PKK is stopping terrorism; it is not part of it. According to the newspaper *Il fatto quotidiano*, the

PKK stops terrorism, and it is not part of it. As is well known thanks to the strong media attention given to the participation of women in the Kurdish war and the liberation of Kobane, the female issue plays a fundamental role for democratic confederalism, as theorised by Öcalan. The question of gender is in fact more than a simple claim of rights; it is one of the main points of Öcalan's criticism of contemporary society and, consequently, constitutes one of the pillars on which to base a new one. According to the leader of the PKK, female discrimination has its roots in the patriarchal structure of modern society and in the historical union it has achieved with military culture.

According to Francesca La Bella (2016), women played a fundamental role in defining their role in society; their emancipation was often considered secondary to the struggle for national liberation. The author argues that "in this perspective, some analysts have stated that Kurdish feminism has played a mere supporting role compared to the broader Kurdish nationalism. In this sense, women would be 'authorized' to fight for their rights only where this process could lead to benefits for the realization of the national Kurdish project". According to a study conducted by Chyntia Enloe (2004), titled "Gender is Not Enough: The Need for a Feminist Consciousness" international affairs 80. (2004), the role of women in the "war fought" has always been negligible, because it has been considered insignificant; consequently, the contribution of the female sex would historically be contested in the reconstruction processes of peace and reconciliation, so-called DDR processes (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration), thus fuelling the ideal-typical vision of the war that conceives of it as an exclusively male activity. From this point of view, one of the central aspects of women's liberation is free access to all levels of public life and the rejection of a process of "housewifification" as a reduction of women to male property. The rejection of the isolation of women in the private sphere can be considered to descend from Marxist theory, but the analysis of Öcalan has gone beyond Marxist theory.

The feminism who influenced the ideas of Öcalan and the female Kurdish fighters who are inspired by his "Jineology theory", Jin" is Kurdish and means "woman". Logy is derived from the Greek term "logos", meaning knowledge; it is



not connected with liberal feminism. Öcalan was inspired by the theory of Maria Mies, a social feminist and eco-feminist who also focused on the division of labour. According to her, a materialist explanation forces us to analyse the nature of the interaction of women and men with nature, and through it, their human or social nature is accumulated. In this context, she criticises Engels for not taking this aspect into account. The feminine and the masculine define in each different historical epoch. Thus, in what she calls the principles of societies, matriarchal women were significant, because they were productive – they were active producers of life. In capitalist conditions, this has changed, and they are housewives, empty of all creative and productive qualities. Women as producers of children and milk, and as gatherers and farmers, had a relationship with nature different from that of men. Men relate to nature through tools. According to her, then, the supremacy of men does not come from their superior economic contribution, but from the fact that they invented the destructive tools through which they control women. In addition, she adds that patriarchal relations were established in the herding economy. Men learned the role of impregnation. The monopoly of weapons, and knowledge of this, meant that the male role in production led to changes in the division of labour. Women were no longer important as food gatherers or as producers; their role involved the raising of children. In this way, she concludes, "we can attribute the symmetrical division of labour between men and women to a predatory mode of production, or rather, appropriation, which is based on the male monopoly on means of coercion, ie, in the arms and in the direct violence through which the permanent relations of exploitation and domination between the sexes are created and maintained".

The family, the state and religion have played an important role in endorsing this point of view. Although Mies claims that we must reject biological determinism, she herself deviates towards it. Several of her proposals for social change, like those of radical feminists, are directed towards the transformation of male-female relationships and the responsibility of raising children. However, it is not possible to change it within the capitalist system. The capitalist mode of production must not only be transformed, but must be transformed along with the mode of procreation.

Maria Mies has also expressed harsh criticism of Marxist theory, introducing the concepts of male dominance and “housewification”. In her opinion, the Marxist analysis of the value of labour force does not pay attention to the relationship between a man who is active at work and a woman who is a housewife. Thus, if, for the capitalists, the work of women at home is considered a natural resource, even in proletarian families, women's work is considered marginal. This consideration is derived from the concept according to which, in the absence of bargaining power, women are subjugated by proletarian men just as colonies are subjugated by colonisers. “Housewification” is described as the most ancient form of enslavement, and gender discrimination is considered the basis of all unequal power relations, such as those between different classes and peoples (Mies 2015).

What is happening in Rojava is revolutionary, and the space given in the media to the female soldiers has a very strong symbolic power. Thus, the present author argues that it may represent real female emancipation rather than merely a good tool to improve the PKK’s image in the international press coverage, and thus in the opinion of the Western public. According to Dirik, “Today, when we look at how the mainstream treats the Kurdish women’s resistance against ISIS, we can see very simplistic and problematic approaches that focus on the war in terms of a physical military fight only, even a certain Schadenfreude that ISIS is being defeated by women, a classical ‘girls beat boys’ type of attitude. The women’s political motivations, their ideologies are ignored or co-opted within this context, even by feminists”. Having considered different feminist theories, including liberal feminism, critical feminism and radical feminism, it is now worth examining which of these is predominant in the media.

## **2.5 Methodology and Analysis**

To undertake this research, the author must begin by defining who the Kurdish people are. The method the author will use to conduct is quantitative content analysis. According to Berenson “*Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of*

*communication*". According to Hanson (1989), six steps are required to undertake a content analysis. It is these steps which the author will follow to understand if and how the promotion of gender equality is improving the PKK's international image.

Definition of research problem: **How are Kurdish female fighters framed by the Western media? Is the media giving attention to their ideas when describing female fighters?**

- Selection of the media and sample: the author will analyse the news coverage given to PKK, Öcalan and Kurdish females in different newspapers. She will analyse the period 2011-2018, and she will use the following keywords in the research: "Kurdish women", "PKK", "Öcalan", "PYD", "Rojava" and "Kurdish female fighters". Media coverage of the PKK organisation could be key to showing how PKK is perceived by various countries. As Öcalan was hosted as a refugee in Italy, the author will take into consideration two Italian newspapers: *La Repubblica* (centre-left) and *Il Corriere della Sera* (centre-right). The author will analyse an example of international press coverage the *Guardian* and *The Times*.
- She will take into consideration different Turkish newspapers in the English language, chosen according to different political sides: *Bianet* is pro-Kurdish and leftist; *Diken* is leftist; *Hürriyet Daily News* is centre; and *Dailysabah* is considered nationalist.
- It is also crucial for the research to determine whether the fighters who speak for themselves are chosen by reporters as a collective subject that speaks for all participants in the group.
- Definition of analytical categories, e.g.:  
  
PKK as a terrorist party  
  
Kurdish cause

Kurdish women/Kurdish female fighters – how the media portrays them in relation to Kobane

1) struggle for equality/emancipation/liberation

2) personal/emotional motivations: Revenge, Out-of-touch-with-reality, love.

3) physical appearance

4) exceptionalism

- Construction of coding schedule. The coding schedule will include information such as article length, the name of the newspaper, type of article and the political alignment of the newspaper
- Checking reliability: she will check if the categories are reliable in the analysis.
- Data preparation and analysis

### **Target group**

The target group of the research study are Kurdish, Turkish and Syrian people living in Ireland and national journalists and lecturers internationally. This paper, it is hoped, will serve as an academic study to bring about awareness of the Kurdish cause and demonstrate how gender equality is possible in the Middle East, along with the ideas that support it.

### **Ethical issues**

The general ethical principles to be applied during research include voluntary participants being aware of the risk involved in participation, confidentiality and anonymity, knowing the benefit of participation, informed consent and the right

to withdraw. Most of the research will be based on content analysis, although the author will endeavour to follow these principles.

### **Potential challenges**

- PKK is still considered a terrorist party by the US and the European Union.
- In Turkey, Kurdish identity is a controversial topic, especially given the current censorious environment and the security clampdown due to the attempted coup.

### **Outcomes**

It is hoped that this study will demonstrate that the gender revolution in Rojava is truly happening and that it is no mere public relations strategy. The author also wishes to demonstrate that in this fight, women's political motivations and their ideologies are evident. Often, this aspect is ignored by the Western media.

## **Chapter 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The data consisted of news articles from the national media in Italy, Turkey and the United Kingdom between 2008 and 2018, analysed via frame analysis. The newspapers examined from Italy included *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*, while those from the UK were the *Guardian* and the *Times*. The Turkish publications considered were the *Daily Sabah*, the *Bianet* and the *Hürriyet*.<sup>1</sup> The goal was to determine whether the revolution in Rojava was reported, in addition to whether it was truly happening or was merely public relations propaganda, as the Turkish newspapers often claim. The research also sought to ascertain whether the Western newspapers highlighted only the sensationalist aspects of the fighters or also gave attention to the ideologies that drove them to fight. Finally, the research was aimed at determining whether there was a perspective shared by all Western newspapers.

According to Dirik, Kurdish women fighters is a novel phenomenon. The media underestimates the ideology behind their fight by projecting bizarre Oriental fantasies on it and oversimplifying the motivations causing Kurdish women to join the fight. It is appealing to portray women as sympathetic enemies of ISIS, without raising questions about their ideologies and political aims. In the words of Dirik, "Appreciation for these women should not only praise their fight against ISIS, but it should also recognize their politics. Those seeking to honor the bravest enemies of ISIS can begin by actively supporting the resistance in Kobane, remove the PKK from the terror list, and officially recognize the Syrian Kurdistan administration".

They have become icons of heroism and bravery, with a number of celebratory epithets that reflect the uniqueness of their choice and condition. A pattern

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<sup>1</sup> All the article will be collected in the media appendix

noticed by Emanuela del Re is that Western newspapers create myths that degrade ISIS by deconstructing the masculinity of the enemy while sexualising the YPJ. Thus, the charming female fighters are portrayed as winning against ISIS not because of their military value, but due to ISIS's fear of being killed by them. Moreover, this would confirm Dirik's thesis of the Western media oversimplifying the motivations behind their choice to fight.

### **3.2 Data collection and methodology**

The content analysis method was adopted for this analysis. It is a quantitative method; its purpose is to identify and count the occurrence of specified characteristics or dimensions of a text and, through this, to be able to state something about messages, images and representations of such texts, along with their wider social significance.<sup>2</sup> According to Hanson Anders, this method cannot be objective in a "value-free" sense – it is based on making a subjective choice as regards which dimensions chosen for analysis are the important or significant aspects to consider. Because of this weakness, the author decided to assign a number to every article taken into consideration, using an online automatic number generator to track the articles chosen for analysis.

The idea was to compare the image represented by the Western newspapers with that of the Turkish newspapers, but also to distinguish between English and Italian newspapers. This was also because Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, had been hosted in Italy before being imprisoned in Turkey. The chosen period was included because it involved several important events:

- The start of the war in Syria, on March 15, 2011.
- The release of Kobane by the Kurdish Protection Units in the spring of 2015.
- The assault on Afrin in January 2018. The Turkish forces, supported by the Free Syrian Army (ESL), surrounded the city of Afrin, located in the

north-west of Syria, and they took control of certain areas. Afrin, close to the Turkish border, is a critical enclave in the north-west of Syria which could have offered an outlet to the Mediterranean for the Kurds. The campaign is being conducted against the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdish forces in northern Syria, which are considered by Ankara to be part of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The collection of data was conducted via the Internet, so the issues of these newspapers were online versions, and in some cases, they were paid versions. The author took the Turkish press into consideration because she believes that reading the English edition was important, since it indicates the image of the country that the newspaper wants to communicate to a foreign audience. The number of articles available in the English language in the Turkish press was limited.

Madina Aynur Benakay, in *The Badass Female Fighters: Media Representation of Kurdish Women in Kobane*, took into consideration fashion magazines such as *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Teen Vogue*. For this study, the author chose national newspapers, because she believed that articles in fashion magazines may be inclined towards sensationalist viewpoints. The author considered the macrostructure, the heading and the subheading, in addition to whether the picture was consistent with the topic. The concepts of background information and context were also adopted.

Context information is about social and political views of the facts. In this study, the author sought to highlight whether the article was generally in favour of the Kurds or not. Moreover, she wanted to ascertain whether there was a definition of the historical context and the reasons for the conflict. The purpose was to identify whether the media was giving attention to the ideology behind the Kurdish fight or whether it was merely creating a narrative about the personal stories of the female fighters, in order to satisfy the expectations and tastes of the audience.

Analysis by J. Galtung and M. Ruge has shown that several factors are consistently applied across a range of news organisations in order to decide the



selection and prioritisation of news (frequency, reference to persons, reference to something negative and consonance). The more an event is associated with these criteria, the more likely it is to be reported on in a newspaper.

“Consonance” is a news value which indicates that, if the media suggests that something will happen, it will happen in the manner in which it was previously reported. It is based on expected features of the world on which the media reports and which the audience expects.

According to Brigitte Nacos (2005), gender stereotypes are found in the media, such as the idea that females have a compassionate nature, while males are naturally aggressive, and these affect people by making them expect men and women to behave differently. Following the study by Nacos, the author decided to examine whether the newspapers gave attention to the reasons that had led women to war, along with determining what interpretative framework the journalists used. Using the study of Brigitte Nacos, the author has distinguished four main frames used in both national presses: 1) idealistic, with a struggle for equality/emancipation/liberation; 2) the desire for revenge; 3) out of touch with reality and love; and 4) escaping from their backward culture or from ISIS. The first frame presented the women combatants' participation as ideological; they were fighting for equality, emancipation and national liberation. The second and third frames were used to underline women's personal reasons for engaging in battle (loss of family members, for instance, being naïve and following a husband, or for love). The fourth frame was employed when there was a desire to change the female condition in respect of the environment offered by the archaic traditional culture and the project pursued by Isis.

The author tried to analyse the photos and descriptions to determine whether there were references to women's physical appearances and their feminine features. The author also decided to examine whether there was a frame that depicted women as extraordinary and tougher than men, in order to verify whether there was a tendency to “emasculate” the enemy. In the analysis, the author also identified whether the journalist was a man or a woman and whether he/she was European. This was because of the desire to examine

whether an exotic, Orientalist image prevailed or whether attention was also given to the reasons and the historical context.

In the analysis regarding the article written by Brigitte Nacos, the author tried to investigate how the female fighters were described and whether they fell into the categories described by her. For instance, the author found worthy in the analysis the “Terrorist for the Sake of Love Frame”. Related to the previous category is the popular image of the woman terrorist or fighter who fights for the sake of love, not for deeply political reasons. There is a stereotype of the female terrorist who joins terrorist groups and activities, following her lover or husband, or perhaps her father, brother or cousin. The author has noticed that this frame is popular when describing women’s part in jihad. The author then tried to compare the descriptions of the Kurdish fighters and foreign female fighters with those who had joined the jihad, in order to ascertain whether the same frames were used.

Nacos also emphasises that female terrorists are almost always physically attractive, trim and pleasant. With respect to female terrorists, the concept of the “naïve, bored, non-political, out-of-touch-with-reality woman” (Nacos 2014) who turns to terrorism simply out of boredom is frequently used. The author sought to determine whether there was a reason for joining the fight on both sides, and she was especially interested in foreign female Western fighters participating in the fight on both sides. Moreover, the author sought to analyse whether the Italian media and the English media shared the same perspectives and used the same frames when describing the female fighters.

### **3.3 Content analysis**

According to Berelson (1952), content analysis is a method of study and analysis of the messages of systematic, objective and quantitative communication with the purpose of measuring certain variables. Content analysis must be systematic, both in selecting the sample and in conducting the actual analysis. The selection of the sample must follow the established procedures, and each element must have a fair chance of being included in the sample. Furthermore, during the analysis, all of the content under examination must be treated in exactly the same way. The author used the same categories when conducting the research for all of the articles. The categories used were taken from the article of Nacos (2005), and they were equally used on the analysis of all newspapers taken into consideration.

The analysis of the content must be objective. Even if perfect objectivity is unattainable, it is still possible to have operational definitions and rules for classifying variables as explicitly and exhaustively as possible, so as to allow another researcher who repeats the same process to reach the same conclusions.

The author decided to choose four categories:

- 1) idealistic, with a struggle for equality/emancipation/liberation
- 2) the desire for revenge
- 3) out of touch with reality and love
- 4) escaping from their backward culture, or from ISIS.

In the idealistic category, the author included feminist ideas and political ideas (such as democratic confederalism and the Kurdish cause). As regards the desire for revenge, this was connected, for example, to the loss of a family member. The third category, out of touch with reality and love, related to when the journalist focused on a partner or husband as the reason for females choosing to fight. Such females are viewed as out of touch of reality when they

are depicted being naïve and not totally aware of the weight of their decisions and consequences.

The author defined the content of the research as daily newspaper articles published from 2011 to 2018. The author considered unit of analysis articles written in English to make the content understandable to potential readers of this paper. The second language was Italian, but the author will translate and explain in English the meaning of the articles taken into consideration. The author also took into consideration newspapers from the United Kingdom instead of Ireland, simply because there were more pages dedicated to the topic in UK newspapers during the period considered, 2011-2018. The Italian daily newspapers considered were *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, while the UK publications were the *Times* and the *Guardian*.

Content analysis must be quantitative. The method must therefore quantify the message in such a way as to allow precise conclusions. Quantification allows researchers to summarise their results author to present them concisely. During the phase of category construction, the author tried to define content categories suitable to the topic object of the analysis. According to Berelson (1952), these categories must be exclusive and reliable: every unit of analysis can be inserted into only one category. In cases where the unit of analysis could be placed into two different categories, the author considered the numbers of words dedicated to the two different topics when there was an overlap. In addition, the captions associated with photographs were considered. This also helped to avoid overlaps between the idealist category and the frame escaping from their backward culture and ISIS. The category had to contain all of the units of analysis considered so that elements were not allocated to another category. The categories and to be reliable in order to allow other research to yield the same results.

The author also established a system to quantify the data, involving the use of the number “one” to indicate the presence of an element or a frame. The author counted the frequency of the units of analysis in every category of content.

At the end of the process, the author performed an analysis of the data, and she will present the analysis of the results objectively.

### 3-The *Guardian*

The *Guardian* is a British daily newspaper. It was known from 1821 until 1959 as the *Manchester Guardian*. The Trust was created in 1936 "to secure the financial and editorial independence of the *Guardian* in perpetuity and to safeguard the journalistic freedom and liberal values of the *Guardian* free from commercial or political interference". The paper's readership is generally on the mainstream left of the British political spectrum. The newspaper's reputation as a platform for liberal and left-wing editorials has led to the use of the "*Guardian* reader" and "Guardianista" often (but not always) as pejorative epithets for those of left-leaning or politically correct tendencies<sup>3</sup>.

In the article "Turkish women get behind the wheel", Kurdish women are portrayed as taking the lead on the drive for gender equality in Diyarbakir, south-east Turkey, where PKK and Turkish troops have previously clashed. Here, it describes the emancipation of the Kurdish women respect the Turkish one. It is worth mentioning that in this article, Sakine Cansiz is described as "a legend among PKK members' about the Female Kurdish activist shot dead in Paris". The article suggests that she participated in the armed struggle in northern Iraq, and in the picture accompanying the article, she appears beside Öcalan. The *Guardian* is linking the female fighters to Öcalan, but in the article, the PKK is not considered a terrorist party.

In the article "Kurdish peshmerga fighters: women on the frontline – in pictures", the female fighters are presented as learning to use guns and training. They are pretty, but no makeup or objects associated with female identity feature. They are presented as equal to their male colleagues. Meanwhile, in the article " 'We are so proud' – the women who died defending Kobani against Isis", revenge is the frame mostly used to describe the reason why the girls decided to start fighting: "my father gave his old gun to Shireen and told her to follow her

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<sup>3</sup> "a reader of the Guardian newspaper, seen as being typically left-wing, liberal, and politically correct " in Collins English dictionary, Definition of Guardian Reader".

teacher and be a fighter – despite my mother’s disagreement. Shireen vowed to join the People’s Protection units, YPG, to seek revenge for her teacher and defend Kobani”. In one part, the article emphasises that some female accessories are replaced by the female fighter as she rejects her femininity to be transformed into a war machine: “Her bag, which was full of perfume and cosmetics, came to be loaded with bombs and bullets”. In the article, the family connection frame is part of the motivation to fight. However, it is also stated that “Ruhan, 19, wanted to know more about the political rights of the Kurdish people in Syria. She was keen to attend all the national activities organized by the different political movements in Kobani”.

## **Foreign female fighters**

In “Ottawa investigates reports that Isis has captured Canadian-Israeli woman”, the *Guardian* journalist speaks about a foreign woman who joined the Kurdish female fighters, and it reports that she decided to participate as she truly wanted to help the Kurdish. In the article, Anna Campbell’s father claims, “I don’t think I had any right to stop her fighting in Syria”. Mr Campbell empathises with the idealism behind her choice: it is “humanitarian, ecological, feminist and equal political representation,” states Dirk, Anna’s father. “Those were the issues she came to dedicate her life to, and she came to the conclusion that Rojava was where she had to go”.

The journalist Mark Blake mentions the ideology of Ocalan; he also reports on the creation of a system of co-presidency, whereby a man and a woman share power at every level. In the article, “Number of women and children who joined ISIS significantly underestimated”, the journalist Nadia Khomami presents the case of the women joining ISIS. She suggests that the narratives within ISIS itself related to women’s roles in combat have also evolved, broadening the circumstances under which women may be asked to take up arms. The article cites push-and-pull factors for women who travel to aid Isis, including feelings of discrimination, persecution or of not belonging to society, as well as ideological motivations and efforts by Isis to portray women’s empowerment. The women are moved to a sense of belonging, but also an idea of emancipation that seeks to be connected with ISIS. However, the article does not explain ideas in a profound manner, but the focus is more on the integration initiatives that the government has to take in order to fight the risk of ISIS’s appeal for people marginalised by society.



### **3.5 The Times**

The *Times* is a British daily (available from Monday to Saturday) national newspaper based in London. It began in 1785 under the title the *Daily Universal Register*, adopting its current name on 1 January 1788. In 1959, the historian of journalism Allan Nevins analysed the importance of the *Times* in shaping the views of the events of London's elite.<sup>4</sup>

In “Revolutionary Kurdish feminist leads assault on Raqqa”, Tom Coghlan, a reporter from Beirut, describes a woman called Rojda Felat, who is the commander of an assault on Raqqa, a revolutionary feminist. The point of view is the same as that of the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, considering her to be in the front line of a feminist revolution, but in this article, there is no mention of changing the role of women in Western countries. There is also no mention to the leader Öcalan. There is instead more attention to her marital status, but this is mentioned only briefly

#### **Foreign female fighters**

The *Times's* approach is different from that of *La Repubblica*, which describes foreigners going to fight with the Kurds. For instance, it describes Gill Rosenberg, a former member of the Israel Defence Force, who travelled to Syria to fight against Isis, and it emphasises that he has an obscure background. In the same article, it speaks about the number of Britons traveling to Syria and Iraq to fight with Isis as they were the same thing. It may be the case that they were brought there simply by boredom. However, when the journalists of the *Times* write about Anna Campbell, the first British woman to die fighting alongside Kurdish forces, they underline her ideology and her desire to participate in the revolution of women. Regarding the women who fight for ISIS depicted in the article “Married to a jihadi”, the reason behind joining the jihad, for women, is the sense of exclusion in their countries, and they are motivated especially by love, following their partner. The background presented

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<sup>4</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Accessed 14 September 2018

in the article is linked with personal reasons and also depicts naivete on the part of the women.

### **3.6 The Italian newspapers**

As Mirella Galletti states, Öcalan has had a special relationship with Italy. The PKK leader chose Italy as a traditionally tolerant country with little Turkish or Kurdish presence, where the PKK has never created problems related to public order, and where the government forces seem sensitive to supporting the claims of the Kurdish people. The prime minister at that time was Massimo D'Alema, who was also the leader of the Italian left; this also encouraged Öcalan's decision. The Italian-Turkish rapport in that period became difficult, and Turkey promoted the boycotting of Italian goods. The government was then forced to request the removal of the Kurdish leader from Italy on January 16, 1999. Those, the presence of Öcalan in Italy could be the reason behind the different approach.

#### **La Repubblica**

This is the newspaper with the second largest circulation in Italy. Founded in 1976 by Eugenio Scalfari, it is ideological positioned in the area of the secular and reformist left. (Castronovo, 1994)

The author examined ten articles on this newspaper, ranging from 2007 to 2018. They are all in favour of the Kurdish cause, not only regarding ISIS, but also against the attacks of Turkish troops in Afrin. The first article taken into consideration was written in 2008. It describes the Kurds before the Syrian war, the Kurdish fighters against the Turkish troops and their role in the PKK. The title is "*PKK. Così combattono le donne guerriere*", which relates to how female warriors fight. The following is an opinion expressed by a woman interviewed in the article: "Moreover, even the PKK eventually had to change its mind about us, for the passion we put into it. I understand that it is not normal for a girl to take a weapon and shoot herself. I also did it as a form of rebellion against my family and society. From an emotional point of view, we women are more

exposed to war. If caught, we end up being tortured for longer”. The ideology of the Kurdish seems to be promoted, and the article connects the ideas of their fight with the political leader Öcalan, while the historical context is also described.

According to the analysed articles, the women decide to fight both for members of the nationalist Kurdish cause and for the liberation of women. However, the articles analysed highlight that the cruelty of ISIS as a motivation for the struggle was more common than the Kurdish cause or the Öcalan project. The desire to escape from an awkward context therefore also plays a fundamental role in motivating women to fight, along with the intense fear of falling into the hands of ISIS and of being victims of their model of society.

In fact, in the article *“Mosul, le donne curde che sfidano l'Isis al fronte: Un proiettile sempre pronto in caso di cattura”*, (At Mosul, the Kurdish women, challenge Isis on the battlefield, a bullet in case of capture), and it is stated that the fighters prefer to fight or take their lives rather than fall into the hands of ISIS, the main enemy. There is a contrast between smiling and courageous women defying death every day, while Isis fighters are depicted as cowards afraid of dying at the hands of a woman. Here, it is often possible to observe how the newspaper attempts to “emasculate the evil, the male ISIS enemy”. (Del Re,2015)

The article *“La liberazione di Raqqa ha il volto di una donna in armi: ecco chi è Rojda Felat”* describes Roida Felat, commander of the Ypj (the women's protection unit), which is the female arm of the Ypg. The headline translates as “the liberation of Raqqa has the face of a woman”, but this phrase is inserted into a more general discourse. Felat fought for the freedom of people from terrorism and tyranny, whilst also seeking another freedom: “That is for Kurdish women, and Syrians in general, to be free by the constraints and control of traditional society”. The journalist, Paolo Gallori, describes her as a radical feminist planted in the Syrian hell: Rojda Felat is at the forefront of a cultural mutation that leads to the full recognition of the rights, aspirations, and lives of women of all ethnic groups in Syria. And not only. because, on closer look, according to her words, even Western women will need it. For Rojda Felat, as

long as "the capitalist system will consider women as objects", the women must fight. Indeed, the women are objects perfectly capable of leading men to victory. In the military, we are often seen with condescension, they believed that we are too delicate and lacking the courage to use even a gun or a knife. You can see from us that we use machine guns and mortars in the Ypj, and we also conduct de-mining operations"

### **Foreign female fighters**

*La Repubblica* also presents stories of dead European women trying to help the Kurds. They are compared to Che Guevara and other historical heroes. Ayse Deniz Karacagil, a Turkish woman who died in 2017 while fighting against Isis, is referred to by her nickname of "Little Red Riding Hood", which has connotations that could make one think of something naive or childish. The last sentence of the article, however, speaking of her death, emphasises the importance of heroism: "A symbol had been cried, but nobody had understood: the time of the heroes was over with Little Red Riding Hood."

In most of these articles, the journalist is a woman and a European. However, there are also men who share the same perspective. The women who are fighting Isis are not naïve or detached from the reality, but this frame has been used regarding the women who are fighting for Isis. In the article "*A Raqqa, nel carcere delle donne della Jihad*", the journalist, Raqqa, in a jail for women who have engaged in jihad, describes the situation of ISIS wives who came to fight from Germany, Morocco, Tunisia and Russia. Isis wives have joined because they were following their husband, and now, most of them regret their choice.

## **Il Corriere della Sera**

*Il Corriere della Sera* is a historic Italian newspaper, founded in Milan in 1876. Published by the RCS Media Group, it is the Italian newspaper with the highest circulation and readership. Its slogan is "The freedom of ideas", and its political orientation is considered "moderate centre".(Castronovo,1994)

The author has taken into consideration 13 articles from 2013 until 2018. She has noticed that there is a favourable attitude to the Kurds, and both ideology and historical context are analysed. Female journalists wrote most of the articles, but many of these journalists wrote more than one of the articles, and the prevalence of females could be explained by the fact that these people are considered experts in the matter, rather than being chosen because they are women.

The article underline as predominant motivations to fight, the liberation of women and the terror of a future dominated by ISIS. However, this aspect, the fear of ISIS, is much more pronounced than in *La Repubblica* and is also part of the title of some articles. In the article "*Arin, dall'università alle trincee «Noi, ragazze curde contro l'Isis»*" ("Arin, from the university to the trenches: 'We, Kurdish girls against the Isis' "), the journalist Lorenzo Cremonesi emphasises the value and courage of these girls. The fighters are so exceptional that it makes the journalist (a man) ashamed of being away from the battlefield. In "the girls from the university to the battlefields", he writes, "they fight like men and they die like them".

In the article "*La curda Nisir che si è arruolata perché le donne non restino in cucina*", the meaning of the title translates as "The Kurdish Nisir who enlisted, because women do not remain in the kitchen". It clearly expresses the intent of liberation of the women. "We fight for all women, for gender equality. Because women will not anymore be relegated to the kitchen. We know how to do something else and we are demonstrating it", the Kurdish Nisir states, and she adds, "We want to be an example also for the Western world". There are references to Öcalan and his ideology as the basis of the commitment of

women to the war: "there can never be a revolution without the liberation of women". The article also speaks of the centres for women (referred to as "Jineology", which, in Kurdish, means "science of women").

The article states that, "In the Western imagination, in fact," the Kurdish woman is above all a guerrilla and that the role of weapons has its own importance. But the political dimension is certainly the most relevant because it makes all the balances of patriarchy shake". The journalist Benedetta Argentieri also points out that the women are constantly involved in military decisions. She refers to the ideology of Öcalan and asserts that the philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy has asked that the PKK be removed from the list of terrorist organisations.

### **Foreign fighters**

In "*Le donne del Isis, da spose a combattenti jihadiste*", Benedetta Argentieri and Marta Serafini write about the women of ISIS who transform from wives to jihadist fighters. They underline that there has been a change in ISIS, bringing women into the battlefield as fighters. This article also mentions foreign girls from France and Germany who left their countries to marry and be part of the jihad, revealing that their families often do not agree with their decision, and so they often break ties with their past and their relatives. The article does not, however, mention the ideologies behind their choices.

### **3.7 The British Press Vs. the Italian Press**

It has largely been asserted that the dominant frames detected in the British media are exceptionalism, personal/emotional motivations, physical appearance and, finally, the struggle for equality and emancipation. It is evident that the tabloid newspapers place increasing emphasis on the exceptionalism of women taking up arms and reproduce the traditional gender approach that considers women more as victims rather than actors in an armed struggle. In most articles, one can observe a fascination with female combatants and the uniqueness of their presence on the battlefield. These articles usually involve visual material depicting women in combat clothes either during a training session or while taking a break from war-related activities. Photos of women holding Kalashnikovs have gone viral, as they reveal women's participation in war as non-traditional. In one article, a family member of a deceased combatant mentions that she used to wear jewellery and full make-up, and her bag was full of cosmetics and perfume. However, she now fills her bag with bombs and bullets.

The British and the Italian media have repeatedly covered the primary motivations of female combatants for joining the armed struggle. It is striking that the victim frame is used in order to depict a background story regarding women's motivations to take up arms. Sexual violence, including rape and torture, beheadings and the experience of being a sex slave to fighters, along with other violent occurrences, have been given as the primary motivations that drove these women to join combat units. However, most articles presented these depictions as something that the women left behind when they became fighters, and the current dominant discourse is the heroine frame, in which the newspaper articles depict combatants as stepping out of that zone of victimhood. For instance, one presented a YPJ combatant as stating that she is always careful to leave one bullet in her weapon in order to use it on herself if she is captured by ISIS fighters. According to such narratives, women have no choice but to join the combat units, because they are fighting for their survival, escaping rape and torture. Revenge has also been mentioned as one of the most fundamental motives for women to take up arms.

The UK and Italian media framing constantly underline the adversaries against whom the female combatants are fighting: the jihadists. This surely relates to the depiction of ISIS in the international media in general. Combined with a potential Orientalist approach, in the eyes of Western audiences, it is universally accepted that they are portraying an unquestionable evil. Articles report the horrible acts committed by IS and the vulnerable situation of women in this region as a result of the genocidal and brutal actions (including sexual violence) that have taken place during the course of the war. The tone of the news stories is not neutral, as in the case of civil wars or articles depicting rebel groups in other parts of the world. The female combatants fighting IS are represented as admirable people worthy of attention.

The present author agrees with Mari Toivanen's assertion that the frame of exceptionalism is dominant in every newspaper (Toivanen, Baser, 2016). All of the newspapers repeatedly remark that the female combatants are "terrifying" the ISIS fighters. They mention the concept that warriors are more terrified of being killed by female combatants because they believe it will prevent them from reaching heaven or that they will lose the 72 virgins promised in return for their martyrdom. The present author does not agree that Kurdish political activism regarding the PKK is not criminalised in either Great Britain or Italy, and she does not agree that the ongoing Kurdish conflict is, to some extent, depoliticised in news reporting. The terminology used to refer to female Kurdish combatants includes terms such as "guerrillas" and "rebels". On no occasion are the YPJ combatants referred to as "terrorists", although a few news stories raise the issue of PYD's alleged connection to the PKK and the latter's presence on the EU list of terrorist organisations. However, in some articles, there is explicit reference to the Ocalan's ideology and the fact that these Kurdish women are fighting for a national cause but also to transform the society in which they live and society globally. Perhaps we may note that the Italian press is more willing to treat the female fighters and the foreign people who join them as heroes, comparing them to Che Guevara or symbols. This could be explained by the fact that the Italian press has always been more sympathetic to the Kurdish story because Ocalan was famous when he went to Italy.



### **3.8 The Turkish Press**

The Turkish press has faced challenges and changes since Turkey became a candidate for the European Union in 1999. For example, the rapid tabloidisation of newspapers in the 1980s and the commercialisation/deregulation of the media in the 1990s generated a tendency toward sensational news journalism, but the availability of commercial media also made visible formerly excluded issues (such as the Kurdish question, minority rights, etc.), as well as fuelling consumerism and a cheaply gratifying nationalism (Christensen 2010). The EU's 2008 *Country Progress Report Turkey* suggests that "Open debate continues in the Turkish media on a wide range of issues, including those perceived as sensitive by Turkish society" (European Commission 2008: 14). The EU has played a key role in the potential democratisation of Turkey through the imposition of democratic benchmarks.

However, certain topics still incite aggressive reactions. For instance, in 1998, according to M. Christensen, Andrew Finkel, a foreign correspondent based in Turkey, "was laid off from his position at Sabah, a popular daily, following a column he wrote about radical Kurdish PKK party leader Abdullah Öcalan's flight to Rome in 1998. In this article, Finkel interpreted Öcalan's flight to Europe as a sign of the PKK's weakness rather than as evidence that he enjoyed European support, which was the common reaction to the issue at the time" (Christensen 2010). In 2007, Christensen wrote that "the general problems faced by journalists in Turkey today are the result of a combination of factors, namely hyper-commercialization, clientelism, a patrimonial relationship between the media and the state, lack of unionization of journalists and lack of job security" (Christensen, 2007).

The main groups with cross-media ownership in Turkey are as follows: Albayrak Medya Grubu (conservative/Islamist/pro-government); Ciner Yayın Holding (mainstream); Çukurova Medya Grubu (mainstream); Çalık Medya Grubu (conservative/pro-government); Doğan Medya Grubu (mainstream); and Samanyolu yayıncılık-Feza Gazetecilik (Islamist/pro-government). The Doğan Group is one of the largest business groups in Turkey, with extensive activities pertaining to the media, tourism, energy, real estate and insurance sectors, and

it controls almost half of Turkey's private media (Raşit Kaya & Barış Çakmur 2010).

According to Raşit Kaya, the increased commercialisation of the media did not help to alleviate the government's control; instead, it made the media stronger and thus paved the way for the instrumentalisation of the media outlets according to corporate interests (Raşit Kaya & Barış Çakmur 2010), although, since 2015, less and less space has been available for a plurality of views. Companies close to the ruling AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Party for Justice and Development) have taken control of more independent outlets, such as the Dogan holding company (including *Hürriyet* – Turkey's largest daily newspaper – CNN Türk and the Dogan News Agency). According to Reporters Without Borders, this represents a major shift in the media landscape, because independent and sometimes critical newspapers have a rather small reach (European Union 2018). Indeed, there was an unprecedented level of media support, since, in addition to state-owned radio and television, the party in power was now directly controlling the second largest media group in the country in relation to daily mass circulation, *Sabah*, and a leading private TV channel, ATV. Furthermore, most of the mainstream media displayed a clear pro-government bias. In addition, according to a European Union report (a report on the freedom of the press published in 2018), since the failed military coup in 2016, the freedom of the press in Turkey has deteriorated. In the aftermath of the failed military coup of 2016, a number of journalists were arrested.

*Daily Sabah* is considered a Turkish pro-government publication, while the *Bianet* is considered pro-Kurdish, and *Hürriyet*, according to Euro Topics (European Press round) in 2009, had a critical stance against the government even if it began with a more favourable stance toward the government after the attempted coup in 2016. The author has chosen these three newspapers also

because they run an English edition, which meant that she could understand the content to conduct an analysis.<sup>5</sup>

### **Daily Sabbah**

*Daily Sabah* (literally "Daily Morning") is a Turkish pro-government daily published in Turkey. It is published in English, German, Arabic and Russian; it is owned by the Turkuvaz Media Group, Daily Sabah, and the editor-in-chief is Serdar Karagöz. The author took into consideration 10 articles from between 2015 and 2018. The keywords inserted using the internal search section of the online version were as follows: "Kurdish female fighters", "female fighters", "Rojava" and "YPJ". The articles presented in this analysis were randomly chosen, by associating a random number to carry out an objective selection process in conducting the analysis. All of the 10 articles were opposed to the YPJ and the female Kurdish fighters.

The author performed a discourse analysis, taking into consideration the headline and the content of the article, along with the picture chosen and whether these elements were consistent with each other. In the article chosen, the headline, "Tips from the New York Times on how to beautify YPG terrorism (Bulur 2018), clarifies what the journalist believes about the Kurdish female fighters. The picture chosen depicts a beautiful woman carrying a weapon; there is no caption to identify the person in the picture or the source of the image. The article was published in 2018, the same year in which Turkey started the branch oil operation against Afrin.

According to the article, the PKK would use the image of women for "*feminist rhetoric as a tool to aestheticize terror*". For the journalist, the feminist are claims are just a form of propaganda, and the *New York Times* is falling into a trap: "Adapting feminist discourse for their own purposes, a terrorist woman can now be praised as a freedom fighter who kills for women's liberation and

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<sup>5</sup> The author tried to reach out some journalists and a teacher from the Department of the Sociology at the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Istanbul to carry out this research

empowerment, which is what the two New York Times articles, directly or not, also do with eulogies to the YPJ fighters”. According to the *Daily Sabbah*, the *New York Times* is “sugarcoat[ing] all the violence of the group under the guise of fighting for women's liberation” (Bulur 2018). The newspaper aims to demonstrate that the YPJ is a terrorist organisation like PKK and ISIS. In addition, the *Daily Sabbah* seeks to discourage Europeans and other foreigners who want to join the Kurdish in the fight: “So before you write that check to help them, before you pack your bags to go and join them, remember that spin is being put on the women of the YPG, YPJ and PKK, the reality is not at all as it is depicted in the Western press”.

The main message that the newspaper delivers is that the instrumentalization of women as a means to legitimise violence and the acts of the YPG (an affiliate of the PKK, itself recognised as a terrorist group by the US, the EU and NATO) is of no use whatsoever, as it does not change the fact that a terrorist is a terrorist, no matter what gender. The journalist insists that the YPG and its affiliates are synonymous with the PKK, a terrorist group that has spent decades fighting for Kurdish secession in southern Turkey (Aytekin 2018). What the *Daily Sabbah* is stating is that the Western media is “glamourizing the terrorism” and that YPG is just another face of the PKK, a terrorist organisation. Furthermore, the sympathisers of the PKK terrorist organisation have once again resorted to fake images, this time from the New York streets, to defame Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in north-western Syria. There are two lines of criticism: the PKK is using the female fighters as a PR strategy. The PKK is a terrorist party and the western media are blind

In the article “The reality behind YPG heroines: Intimidation, signed, sealed and delivered” (Kandur 2015), there is an emphasis on images, and these are used to create a sense of “glamour” in order to describe what the PKK is trying to do. The picture chosen in this article depicts a beautiful Kurdish woman smiling, with no war or men in the background, just the Kurdish flag. It is also interesting to consider the capture below the image: “*Many major media outlets worldwide polish PKK-linked YPG terrorists and are asking us to choose the side that stands against ISIS*”. The women of the YPG and YPJ are being depicted as

heroines in the Western media, particularly in the article spoke about the BBC. The journalist Kandur asks, *“does this group, closely affiliated with the PKK, really consist of heroes and heroines battling for freedom? What is the truth behind these organizations that are internationally recognized as terrorist groups?”* The *Daily Sabah* states that *“It is a message that is cleverly and tidily packaged for our digestion. Without much thought most readers avidly eat it up, thinking, ‘Ah, women standing up for what is right, how wonderful’ ”* (Kandur 2015).

Just like the Western media, the *Daily Sabah* speaks about the heroes: *“revolutionaries are attractive. Che Guevara, William Wallace, Garibaldi, Lenin, these are men who stood up for what they believed in, fought against injustice and strove to make the world a better place. Or so we are told. Perhaps it is the American legacy based on a revolution that makes revolutionaries so attractive to the modern middle-class mind. But revolutionaries are no more glamorous than revolutions. Revolutions are dirty, bloody battles. And revolutionaries, more often than not, are men who will sacrifice almost anything in the name of their cause”*. The article does not label ISIS evil, but it appears to seek to use the same images that the Western media uses to deliver messages, suggesting that the West is blind and that it does not see the truth, that the PKK is using the female fighters to improve its image and should not be listed as a terrorist organisation. The article also reports the alleged rape of women joining the PKK and the use of child soldiers. Other criticism is aimed at the Marxist and nationalist values of the YPJ linked with the PKK and the US, making fun of the idea that the Western countries have terrorists as the allies.

When the *Daily Sabah* speaks about foreign people being ideological in motivated to travel to Syria in order to join the "Rojava revolution", it tells us that they cannot be considered a uniform group but that, among them, there are also "crusaders and lunatics". In the same article, the *Daily Sabah* speaks about Anna Campbell, describing her motivation to join the fight: "Ironically she was one of the dozens of foreign fighters, who fought against a NATO ally for the purpose of creating a socialist utopia in Syria" (ÖzkizilciK 2018). In this

article, the reasons to join are listed as a lack of knowledge about what is happening and of the history of the area, as well as a sense of naivete.

## **Hürriyet**

In this case, the newspaper seems to share the stance expressed by the *Daily Sabbah*. The author takes into consideration six articles for the analysis, selecting them using the keywords “Kurdish female fighters”, “female fighters”, “Rojava” and “YPJ”. Two of these articles are not in favour of regarding the female Kurdish fighters as neutral. In fact, no article offers a favourable view of them. In one article, written by Kiziltan (2014), regarding the PKK and the “free female fighter” rhetoric, it asserts that gender equality is a fundamental feature of the PKK, which was founded as a Marxist organization: “many news sources reported, while depicting the heroines of the PKK, conducting individual interviews and sharing their extraordinary life stories. Nevertheless, there are serious complications about these statements”. It claims that women have voluntarily joined the PKK because they are attracted to the propaganda and the aims of the organisation or because of family pressure. It states that, especially during the early stages of the PKK’s existence, the group kidnapped young women for recruitment and forced children whose families were already involved with the PKK to join the organisation (Kiziltan 2014). Quoting the Abdullah Öcalan ideology, the article tries to destroy one of the fundamental pillars of the Rojava revolution and the YPJ: the idea that women are treated as equal to men in their fight and the portrayal of the PKK as having a record of gender discrimination. The emphasis is on the PKK forcing children and women to join the fight and on alleged rapes perpetuated against the women in the organisation. When the newspaper speaks about Anna Campbell’s death, it does not mention any ideological reason that would have motivated her to join the YPJ (Hürriyet 2018).

## **Diken**

*Diken* is an online Turkish language newspaper edited by Erdal Güven and Emrah Temizkan. The newspaper was first published on 27 January 2014. Simavi describes *Diken's* mission thusly: "To be a thorn in the media that's asked to portray our country as a rose garden and to defend our democracy, basic freedoms, and secularism. And while carrying out this mission, to bring the profession of journalism the dignity and honor that it deserves". The author encountered difficulty with researching the online English version, because there was no internal search section in the website. Thus, the analysis involved exploring the website to find articles about Rojava and the Kurdish female fighters. Only three articles were found. The coverage was neutral in these.

In the article "Dutch journalist spends five months in Rojava, says YPG and PKK are separate but closely linked", Zaman (2016) states that "*media coverage of the area known as Rojava has been broadly favorable. The main Syrian Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units or YPG has attracted particular sympathy for its spirited battle against the so-called Islamic State. However, foreign journalists usually do not spend more than a week or two in the region. Moreover, the steady blast of pro-YPG propaganda dressed up as news can blur the picture*". It also recognises that "Women are far more powerful now in Rojava than they have ever been. So much so that even parties that oppose the PYD joke about it saying 'we no longer have any power as men.' Marriage of minors has been banned. Polygamy [permitted under Syrian law] has also been banned in Rojava." In the picture associated with the article, there is a man, the reporter who has been interviewed by A. Zaman.

## **The Bianet**

The Bianet (an acronym for the Turkish phrase Bağımsız İletişim Ağı – meaning "Independent Communication Network") is an independent Turkish press agency based in Istanbul. It was established in 2000 by journalist Nadire Mater, a former representative of Reporters Without Borders. The only article found using the keywords "Kurdish female fighters" was "Kobane: the struggle of



Kurdish women against Islamic State” (Açık 2014). Even in the headline, it is possible to understand the perspective taken. The females are the main protagonists of the struggle against the enemy, ISIS. The journalist speaks about the most visible change, the inclusion of women in the defence forces and the police, as separate units through the establishment of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and the Women's Security Forces (HAJ). The article also refers to the empowerment of women as being key to the Rojava revolution, which explains its popularity, particularly among women. It stresses that the ideological support provided by the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, has helped women within the Kurdish movement in North Kurdistan/Turkey to question and challenge women's oppression and gender inequalities, and many women have begun to develop a feminist consciousness.

Using the keyword “Rojava”, it was possible to find an article about the death of Aziz Güler, who lost her life while fighting against ISIS (BIA News Desk 2016), but there is no mention of why she joined the fight. Using the same keyword, “Rojava”, the article “Thousands of women celebrate Women's Day in Afrin” (BIA News Desk 2018) was also accessed. This article reports that “the women chanted the slogan ‘Long live women's resistance’ ”. In the same article, there is an explanation of the Rojava cartoon, but there is no mention of the reason that caused the women to participate in the fight. Perhaps the reason that the author could not find any mention of the reasons for joining the fight was because the article was published in 2018, the year in which Turkey began Operation Branch Oil.

## Conclusions

When the author first decided to write about this topic, she was very enthusiastic, because observing news about female fighters was something new for the author, even though the author is a woman living in western Europe. The fact that women were fighting beside men and in a manner similar to them seemed extraordinary. The fact that they were Middle Eastern women was an element that further appealed to the author's attention. However, after the author read many texts that Dilar Dirik wrote and an article by Mirella Galletti and Francesca La Bella (2016), the author began to think she was a victim of the "typical western media's myopia" and an "orientalism perspective" (Dirik,2014) in considering Kurdish female fighters to be unusual and exceptional without understanding their long commitment to the struggle. After reading an article by Emanuela Del Re, the author concluded that the media were creating symbols and myths when speaking about the female fighters and that perhaps it was difficult to verify some events in times of war. One example is the myth of ISIS escaping from the YPJ, because they were going to the hell if they were killed by women. According to Emanuela del Re, the "emasculating" of the enemy aims to underestimate the YPJ in terms of their real value as fighters. Thus, the author sought to determine whether the media was merely presenting the fight of the Kurdish female fighters as an "exotic phenomenon" (Said 2002) presenting Oriental women without a veil and with a gun, without exploring the history and their ideology.

The author decided to examine the ideology behind their motivation to fight, and the author was surprised to discover that they were not fighting based on the same values of western Europeans: they are not fighting having the western women as a model of freedom. They take inspiration from Öcalan and the rejection of the process of "housewification" (Öcalan,2011), which they view as a means of reducing women to male property. They are against the patriarchal system, and they believe that the capitalistic system produces the mechanisms that deprive women of freedom. As Evren Kocabicak has stated, women in Western countries have obtained economic, social and political rights, and they are equal to men, but this is merely superficial: women are still prisoners of the

hierarchy that constitutes the State and Society (Isyandan.org 2016). What the Kurdish female fighters want is a transformation of society towards a model of direct democracy and according to the democratic confederalism theory created by Öcalan. The author decided to examine Western newspapers to verify whether their opinion and Öcalan's theory were reported. The author also analysis essays in fashion magazines], and she discovered that during the ongoing conflict was, to some extent, the 'democratic confederalism' ideology was depoliticised in news reporting

Using Geraldine Nacos's (Nacos, 2005) four frames, the author found that, in the Italian and British newspapers, the motivations of Kurdish women to take part in an armed conflict were represented as both personal (regarding the loss of family members, survival, revenge, escape from rape and sexual abuse) and ideological (women's rights, the struggle for liberation). News articles that focused on individual stories not only represented the inter-connectedness of these personal and political goals (and experiences), but they also employed close-up views of the personal stories of individual combatants, in order to give the conflict a human face. This was particularly the case with the Italian media, which sought to represent the YPJ combatants as heroes and provide an example for the young generations. For instance, in one article the journalist, a man, underlined that he was ashamed to be unable to help them (Repubblica).

Although Kurdish political activism (particularly in relation to the PKK) is criminalised as a terrorist organization in both Great Britain and Italy, the author has noticed that the terminology used to refer to female Kurdish combatants included terms such as "guerrillas" and "rebels". On no occasion were the YPJ combatants referred to as "terrorists", although a few news stories raised the issue of the PYD's alleged connection to the PKK and the latter's presence on the European list of terrorist organisations. The frames that the media used to narrate the accounts of female Kurdish fighters made their stories interesting for Italian and British audiences by omitting certain aspects that might come across as controversial but which were largely present in Dayly Sabbah, the Turkish pro-government newspaper. In both materials, the struggle of YPJ combatants could be described as entailing a certain level of glorification. In the British

case, this was combined with the sexualisation of the combatants. This is not surprising, according to Mari Toivanen (Mari Toivanen, 2016) and Dilar Dirik (D. Dirik, 2014), since YPJ combatants were portrayed as fighting against the Islamic state, which was commonly accepted as “evil”.

The author does not agree with the opinion that their struggle became all the more newsworthy in the Western media because these women were contesting Orientalist stereotypes of women in the Middle East, particularly those based on gender, religion and ethnicity. Dilar Dirik and the newspaper *Dayly Sabah* (2018) appear to take opposing views. While Dilar Dirik is absolutely pro-Kurdish, but they seem to agree on one point: the Western media is blind and is not analysing the reality in sufficient depth. The Orientalist theory (Said 2002), in this case, seems to be a preconception by the Western media. Its perspective, involving the “glamorization of terrorism”(Dayly Sabbah), is more commonly drawn attention to by the Turkish media. Thus, it seems to be a paradoxical situation that both sides adopt the same critique.

Dirik asserts that the western media is not taking into consideration the ideology behind the Kurdish female fighters, but rather only the “myth” and “the novel phenomenon”(Dirik, 2014), and at the same time, the Turkish pro-government press is accusing the Western media of being blind and manipulated by Kurdish propaganda. By analysing several media, including a daily newspaper and taking into consideration a newspaper in Italy where Öcalan was hosted as refugee, the author came to a different conclusion. She also considered it worth comparing the findings with the Turkish daily newspapers. Particularly in Italy, the Kurdish female fighters are connected to idealism and heroism, which remind the audience of liberation from fascism, or they are often connected to a broader feminist liberation movement that involves all Western women as well. This is particularly true when Western newspapers speak about the Western women who have joined the Kurdish female fighters. The English newspapers, for example, emphasised the idealistic background behind the choice of Anna Campbell, the first English woman who died in the fight.

Regarding the women who are fighting with ISIS, the perspective is different. The author decided to take into consideration some articles about the women

who are fighting on the other side, who fight for opposing values, rather than freedom of choice and the application of an extremist vision of Islam. The author has noticed they are represented as naïve, detached from reality or marginalised in Western society, where they have been recruited. In these cases, the frames described by Nacos are clearly applied. In the articles analysed, none mentioned the ideology behind their choices. These women travel to aid ISIS, doing so for several reasons, including feelings of discrimination, persecution or of not belonging to society, as well as ideological motivations, based on the efforts by ISIS to portray women's empowerment. The women are moved by a sense of belonging, but also the idea of emancipation that they consider to be connected with ISIS. However, the articles do not explain the ideas in a profound manner.

It is true as Emanuela Del Re wrote that war creates narrative myths and that the Western media has a kind of fascination for such myths (Del Re, 2015). At the same time, this could have helped with improving the image of the PKK or brought more attention to the Kurdish cause. However, maybe the reason that brought them to the Western media's attention is not causing them to neglect the ideology behind them. Thus, the author does not believe the Western media is completely blind regarding this topic, as the Kurdish pro-government media [ Dayly Sabbah is claiming.

As regards the limitations of this research, the author admits that this research could have analysed in greater depth what the Turkish media, in the Turkish language, had to say about the Kurdish female fighters. She could also have conducted some interviews with Turkish people perhaps Turkish journalists' about their views regarding the topic, especially now, after Operation Olive Branch. This could be achieved in future research.

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## Media Appendix

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(Katie Glass and Ahmed al-Hamsi)  
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(Amberin Zaman, 2016), *Bianet*, 13 October 2016  
*Dutch journalist spends five months in Rojava, says YPG and PKK are separate but closely linked* available at <http://www.diken.com.tr/in-rojava-ypg-pkk-separate-closely-linked/> (accessed 10 November 2018)

## The guardian articles on Kurdish Female fighters

Constanze Letsch

(2012) *Turkish women get behind the wheel* available at

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/13/turkish-women-equality-pkk-kurds> (accessed 18/12/2018)

Most of the stories that emerge from Baglar, the largest and poorest district in Diyarbakir, in south-east [Turkey](#), have been reports of violent clashes between Kurdish people and police.

Baglar is home to refugees who were forced from their homes when Turkish security forces emptied more than 3,000 villages during their conflict with the Kurdish separatist PKK in the 1990s.

But now it is making headlines for another type of revolution: the local authorities want to put women behind the wheel of buses and taxis as early as next month. Currently only 12.6% of all private drivers in Diyarbakir are female.

Funded by a European Union grant aimed at increasing youth employment, the municipality provided education in computer skills, accounting, communication, public relations work, typing and gender equality for 120 women between the ages of 18 and 29.

Ninety out of the 120 received an ordinary type B driving licence, while 30 went on to receive the type E licence necessary for driving public buses.

According to the mayor of Baglar, Yüksel Baran, the low education level of women is one of the district's most serious problems – 50.4% of all women over 18 are illiterate, and only 0.8% of the local female residents go to university. "Schools here are incredibly crowded; sometimes we have 40 to 50 students in one class. There are no libraries, no labs and no computers in Baglar schools. Compared with other Diyarbakir districts, we are at a distinct disadvantage," she said.

The municipal EU projects co-ordinator, Funda Ipek, said that one of the main aims of the programme was to get unemployed women out of the house.

"There are many young women with great potential, but most of these women stay at home. They don't participate in public life. All that potential is wasted."

According to the government's statistics, only 4% of female Baglar residents have a regular paid job. It is not the first women's employment project the Baglar municipality has launched; in 2010, 13 women were employed as cleaners, a job that had until then been carried out exclusively by men.

The municipality also supports a women's co-operative where women learn to make and sell their own products: traditional clothes, potted preserves or dried vegetables.

Cigdem Kaplan, one of the women who obtained a bus driver's licence through the programme, said the project had helped her question gender stereotypes.

"They always say: 'You have your fingers in dough. Why do you poke your nose in a man's job?' If that's true, why are all bakers, all carpet cleaners, all cooks here men? Shouldn't a woman be able to become a bus driver then, too?"

Another woman who participated in the project, Demet Tanrikulu, said she felt much stronger since completing the courses: "I learned to stand up for myself, not to give in, to voice my own opinions. I acquired self-confidence, understood that I could do things."

Kaplan agreed: "A woman that quietly endures is idealised in society – she is considered the perfect wife. But as a group we started to question and criticise things until then considered normal: violence, or the fact that women often only live to please their husbands, parents or brothers in order to avoid conflict."

Ipek thinks that the programme is was a small first step in the right direction. "Once people get used to female bus and taxi drivers, the general attitude will change. And more women will want to leave the house and work. They will say: 'I can do this, too.'"

Mehmet Bilen, a Diyarbakir cab driver, said he liked the idea of female colleagues. "Why not? A good idea!" He laughed. "The only problem will be that nobody will want to drive with us [men] any more."

### **Constanze Letsch**

**(2013) Sakine Cansiz: 'a legend among PKK members' available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/10/sakine-cansiz-pkk-kurdish-activist> (accessed 18/12/2018)**

Sakine Cansiz, who was shot dead in Paris with two other female activists, was a founding member of the Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK).

Originally from Tunceli (formerly Dersim), she was present at the founding meeting of the PKK on 25 November 1978 in a tea house in Fis, a town close to Diyarbakir in the predominantly Kurdish south-east of Turkey.

After the military coup of September 1980 she was imprisoned along with many other members of the PKK, and spent many years jailed in Diyarbakir prison, where 34 inmates died of torture between 1981 and 1989, and hundreds suffered lasting injury. According to PKK members and former inmates, the treatment of political prisoners in Diyarbakir prison was one of the main reasons



for the organisation's radicalisation and the armed struggle against the Turkish state, which escalated dramatically in 1984.

Cansiz led the Kurdish protest movement inside prison and by the time she was released she had become a "legend amongst PKK members", according to one activist. She entered the PKK training camp in the Bekaa valley, then under Syrian control, and joined the armed struggle in northern Iraq under the command of Osman Öcalan, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's younger brother. Osman later distanced himself from the PKK.

It is there that Cansiz started to organise the women's movement inside the organisation. In her book *Blood and Belief*, journalist and PKK expert Aliza Marcus writes that by 1993, one-third of the PKK's armed forces were women. Mehmet Ali Ertas, activist and journalist at the pro-Kurdish DIHA news agency, described Cansiz as the main representative for the Kurdish women's movement. He said: "She was the most prominent and most important female Kurdish activist. She did not shy away from speaking her mind, especially when it came to women's issues."

In 1992 Cansiz was dispatched to Europe by Murat Karayilan, then the leader of the PKK's armed wing. She spent some time in Germany before finally moving to France, where she continued to work for the organisation.

Vahap Coskun, assistant professor at Dicle University in Diyarbakir, said that Cansiz had been known to be very close to the jailed Abdullah Öcalan. When he was interrogated after his imprisonment in 1999, Öcalan said about her: "I started the women's movement to free [women] from the feudalism of men and to create a strong type of woman. I wanted lively discussions. In relation to that I do remember the name of Sakine Polat [Cansiz]." And he added: "In mind and emotions she is loyal to the party."

### ***Maryam Ashrafi***

***(2014) Kurdish peshmerga fighters: women on the frontline - in pictures available at***

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2014/oct/09/kurdish-peshmerga-fighters-women-on-the-frontline-in-pictures>

**(accessed 18/12/2018)**

Kurdish peshmerga fighters have been in training for many years. Here, Maryam Ashrafi photographs women learning to use guns and training in various parts of Kurdistan. The Kurds of Syria and Iraq have become a major focal point in the war against Isis

Mona Mahmood

(2015) '*We are so proud*' – the women who died defending Kobani against ISIS available at [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/30/kurdish-women-](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/30/kurdish-women-died-kobani-isis-syria)

[died-kobani-isis-syria](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/30/kurdish-women-died-kobani-isis-syria)

(accessed 18/12/2018)

**This week Kurdish forces took full control of Kobani, a Syrian town near the Turkish border, after months of bombardment by Islamic State. Mona Mahmood speaks to four Kurdish families about the female fighters who died helping to wrest control of the town from Isis**

**Shireen Taher**

**Mustafa Taher, 30, a lawyer and Kurdish language teacher, on his sister**

A few months after the revolution in Syria broke out, the Syrian regime permitted predominantly Kurdish towns in Syria to teach the Kurdish language in their schools. This included my home town, Kobani. My sister Shireen, then 19, was supposed to study English literature at Damascus University in autumn 2012, but it became inconceivable to travel between Kobani and the capital given the increase in violence throughout Syria. Shireen instead studied the Kurdish language in Kobani while waiting for the chance to join the university.

Of my 11 brothers and sisters, I was closest to Shireen. We were more like friends than sister and brother. She was sensitive, fond of parties and loved sport. We were great fans of Barcelona football team. When the World Cup final was held in Johannesburg in 2010, Shireen travelled to Damascus where I worked as a lawyer, so we could watch the matches which were screened in large parks.

Shireen was inspired by her female Kurdish language teacher, Vian, 29, a fighter with the Kurdistan Workers' party, PKK. It was a sombre day for the locals of Kobani when Vian was killed in a fight against Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaida affiliate and Syrian jihadi rebel group, in the Syrian town of Tel Abyad on 26 July 2012. At the funeral in Kobani to extol Vian's martyrdom, my father gave his old gun to Shireen and told her to follow her teacher and be a fighter – despite my mother's disagreement. Shireen vowed to join the People's Protection units, YPG, to seek revenge for her teacher and defend Kobani. If Shireen had not volunteered, I would have done.

Shireen Taher had hoped to study English literature at university. Photograph: The Guardian

Shortly afterwards, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Isis) launched attacks against Kobani. They were initiated by a car bomb at the Red Crescent centre on 11 November 2012. My father, 67, and his friend were nearby and were killed, alongside 12 other martyrs. During my father's funeral, Shireen said: "I

always thought that one day my father would be named as the father of martyrs, but I never thought that I would become the daughter of a martyr.”

Our father’s death gave Shireen an enormous jolt to adhere to his will and be an outstanding fighter. Especially after we went to the mortuary for his body. It was hard to identify given the massive damage caused by the explosion. Shireen was devastated by the martyrdom of several of her friends. She could hardly cope with the loss of her father and teacher. Life became meaningless for Shireen. She would spend days training in the military camp on weapons like the Kalashnikov, rocket-propelled grenades and hand grenades.

During her two years of training, Shireen would visit us. I could not believe how much her personality changed during her long embedding in the military camp in a Kobani suburb. She used to have a Barcelona flag around her neck and wore full makeup. I can’t remember her hands without rings or bracelets. Her bag, which was full of perfume and cosmetics, came to be loaded with bombs and bullets.

The day I decided to move my mother and sisters to Turkey, like most of the locals of Kobani, to escape the hellish Isis attack against our town, my mother insisted that I call Shireen. She told my mother: “If you leave Kobani, you won’t be my mother any longer.” But after three days, Shireen asked my mother to leave as soon as possible as Isis was getting closer to the city.

Shireen was camping west of Kobani when Isis militants were pushing forward towards the city with their heavy weapons and tanks. The Kurdish resistance was able to distract the progress of Isis with their light weapons but they could not stop it forever. Shireen was hiding in a trench near the Kurdish radio broadcast office. I rang her from Turkey five hours before her martyrdom to check on her. She said: “Do not worry, I’m still alive.” At 8pm, my other sister – who had stayed in Kobani working in the hospital as a nurse – called Shireen out of her fear for her safety. Shireen asked her not to contact her any more as the fight was getting worse and she could no longer speak on her mobile.

### **When my mother answered, the man told her to come and get her daughter’s head**

Then we heard about a heavy fight launched by Isis against Kobani. At 10pm, we got a call from my sister’s mobile. It was a man’s voice. He asked if he was speaking to Shireen’s family. One of my sisters confirmed that we were, and he told her that Shireen was killed by Isis and she needed to collect Shireen’s head.

Before my sister could break the news of Shireen’s martyrdom to my mother, the Isis militant contacted my mother in Turkey and told her Shireen wanted to speak to her. When my mother answered, the man told her to come and get her daughter’s head. My mother lost consciousness , and was taken to hospital.

We called Shireen's friends at the war front, who said Shireen and five other female fighters were ambushed on 30 September by an Isis tank that shelled them all to death. I returned to Kobani to get Shireen's body for her funeral, but her friends told me her body was still with Isis and no one was able to go into the district where she had been killed. I returned to Turkey with my sister – she had a nervous breakdown and could not stay in Kobani any more.

Although Shireen's martyrdom was heartbreaking for my family, we are all proud of her sacrifice and the sacrifice of all her friends killed defending Kobani  
Hameera Muhammed

**Muhammed Khashman, 45, a businessman who is a refugee in Turkey, remembers his sister's adopted daughter, Hameera Muhammed**

Hameera was born three months after her father was killed in a car accident in 1982. It was difficult for her mother to cope with the expense of four children on her own. My sister, a friend of Hameera's mother, offered to adopt the baby and raise her with her eight children in Kobani. Hameera was cheerful with a sense of humour, and married a taxi driver from Kobani when she was 18.

On a trip to Aleppo two years ago, Hameera's husband was killed by a sniper while she was giving birth to their youngest son. It took Hameera three days to get her husband's body back to Kobani as a result of heavy fighting between the Syrian army and the rebels in Aleppo. It was hard for Hameera to cope with the expense of her five kids. She relied only on selling dairy products from a cow that had been owned by her husband and on subsidies from her parents. Her father-in-law offered Hameera and her children a room in his house but she refused to leave her home. After a series of quarrels, her father-in-law took Hameera's five kids to his house and she went to live with her parents.

Hameera was devastated by the loss of her kids. She wanted to see her baby to breastfeed him but she was not allowed. All of Hameera's mother's attempts to repair the rift between her and her father-in-law did not work. Hameera's depression and her yearning to be reunited with her kids became obvious. When the fight escalated in Kobani between Isis and Kobani's fighters last September, Hameera's family was one of thousands who crossed the border into Turkey. Driven by fear and horror, Hameera's mother was unable to check whether she had all her nine children with her. It was only when she reached the refugee camp in Turkey that her eldest daughter told her Hameera had stayed in Kobani to fight Isis, and that she had joined the resistance.

After a week, Hameera contacted her mother asking for forgiveness. She said she thought joining the resistance in Kobani to fight against Isis would make her father-in-law treat her differently and let her see her children. She told her mother she had been wounded in her shoulder and hand during a fight against Isis. Hameera's mother pleaded with her to come to Turkey. She said she was not well trained, that the war is not a joke and that it is for men not women.

It was the first day of observing Eid al-Adha in Turkey, so I visited my sister in the camp to check on her and her family. They were on the phone to Hameera,

who told them she was getting better but she missed them and her kids. Hameera's mother asked her to come back as the fight was getting tougher and she was worried about her. Hameera's answer was that she wouldn't be able to speak on the phone any more.

Ten days later, Hameera's sister got a phone call from someone who said Hameera had been hiding in a building with a few other fighters when a mortar had shelled the building and killed them. The building was still occupied by Isis and Hameera's body with others were inside.

Hameera's mother insisted on giving her a funeral in the camp as a martyr. She hopes she will get Hameera's body back so she can bury her in Kobani and her kids can visit her.

### **Berivan Fadhil**

#### **Ibrahiem Fadhil, 46, a shopkeeper and now a refugee in Turkey, recalls his sister**

Berivan was a 22-year-old ordinary, smart, ambitious girl, trying to find her way in a wildly violent place like Syria. I never thought I would see the day when Berivan would be holding a gun to defend her town Kobani to her last drop of blood. Scenes of horror and brutality in Syria were highly affecting her. She could not sleep for a few nights after she watched the Isis military campaign against the Yazidi minority in Sinjar, and was frightened that Kobani would face the same fate. Berivan said to her mother: "I'm going to join Kobani's fighters and no power on earth can stop me."

Berivan was only two when her father was killed in a car accident in Aleppo, leaving behind a family of seven kids without any support. Despite the difficult circumstances, Berivan did really well in school, with the aim of fulfilling her dream of joining a college of medicine. It was only a few days before her final exam when the revolution broke out in Syria. This meant that she was not able to travel to Aleppo to do the test.

Berivan's mother was terrified by the kidnapping of a number of Kurdish students by Isis militants while they were on their way to do the exam in Aleppo. It was a hard choice, but Berivan's mother preferred that if her daughter were to be killed, it should be in defence of Kobani rather than from a kidnapping or murder by Isis. It would be a more honourable death for the family.

Most of the young Kobani locals had left their schools or jobs to focus on training

We had to leave Aleppo two years ago to escape the heavy shelling of the Syrian army planes that accompanied the clashes between factions and devastated the life of the locals. Being at home most of the time, Berivan's dream of becoming a doctor was withering with the escalation of violence in

Syria. She spent most of her time listening and watching news of the war in Syria and the rapid advance of Isis in Iraq.

We did not have many options. We headed to Riqqa where we have a few relatives, seeking refuge and protection. But it was not long before Isis ravaged Riqqa and turned it into its main base for the Islamic state, where military campaigns are waged against its enemies including the Kurds. All the Kurds were a target for Isis, under the accusation of being defectors and loyal to the Syrian regime.

There was no other escape but to go back to Kobani, which we did a few months ago. The town was relatively secure under the control of the Kurdish labour party, despite the shortage of water and power as a result of the tough siege imposed by Isis on all entrances to the city. Most food products and fuels were smuggled into Kobani, business was dead, and we relied on our savings to maintain our life.

When the danger of Isis was creeping back towards the Kobani suburbs six months ago, lots of Kurdish men and women volunteered to join the Kurdish People's Protection forces in preparation for a showdown. It was the moment Berivan had been yearning for. She did not wait to get her family's approval and enrolled with the force. She embedded in military camps for training on light weapons with her cousins and friends. The military camp was in the Kobani suburbs and Berivan could only come home once a week. I used to go and see her in the camp when she could not make it home. I could see that she was mainly talking about politics and human rights abuses. She said she would not stand a second in Kobani under the Isis command.

As a family we could not object to Berivan's decision as most of the young Kobani locals had left their schools or jobs to focus on training for the protection of Kobani. It was a big relief for my mother that Berivan stopped asking to go to Aleppo to do her final exam – this put an end to the ongoing nightmare of Isis kidnapping Berivan and selling her as a slave, as they had done with Yazidi women. As a man with three kids, I could not join in with the training out of fear for my kids' future if I were to be killed.

In the eighth months Berivani spent in the military camp, I tried in my visits to her to warn her of the risks of being killed as she was young and not used to military life. But she would not let me finish. Her morale was high and she would not reconsider.

Although we were swamped with fear and worry about Berivan getting killed in a fight, she was still haunted by the dream of completing her studies. She used to spend long hours reviewing her school books when she was allowed home. But the security situation deterioration rapidly. Isis increased the intensity of their attacks against Kobani villages with mortars, artillery and car bombs.

Most of the villagers ran to the centre of Kobani, fearing Isis attacks. We were worried about our family and about the kids who were terrified by the mortars that would fall randomly on the city. I rang Berivan to say: "We are all leaving to

Turkey, what are you going to do?” She replied: “I’m not coming with you, it has become a matter of life and death to defend Kobani.”

We became really worried on 18 October. Berivan’s mobile had been switched off for days. It was difficult to reach the military camp or to know where, until my mobile rang. It was Berivan’s friend. He said: “I’m sorry to let you know that Berivan was killed by a car bomb as she was advancing towards Isis positions.”

I’m so proud of her martyrdom – I refuse to get consolation for her loss and would rather be congratulated for her heroic death.

## **Ruhan Hassan**

### **Adnan Hassan, 50, a refugee in Turkey, talks about his niece**

Ruhan, 19, wanted to know more about the political rights of the Kurdish people in Syria. She was keen to attend all the national activities organised by the different political movements in Kobani. She was the youngest child of a family with seven kids and limited financial resources, and they could not afford to send her to the city to complete her secondary schooling.

Ruhan read a lot about the Kurdish labour party leader, Abdullah Öcalan, co-founder of the PKK, who has been in jail in Turkey for more than 15 years. Ruhan was inspired by his books about Kurdish women and their rights. She joined the women’s protection force in Kobani and in 2013. Ruhan proved to have good skills in fighting against the terrorists, and she encouraged her cousin to join the fight too.

All the fighting forces in Kobani were on alert after the massive attack launched by Isis against Kobani last September. Ruhan’s father asked her to come home and leave the fight to men. She said she preferred to be dead rather than live under the control of Isis and be taken as a slave.

The situation was worsening in Kobani with the flooding in of more Isis fighters. Ruhan’s family struggled to stay to be close to her, but Isis militants started to shell the city centre. There was no way they could stay in Kobani – even their Arab neighbours became a risk after collaborating with Isis against the Kurds. Ruhan’s father told her she needed to flee with them to Turkey. Ruhan said she had decided to die in Kobani.

Like most of the Kurdish families in Turkey, Ruhan’s family watched Kurdish TV to keep up with the news of the fighting and the names of wounded and martyrs among the Kurdish fighters in Kobani.

Then the TV announcer read the names of the martyrs. Ruhan’s mother jumped out of her chair when she heard Ruhan’s name. It was a terrible and sad day. The family ran to the Turkish border to go back to Kobani to find out what had happened to Ruhan. Getting back to Kobani was impossible under the non-stop fight with Isis and the military siege imposed by the Turkish police.

Ruhan's father kept trying her cousin and other friends for any news of his daughter. Her cousin said Ruhan had been at the western front of Kobani with three other female fighters firing against Isis until they ran out of ammunition. They did not want to be taken as prisoners by Isis so they used their last hand grenades to kill themselves.

- This article was amended on 30 January 2015. The original caption on the picture of Ruhan Hassan was incorrect. This has been changed.

***Ottawa investigates reports that Isis has captured Canadian-Israeli woman available at***

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/30/isis-captured-canadian-israeli-woman-gill-rosenberg>  
**(accessed 18/12/2018)**

The Canadian government said on Sunday it was investigating reports that a Canadian-Israeli woman who joined Kurdish militias fighting in northern Syria has been captured by Islamic State (Isis) fighters.

According to a blog linked to Isis, several female fighters who fought alongside the Kurds have been taken prisoner, including Gill Rosenberg, a Canadian-born resident of Tel Aviv. Israel Radio reported Kurdish sources denying the claims, saying Rosenberg was not in the area when it was attacked.

A Canadian government spokesman said in a statement his country was "pursuing all appropriate channels" as it sought further information and was in touch with local authorities.

Asked by an Israeli television station about the reports, the Israeli defence minister, Moshe Ya'alon, said: "I cannot confirm that and I hope that it isn't true." The Shin Bet, Israel's general security service, told the Jerusalem Post: "There are no further details at this stage".

Rosenberg, 31, joined Kurdish troops fighting Isis earlier this month. A former pilot who served in the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), she reportedly contacted Kurdish fighters over the internet before travelling through Iraq to train at one of their camps on the Syrian border.

In an interview with Israel Radio aired in November, Rosenberg said she was training with Kurdish guerrillas with the intention of fighting in Syria. "They are our brothers. They are good people. They love life, a lot like us, really," she said.

On 20 November, a message posted to a Facebook page in Rosenberg's namesaid: "My Facebook account and friend requests are being managed by someone else until I have access again in apx [sic] 2 weeks time on or around week of [8 December]. Please do not message as this is not me. Thank you." Messages of concern were being posted on the Facebook page this weekend. Isis, which has killed five western hostages, is believed to be holding 39 Indian construction workers captive. Last week the group was reported to have executed two Iraqi women who were former parliamentary candidates.



## The Times articles on Kurdish Female fighters

**Coghlan T.(2016) *Revolutionary Kurdish feminist leads assault on Raqqa. The Times, May 27 2016,***

**available at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/revolutionary-kurdish-feminist-leads-assault-on-raqqa-29kdsrgpc> ( accessed: 10 November 2018)**

A revolutionary feminist who is inspired by Bismarck, Napoleon and Saladin is leading the assault on Raqqa, the capital of Islamic State's self-declared caliphate.

Rojda Felat, a Kurdish woman in her thirties who has been battling the extremists for three years, is the joint commander of the offensive on the city. She leads 15,000 Kurdish and Arab fighters, backed by US special forces and coalition aircraft, under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

She said: "My main goal is liberating the Kurdish woman and the Syrian woman in general from the ties and control of traditional society, as well as liberating the entirety of Syria from terrorism and tyranny."

She said that she drew inspiration from women who fought to the death, such as Arin Markin, who is thought to have blown herself up with a grenade rather than face capture and potential enslavement by Isis during the defence of the Kurdish town of Kobani in 2014.

Commander Felat has fought in battles in Hasakah province and for the town of Shadadi. She dodged a question on her marital status: "All the Syrian families are my family. Wherever I go I find my people who welcome me with love," she said.

One of her comrades said that most female fighters had taken a vow of chastity until the battle against Isis was over. There are thought to be more than 10,000 women serving with Kurdish forces, some in all-female brigades and others in mixed battalions.

"They are convinced that Isis don't want to fight females," Alan Semo, the British-based official representative for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, said. "According to Isis's version of Sharia if you are killed by a female fighter you don't go to paradise. Isis are very scared of them."

The forces Commander Felat leads with Ebu Feyyad, her male counterpart, have advanced four miles into Isis territory and seized five villages since the start of the offensive on Raqqa was declared on Tuesday.

"Our campaign is moving very well according to the plans, no problems so far," she said. "The more we advance towards Raqqa the more Isis's resistance is increased.

"My strong beliefs and honest goals help me overcome any obstacles or challenges. The state of weakness that the woman in Rojava [a Kurdish-held territory] and Syria had experienced has gone now. We are not weak any more. Women are playing a vital role in leading and managing the society."

Raqqa is about 25 miles from the front line and Kurdish leaders have said that their immediate goal is to take the approaches to the city. A separate US-backed offensive in Iraq is aimed at the city of Fallujah with the intention of dividing Isis forces.

Kurdish forces advanced on the village of Fatisah, north of Raqqa, yesterday, reportedly with the help of US special forces equipped with anti-tank weapons and jeeps mounted with heavy machineguns.

**Coghlan T. , Mostrou A.(2014). *Woman volunteer with Kurd fighters 'kidnapped by Isis. The Times, December. Woman volunteer with Kurd fighters 'kidnapped by Isis, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/woman-volunteer-with-kurd-fighters-kidnapped-by-isis-mft3gdztzkw> ( accessed: 10 November 2018)***

A woman with dual Canadian-Israeli nationality who volunteered to fight alongside Kurdish fighters in Syria is reported to have been captured by Isis militants.

The Canadian government said that it was investigating reports that Gill Rosenberg, 31, had been kidnapped together with several other Kurdish female fighters.

Ms Rosenberg, a former member of the Israel Defence Force, travelled to Syria via Jordan and northern Iraq on November 2. She has since posted pictures of herself with Kurdish fighters and apparently working in a Kurdish bakery.

"In the IDF, we say Aharai — After Me. Let's show ISIS what that means," she wrote on her Facebook page.

Claims of her capture were reported on Islamist websites. The Samoach al-Islam blog, which acts as a mouthpiece for Isis, reported that she was captured in the area of the disputed town of Kobani after jihadists launched an attack with three suicide car bombs on Friday.

Several Kurdish sources questioned however whether Ms Rosenberg had been anywhere near Kobani. An American fighter serving with the Kurdish groups in Kobani also questioned the claim. In Israel, the Foreign Ministry said that it was examining the claims, which it said were made by sources "of dubious credibility".

Ms Rosenberg was reportedly convicted of involvement, with 11 other Israelis, in a 2009 phone scam that swindled elderly Americans out of a total of \$25 million. She was sentenced to four years in a US prison, though her sentence was later shortened and she was deported.

She is among a growing number of western volunteers to have travelled to Kurdish-held northern Syria hoping to fight Isis. Led by a former US soldier named Jordan Matson, the self-styled "Lions of Rojava" include at least two former British soldiers, James Hughes and Jamie Read.

There are continuing concerns over the number of Britons travelling to Syria and Iraq to fight with Isis

Yesterday it emerged that a suspected jihadist was brought back from Syria by his father, who is believed to be the first British parent to have rescued a son from the hands of Islamists.

Karim Mohammadi flew from his home in Cardiff to Turkey before using community contacts to secure safe passage across the border to Syria. His 19-year-old son Ahmed was reportedly in contact with Reyaad Khan, 21, and Naseer Muthana, 20, two jihadists from Cardiff who appeared in an Isis propaganda video in June.

Other parents are now expected to replicate Mr Mohammadi's successful rescue attempt. "There's a great sense of honour and family value in what Mr Mohammadi did," a police source told *The Sunday Times*. "Parents know that the British government is helpless in helping bring back their children. The government has no representation in Syria and it refuses to negotiate with militant and terrorist groups."

In Kobani yesterday at least 50 Isis militants were killed in clashes with Kurdish fighters, suicide bombings and airstrikes, according to the British-based monitor group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

US airstrikes also hit at least 30 targets in and around Raqqa, the jihadists' de facto capital.

**( Gibbons K. | Brown D, | Spencer R. 2018)YPJ fighter Anna Campbell 'knew the risks she faced' when travelling to Syria. The Times, September 9 2016, available at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ypj-fighter-anna-campbell-knew-the-risks-she-faced-rfl5sbvwr> ( accessed: 10 November 2018)**

Anna Campbell's life ended in a missile attack in Syria but the activism that led her to the Middle East was learnt from her mother at the dinner table of the family home in East Sussex.

The former public schoolgirl became the first British woman to die fighting alongside Kurdish forces after persuading commanders to send her to the city of Afrin, which was under Turkish bombardment.

Her father, Dirk Campbell, a composer for Hollywood films, said yesterday that his daughter's campaigning had been inspired by Adrienne, her mother, a renowned environmentalist who died of breast cancer in 2012.

Anna Campbell on why she fought with the Kurds

Ms Campbell, 27, from Lewes, explained her reasons for joining the Kurdish I joined because I wanted to support the revolution and because I wanted to participate in the revolution of women that has been built up here and also join the weaponised fight against fascism and the enemies of revolution," she said.

forces in a video recorded for release in the event of her death.

Ms Campbell, who adopted the nom de guerre Helin Qerecox, was the first woman of eight Britons to have been killed in Syria while with Kurdish forces. She died on Thursday last week while fighting with the Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in the city of Afrin, northern Syria.

Her father said both he and his daughter understood that she was putting her life at risk by travelling to Syria and he expressed regret at not having done more to prevent her from leaving. She had travelled to Syria in May last year and was due to return to Britain in two months. "Obviously I was worried for

her,” he said. “I told her she would be in danger, that she could come under bombardment, but she was insistent. It was something she desperately wanted to do and there was no stopping her.

“Anna was very brave, she was very beautiful and was a dedicated idealist. She was very intelligent and creative. She was a leading light in many areas and very popular.”

Mr Campbell, 67, a specialist in ethnic instruments whose film credits include *Harry Potter and Goblet of Fire* and *The Last King of Scotland*, said he had last spoken to his daughter two months ago. “She went there knowing what might happen to her. I said, ‘You could be killed’ and she said, ‘I know. There’s nothing I can do to reassure you about that,’ ” he said.

“I had to let her do what she wanted to. I couldn’t force her not to go. She was a grown woman, she could make her own decisions in life.”

Mr Campbell said his daughter had dyed her hair black to appear less conspicuous when she travelled to the front line.

He told a memorial meeting in Lewes last night: “I’ve been asked what my reaction was that my daughter was willing to pick up a rifle, willing to train as a member of a military organisation, and I said because you have to fight fire with fire.

“It is protecting the vulnerable, the underprivileged, the disadvantaged, the suffering.”

His daughter was educated at the independent Lewes New School, which had been set up with the help of her mother, before moving to the £10,000-a-year St Mary’s Hall in Brighton. She then studied at Sheffield University, took a course in blacksmithing and moved to Bristol where she trained as a plumber and was living before travelling to Syria.

Mr Campbell said that his wife and daughter had many conversations about politics and were both at a demonstration in London about eight years ago when women stormed the Houses of Parliament.

His daughter went on to work in the Dale Farm travellers’ camp in Essex and the “Jungle” refugee camp in Calais as well as campaigning alongside her mother on environmental issues including the “Lewes pound”, an alternative currency to promote local shops.

Miss Campbell’s sister, Rose, attends a vigil on Cliffe Bridge, Lewes, yesterday

Chelsea Renton, a close family friend who is an artist and Green Party councillor, said: “Anna believed in women’s rights, in freedom and she was a young woman who stood up for that.”

Marina Pepper, another environmental activist who had known Anna since she was a child, said: “My advice was not to go to Syria, for absolutely selfish reasons.

“Anna was a beautiful, caring person and I did not want her to get hurt. But when someone like Anna cares so passionately it is difficult to undermine these arguments with practicalities.”

Macer Gifford, a former currency trader from Cambridgeshire, travelled to Rojava in northern Syria with Anna last year. He wrote on Facebook yesterday: “She was kind, funny and brimming with energy. She wanted to fight Isis and to rid Syria of the evil that has ripped the country apart.” A YPJ spokeswoman said Ms Campbell’s “revolutionary spirit . . . demonstrated the power of women”. The YPJ is allied to the People’s Protection Units (YPG).

Turkey insists that the YPG and its affiliates are synonymous with the PKK, a terrorist group that has spent decades fighting for Kurdish secession in southern Turkey.

### **Behind the story**

Before the death of Anna Campbell, only one other British woman was known to be fighting with the YPJ, the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units (Richard Spencer writes).

Kimberley Taylor, 28, called Kimmie by her friends, was a maths graduate from Liverpool University who was passionately attached to left-wing causes and had first travelled to the Middle East as a journalist to report on the plight of Yazidi women.

So outraged was she by what she encountered that she decided to take up arms herself. The YPG/YPJ had played a prominent role in rescuing Yazidis, whose main territory in northern Iraq is next door to Kurdish-controlled parts of Syria.

Over the following months, she worked in a propaganda unit of the YPJ as she learnt fluent Kurdish, often appearing in the western media. Eventually she was transferred to fighting duty and took part in the liberation of Raqqa last October. She says she misses her family but wants to stay in Syria to work in public diplomacy for the YPJ’s cause.

( Pesta A.2018) *Married to a jihadi*. *The Times*, available at

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/married-to-a-jihadi-hz8smwgjr>

(accessed: 10 November 2018)

## Married to a jihadi

Tania Joya was a devout Muslim from London. Her husband, John Georgelas, was a convert to Islam from Texas. For ten years they both believed in jihad and a caliphate. But when they moved to Syria and Georgelas became an Isis commander, his pregnant wife changed her mind and fled to America with their three children. Now her story is making headlines on both sides of the Atlantic

Late one August night in 2013, Tania Joya found herself stranded with her husband and three young sons in a Turkish city not far from the Syrian border. The hotels were jammed with refugees, and the family had nowhere to go.

Her husband, a convert to Islam, was from Texas. Tania, who had been raised in Harrow in northwest London, had been married to him for ten years. They had most recently been living in Egypt, but had fled the country amid the chaos that followed the 2013 ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government. They'd headed for the eastern Turkish city of Gaziantep, about 30 miles from the Syrian border, where people spoke Arabic and her husband could find work. He was a jihadist – soon to become one of the most senior westerners in Isis – who dreamt of forming a caliphate, an Islamic kingdom to rule the world. She was growing increasingly disenchanted with his quest.

Standing on a dusty street that August night, Tania, who was five months pregnant, was furious. The family had been living like nomads for a decade, and she was sick of it. As she argued with her husband, a run-down minibus pulled up, letting people on and off. Her husband talked to the driver, then turned and said, "He knows a place where we can stay." Tania was hesitant. Would this be safe? But she told herself not to have a public meltdown. They needed a place to sleep. She and the children were so exhausted they could barely stand. So the family piled onto the bus, squashing into seats with a dozen others.

She had no idea where they were going. As the bus rolled through the predawn darkness, carrying the family south of the city, Tania began to suspect they were headed for Syria. Her husband had been wanting to go there; he'd been talking about it for weeks, but she had vehemently objected. She did not want to take her children into a war zone. The country had become one of the most dangerous places on earth, with rebel groups, terrorists and warlords all fighting with the ruthless government. She confronted her husband, who confirmed her suspicions. "It will just be for a few nights," he said. They were already approaching the border. She looked out the window and saw graffiti on a wall. Scrawled in broken English, it read, "Welcome in Syria".

As a girl, Tania Joya liked the usual things – riding her bike, dancing around her room to house and garage music – but she says she felt unwanted, both at home and in her community. Born in 1983, she had been given the name Joya Choudhury, but her family, friends and teachers called her Tania. She was the fourth daughter of her Bangladeshi-born parents. "The fourth unwanted daughter," she says, citing the deeply rooted cultural belief that boys are more worthy than girls. "Families have babies after babies, hoping for a boy." She

recalls how people would sympathise with her father and say, “Four daughters? I’m so sorry.” He would sigh, “I know, I know.”

Her father worked for an airline, while her mother ran a small catering business. The family home was right next to a halfway house. The ex-cons weren’t too thrilled about their nonwhite neighbours. “They smashed our windows,” Tania recalls. Assuming the family was Pakistani, they would yell, “Pakis, go home!” Sometimes, they’d use the roof of the family’s car as a toilet.

One of her fondest childhood memories was a visit to Bangladesh, where she stayed with wealthy relatives in a mansion with a cricket field. She loved Bangladesh. She felt at home among people who looked like her. “Nobody treated us like we were second class,” she says. “I thought, ‘Why can’t we live here?’ ”

Her family was Muslim, and her relatives encouraged her and her sisters to dress modestly. “If I snuck out with bare arms, Bengali men would say, ‘Don’t you have any shame?’ ” she says. Tania never felt close to her father; she describes him as verbally abusive. “I didn’t respect him as a role model,” she says. In primary school, she faced slurs from bullies, who called her “darkie” and “Paki”.

When Tania was around seven years old, her father was laid off and started working odd jobs. At school, Tania wrestled with dyslexia. Her mother began taking in foster children to help pay the bills.

John said, ‘You’re not supposed to be happy in this life. This life is prison. The next life is paradise’

At secondary school, Tania began to feel sick and noticed a slight protrusion in her abdomen. “I thought I had cancer,” she says. “People said I was a hypochondriac.” Relatives and doctors dismissed her concerns. She looked up her symptoms, diagnosing herself with a tumour. In the meantime, her health concerns inspired her to turn to religion. She had grown up reading the Koran, but had not taken religion very seriously. Now she started praying regularly. “I thought, ‘I better start praying, because God must hate me.’ ”

When her family moved from Harrow to a more affordable place in Barking, east London, Tania made a new set of friends at school. They were devout Muslim girls, and they pressured her to become more devout herself. “I thought I had been living a lie, being ignorant of Islam,” she says. As her devotion grew, “I started wagging my finger at my family, judging them, calling them insincere Muslims.” She became best friends with an Algerian girl who wore a jilbab, and her friend encouraged her to wear one, too. Tania thought it would prove how pious she had become. Her family felt differently. “My parents hated it,” she says. “My sisters were angry at me. But no one could tell me why.”

When she was 17, she saw news of the 9/11 terror attacks on TV. She went to school and told a friend, “Isn’t it terrible?” Her friend replied, “Is it? Is it so terrible?” Some of her new friends were supporters of jihadism. They saw the

attack as retaliation for persecution of Muslims throughout time. “I was intrigued,” Tania says. “At school I was studying social sciences, government, politics. When 9/11 happened, I became aware of political Islam.” She started skipping school and reading about the history of Islam.

She read up on jihad. The term, often associated with terrorism, has different shades of meaning, she noted, including a personal struggle to better oneself and a wider struggle to fight disbelievers and tyranny. “Every Muslim is supposed to have their own little jihad; some go in a violent way, and others just do the self-jihad,” she says. She was drawn to war because she had come to believe there was a war against Muslims. She decided that to reject jihad meant rejecting much of the history of Islam, since the Prophet Muhammad “expanded through war”, she says.

She began to feel that wearing a jilbab would “prove my religious devotion”. “I was trying to prove that I’m not ashamed of who I am. Growing up in Harrow, I had been ashamed of it. People would say, ‘Oh, you’re a Muslim? You’re not allowed to have fun. You’re not allowed to do anything.’ There was a stigma. But when I moved to Barking, it was a more working-class area. People were more religious, and there was a stigma for being too westernised. If girls wore jeans or make-up, they would get slut-shamed.” Part of the appeal of the jilbab was that she could “escape from the negative attention”, she says, including harassment from boys, who would grope her in her western clothes. “I was getting mixed messages.”

And so, one morning she wrapped herself in a jilbab and wore it to school, along with a niqab covering her face. She showed only her eyes. When Tania arrived, her new friends applauded, but not the head, who told her to remove the veil. “He called me in and said, ‘You’re not wearing this. Once you get past the school gates, that mask comes off.’ Then he asked, ‘Why would you wear this?’ I said my religion is more important than my looks.”

Her parents were alarmed, too. “My dad hated it. I was just being yelled at and being told, ‘Why do you have to do this?’ For them, it was going backwards. For me, it was, ‘Well, I’m trying to share something that I have pride in,’ because I’d never been proud of anything until then. They didn’t get it.” Employers balked as well. When she applied for jobs at local clothing shops, she was told she would need to shed the robe. Strangers on the street jeered, “Go marry bin Laden,” or, “Got a bomb under there?”

As Tania continued to wear the jilbab, she became more isolated. At the same time, her stomach was protruding more prominently, and a doctor told her she needed to have an MRI. She simply wanted to escape from it all. And so, in 2003, at 19, she went on a Muslim matrimonial site. An American convert to Islam named John zoomed in on her. “He kept pestering me, sending me messages. I wanted someone older, someone who had experienced life. He was two weeks younger. He was just a boy to me.” She showed his profile to her relatives and friends. “I didn’t trust my own judgment,” she says. “I didn’t have the confidence to think for myself, because I thought that I needed God and religion to think for me.” They thought he was handsome. They also liked



that he was an upper-middle-class American. He was persistent in his pursuit. “He promised travel, a big family, a stable life.”

The Texan was living in Damascus, Syria, at the time, studying Arabic. He had grown up in a politically conservative American family with no background in Islam. Journalist Graeme Wood is one of the few to report extensively on John’s life. According to Wood’s book *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters With the Islamic State*, the family moved often when John was young. Like Tania, he’d battled childhood health issues. In his teens he rebelled by doing drugs, particularly marijuana, which helped him with depression. He went to college and took a course on world religion, which left him wanting to know more about Islam. Two months after 9/11, he had converted to Islam and taken an Arabic name, Yahya al-Bahrumi.

After a month of exchanging emails in 2003, John and Tania agreed to meet in London. “He had a short beard. I thought he looked like a prophet from medieval times,” she recalls. “I didn’t find him attractive, but I thought, he’s come all the way from Syria; I felt an obligation.” So she focused on the things she liked about him: his knowledge of Arabic and Islam, and the promise of travelling the world and living in the Middle East, which sounded exciting. Plus, they shared a curiosity about jihad. She had been protesting against the US’s march towards war in Iraq and, when the protests didn’t make a difference, she says, “I felt like I needed to do more. I began to see jihad as a solution.”

She had come to believe there was a war against Muslims. ‘I began to see jihad as a solution’

Her parents approved of him, impressed that he’d come from a privileged American family, and they knew that their daughter would do whatever she wanted, regardless. She agreed to marry him. After all, she says, “He was the most interesting and intelligent person I had ever met. I knew I could love him with time, and I was right.” Three days later, on March 18, they held a secret religious marriage ceremony. But still, fear and uncertainty loomed. “I remember throwing up that day. But I thought, ‘How do I go back on this?’ ” At the ceremony, she wore her jilbab. “The imam asked, ‘Are you being forced?’ I thought, I’m forcing myself. I was crying my eyes out. John was patting me on the back, saying, ‘I’ll take care of you.’ It was the first time someone was really nice to me.”

Two months later, they held another ceremony, this one with her family. She was not sad to say goodbye. The newlyweds went to visit her in-laws in Texas. When Tania saw Plano, an upscale suburb of Dallas, for the first time, with its elegant homes and flowering trees, she was wowed. “I thought, ‘This is the life.’ John said, ‘This is all a deception to deceive your heart away from God.’ ” The couple settled in the town of College Station, where he had converted and still had a circle of friends, and where, living off money from their wedding, they spent their days hanging out, studying and discussing Islam. He became her spiritual guide, and she deeply admired his knowledge. Wealthy Arabs in the community helped fund his studies. She also liked his friends, who were mostly foreign students. “I felt this kindness. It was so alluring,” she says. “They held a

wedding party for us at the mosque. I was intrigued by meeting people from all over the world.”

But marital strife came quickly. He expected her to be a subservient wife, a role she had a hard time accepting. “I found him really chauvinistic. He would say, ‘Independent women have attitude problems.’ ” Nevertheless, she says, “I told myself to have patience. I worshipped him, because I thought God had put him in charge of me. I thought I needed to be a good Muslim woman. I was taught that obedience to those who have authority over you is obedience to God. And men are given authority over women in Islam. So I was at war with myself.”

They didn’t stay in Texas for long. First they went to London, where Tania had a benign tumour – the protrusion that began back in school – removed from her abdomen.

After London came Damascus. The Syrian civil war was still years away, but the couple met other jihadists and dreamt of a caliphate. “John and I were so thirsty for an Islamic state. I was so young and naive. I painted this rosy picture in my mind. I was picturing a utopia.” They were drawn to Syria, she says, because, “The prophecies told by Muhammad said that the Messiah, Jesus, was going to return to Damascus with an army of believers, and there would be an apocalyptic showdown.”

Her husband began growing his beard and hair long, wearing tunics and cropped pants. Tania was displeased; she wanted him to look more moderate, so he could get a good job.

She felt lonely in Damascus. “I wasn’t able to leave home without his permission,” she says. “John wanted us to live like poor people. He thought living as an ascetic would make him closer to God. The prophet says the poor enter paradise first. It’s kind of like getting programmed. I thought I was getting educated by him. You’re taught that this life is a dream; the next life is the eternal reality.”

When she got pregnant, she told John she wanted to stop wearing the veil because it was unbearable. He consented, for a time.

They returned to England, where he gave religious lectures online and in person to a pro-caliphate community. The couple legally wed in October 2004 and moved to Torrance, California, where he had some Syrian friends and hoped to work as a counsellor in a mosque, but his extremist views were not in line with those of the mosque. Tania gave birth to their son on her 21st birthday. She suffered postnatal depression. In addition, her baby had colic. “John was against giving medicine to the baby. He believed in conspiracy theories that pharmaceutical companies wanted to get everyone addicted.”

Dressed in her robe and veil in California she heard the usual jabs, with a group of young women saying, “Hey, it’s not Hallowe’en.” She later admits, “I actually thought that was funny.” The couple moved to Dallas, where he got a job as a data technician at a company called Rackspace. He visited a jihadist online forum at night and offered tech support to Jihad Unspun, a propaganda site. He also sought ways to use his day job to wage jihad. In April 2006, he was arrested for accessing the passwords of a Rackspace client, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a lobbying group that advocates pro-Israel policies. Tania says his plan was to hijack the website and post an essay about why America was wrong to go to war with Iraq. He was sentenced to 34 months in prison.

With her husband behind bars, Tania headed to London, where she stayed with family and friends. She was considering a divorce. “I told him, ‘I don’t want to live in a home with no furniture. I don’t want to sleep on the floor.’ He begged me to stay.” And so she did. She still believed in him, and in a caliphate. Later she moved to Plano. Her clothing caused anxiety. “The neighbours wouldn’t say hello because of the way I was dressed,” she says.

She told her husband she would not wear the robe and veil but only a headscarf, or hijab. Stuck in prison, he was losing control of her. He ordered her to cover herself in the religious robe when visiting him in prison. “He didn’t want his friends at the jail to see me as a modern Muslim,” she says. On her own in Plano, she got a taste of freedom and began wearing colourful headscarves, form-fitting clothes, three-quarter-length sleeves, “all the stuff I had been wearing under the robes”. She also got a TV and started watching news shows, hearing different viewpoints. She became interested in libertarianism. “When John first went to [prison], I didn’t have the confidence to think I could think without him. But now I was seeing different perspectives on life, I was still trying to be a good Muslim, still trying to obey him. That’s where the clash began.”

I worshipped my husband, because I thought God had put him in charge of me

When he was released from prison, the couple realised how much they had grown apart. While he had been isolated and immersed in studies of ancient Islamic history in prison, she had been teaching dance and yoga to Pakistani women. “He was upset,” she says. “I was getting in tune with American culture. He wanted me to dress Islamically.

He would say, ‘Oh, look at you. Aren’t you so American.’ ” Her views were shifting, too. Publicly she supported her husband, but privately her devotion to him, and to his cause, was waning. “I wanted to be American,” she says. “I started questioning him. The idea of a caliphate was still important to me, but I was a mother now.” She wanted a stable home; her husband wanted her obedience. “He would tell me, ‘Stop doubting. Just obey.’ ” They fought often. “I would argue and say, ‘I don’t want to wear the hijab outside,’ and he would say, ‘Then you can’t go out of the house.’ I was emasculating him. I had to pretend that I was supporting him, but inside, it was war.”

He had to spend three years on probation. For Tania, this was a blessing, because it meant the family had to stay put. He found work fixing computers and doing IT for an online shoe shop. She gave birth to their second son. And her husband took another wife in London, a conservative Salafi woman the couple knew. He married her by phone while Tania fumed. She says she felt she had to go along with it. "I couldn't go home," she says. "I had never felt supported by my family." But she was desperately unhappy. "I told John I would drive into the lake. I said, 'I want to be happy.' He said, 'You're not supposed to be happy in this life. This life is prison. The next life is paradise.' "

As soon as his probation was up, he wanted to move. In October 2011 he took the family to Egypt, where he could escape the attention of the American government. He told his wife he could get a good job. She was now pregnant with their third son. It was a historic moment in time: the Arab Spring uprisings had forced out the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt. The region was erupting.

In Egypt, the family moved around, while Georgelas translated fatwas and continued his studies. He gave online seminars in Arabic and English about preparing for a caliphate. By early 2013, protests against President Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate elected a year earlier, were growing violent. In July, he was ousted in a coup. The family were living in Cairo at the time, and Tania says she heard gunfire at night.

Her husband began talking about wanting to move to Syria, where a civil war had begun. "He felt like he had to go and help Syria. It's a Muslim's duty to help your family. I felt for the Syrians, but I didn't want to bring my boys to a war zone. It wasn't their fight." As her brawls with her husband escalated, he became physically abusive, and she wanted out. "It came to a point where I told him, 'I don't love you any more.' I felt suffocated. I would say, 'One of us is going to need to die.' He would say, 'I could break your neck.' "

With the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government, the couple no longer felt safe in Egypt. "There were tanks roaming the streets," she says. "It was a military state." In August 2013 they flew to Istanbul, then travelled to Gaziantep before making their fateful trip to Syria.

At the Syrian border, armed men stopped the minibus at a checkpoint. Her husband talked his way through, claiming the family were Syrian. They walked into Syria and were immediately confronted by members of a militia group, interrogating people just across the border. John told them he knew important people – Islamic scholars in Egypt. They let him pass and even offered the family a ride to the nearby city of Azaz, where they were dropped off at an abandoned house. There was no electricity. "I felt like I was in a horror movie that wasn't ending," Tania says.

Syria was a different country from the one she'd lived in a decade earlier. Her husband promised, "We'll just be here a short time." She desperately wanted to hold him to that promise, to keep her boys safe.

It quickly became clear how much danger they were in. When she stepped outside with her husband, she faced immediate threats. Militants had come from across the world to engage in jihad. She was wearing just a headscarf, not covering herself fully in a robe and veil. Militants would demand that she cover up. They would say, “Are you asking to be raped?” John would say, “I know. She is a problem.” She was in a precarious position, both on the streets and at home, disobeying and embarrassing her husband by publicly arguing. But she had reached the brink. “I was mouthing off,” she says. Jihad wasn’t about “academia, theory and dreaming” any more, she says. “Now it was real.” And she wanted no part of it. John, however, was in his element.

Tania stayed home while he networked with the local Islamist militia. “There were shoot-outs on the streets. I would peek out the window and the fighters would yell, ‘Put your head inside!’ ” Her husband made friends with various militants, who gave him a hand, delivering water for the family and a tank of gas for the stove. Food was hard to come by and they ate mostly eggs, bread and shawarma sandwiches – chicken with mayonnaise and pickles. For light, they used candles. She didn’t know it at the time, but her husband was getting involved with the pro-caliphate group that would later come to be known as Isis.

It was an incredibly dangerous time. After a few days, the family went to stay with a woman whose brother was a rebel fighter, thanks to more connections her husband had made. “He was always talking to people,” she says. “He could be very charming.” Her sons, who were eight, five and one and a half years old, were getting ill. Tania realised they would not be leaving Syria within two weeks as promised. When her husband got a mobile that worked in Syria, she called a relative and said she needed to escape. Then she said to call the authorities and report her husband.

One day, after they’d been in Syria about three weeks, he said, “I’m not going back.” Tania was devastated. “I was pregnant, just begging him to take us to the airport. He didn’t listen. I told him, ‘F\*\*\* off.’ He said, ‘No, you f\*\*\* off.’ I said, ‘Can I? Can I go?’ He said, ‘Yeah, just go.’ ”

Two days later at dawn, Georgelas packed the family into the back of a van to take them to the border. Departing from Syria wasn’t as easy as entering. There was fighting along the border, and different militia groups controlled various areas. The family couldn’t get out where they had come in. The van driver took them as close to the border as the militia would allow and then let them out. He said the family would have to continue the journey on foot – about an hour’s walk to a barbed-wire fence with a hole in it, which they would need to pass through to enter Turkey. With suitcases, a pushchair and children in tow, she and her husband rushed towards the border, surrounded by olive trees and signs warning of landmines. Syrian refugees who were making the trek with them gave the family water.

As the group of refugees approached the border, snipers began firing from towers, sending everyone fleeing for their lives. The family dashed to the fence, went through the hole and ran towards a waiting truck. Georgelas had arranged for the driver to bring Tania and the children to a bus station in Turkey. The

driver was a human trafficker smuggling refugees. Georgelas paid the man, then turned and ran back towards the border, with bullets still flying past. “He never said goodbye,” she says. “I was in utter shock.”

While Tania and the boys climbed into the truck with Syrian refugees, the traffickers began brutally beating a man. “Apparently he had done something to get us shot at.” The truck left him behind.

However, the driver didn’t go to a bus station as directed, instead dropping everyone off at a random spot by the side of the road. They were near a hill in the countryside, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. “Everyone scattered,” she says. She and the boys stood there alone, crying. Walking up the hill with the children in the hot, dry air, she called her husband on her mobile. “I hate you!” she yelled. The connection was bad, but she kept calling and shouting, “See you in hell!”

As they approached the border, snipers began firing from towers. They fled for their lives

As they walked, a man on a motorbike approached, but they didn’t speak the same language, and communicating was difficult. He indicated that he would take the boys on the bike, one at a time, to the bus station. Tania was terrified to send her children off with him. But she had no other options; she had to trust him. He drove the children one by one, as promised, and the boys waited for their mum at the station. Then the man drove alongside Tania as she walked with the pushchair to the station. As a Muslim woman, “It wouldn’t have been appropriate for me to sit with him on the bike,” she says.

At the bus station, she met up with a contact arranged by her husband. He was in the business of helping Syrians and refugees, and he got them to the airport. They flew to Istanbul and checked in to a hotel. She was six months pregnant and weighed 6st 12lb. Confused and alone, her emotions raced. “He did give me permission to leave – I never would have known how to get out of there without his help,” she says. “Had I stayed, I probably would’ve been tried for apostasy.”

Seeing how ill she looked, the hotel employees rushed her to the hospital. When she felt better, she travelled with the children to London, then later to Texas. “I thought the boys would have better opportunities in America.”

Tania Joya, now 33, tells this story while sitting in a wine bar on a street lined with glittery shops and cafés in Plano, where she now lives. In a sleeveless top, denim skirt and suede heels, her hair casually tousled, she is a world away from her life in radical jihad. She takes a sip of sparkling white wine and dips a pear slice into a creamy cheese fondue. Couples stroll by on the pavement, disappearing into bars and restaurants at dusk. “When I look back, it all feels like a bad dream,” she says.

Her transition to Texas in late 2013 was not easy. Despite being free, and living in a safe home with her in-laws, she felt alone. “I thought, ‘Who am I without

John?' My identity was his identity," she says. He wrote to her, trying to persuade her to come back to Syria. But she wanted a new life. "I told him, 'I'm moving on,' " she says. She gave birth to their fourth son and legally divorced her husband, shedding his last name. When she learnt he had taken another wife, she cut off all ties, she says, noting, "I don't know if he's alive."

And then, she unwound. Free to think on her own, she began working on deradicalising herself, continuing the thoughts of escaping extremism that had been brewing for years. "I stopped thinking in terms of destiny, that everything is preordained. I thought about how I have control over my own life. I have control over my body," she says. "I read about philosophy, existentialism. I thought about American values and freedoms, how unhappy I had been, trying to be someone I wasn't. I thought about how women are pressured to cover themselves, but men aren't pressured to control themselves. It didn't make sense. God made me look the way I am, but I had to view it as a sin."

The shift away from extremism, she says, began with her children and wanting to keep them safe. Now she is thinking about the future. "I'd like to build a career helping with prevention and deradicalisation programmes, whether it's Islamic or white nationalism. I feel very driven," she says. "I lost years of my life in my twenties."

Riding home through the leafy, pristine streets of the suburb, she points to a hair salon. She jokes that she has years of beauty treatments to catch up on, having covered herself for so long. At her apartment, she sinks into a beige sofa in the living room. Photos of her four sons hang on the wall, along with a flat-screen TV. She scrolls through her Facebook page, clicking on photos of her former husband and the boys as they grew up. In one, her husband lies on his back, smiling, holding one of his young sons in the air.

As Tania gradually settled into life in Texas, she craved companionship, so she posted a profile on Match.com. "It was the first time I'd ever dated," she says, smiling as she recalls the dating-unfriendly things she wrote in her profile. "I wanted to be honest. So I said I have four children. I said I'm looking for security. I said my husband had gone off to be the next Osama bin Laden." Nonetheless, she says she got 1,300 replies. "I was like an alien when it came to dating," she says. "I had always thought arranged marriage was good. Why date for more than three months?" She went on a few dates, navigating a new world. "I'd never been exposed to alcohol," she says. "Men would try to get me drunk."

When Craig Burma came across her profile, he was intrigued. "She was beautiful, but I wanted to learn her story," he says. "I wanted to understand." When she told him about her past, he says, "I thought it showed her strength. She had faced such adversity." The two talked for hours that night at a restaurant. She was impressed by his curiosity about the world. "I thought he was really smart and interesting."

Now they are engaged to be married. Craig, a director at a print and marketing solutions company, says, "I just love her like nobody's business." They attend

the Unitarian Universalist Church, an inclusive religion that draws people of all faiths. “It’s all about a progressive message,” she says, noting that the church quotes texts from many religions and spiritual figures. Her fiancé has helped her financially. “The happiness that I was craving so badly in my first marriage, I found it in Craig,” she says. “I’m very fortunate. My children are healthy, safe and happy. They have a good life. They’re very privileged to be in America.”

As for Georgelas, he’s gone on to become the leading producer of English-language propaganda for Isis, according to journalist Graeme Wood, helping to recruit fighters with his words. Meanwhile, Tania says she is hoping to help keep others from following her ex-husband’s path to radicalism.

On a Friday afternoon in August, Tania’s sons burst through the door, all smiles and energy. But when they see their mum talking to a reporter, they’re suddenly nervous and shy. They disappear into another room, unsure if journalists can be trusted. Tania sits them down and explains what journalists do. She advises them to keep an open mind, always to get the facts before forming an opinion, and not to let others tell them what to think. “Don’t become extreme in your thinking,” she says. “Look what it did to your father.”



DailySabah articles on Kurdish Female fighters

Jane Louise Kandur( 2015)

*The reality behind YPG heroines: Intimidation, signed, sealed and delivered*

available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2015/08/29/the-reality-behind-ypg-heroines-intimidation-signed-sealed-and-delivered> (accessed: 10

November 2018)

*The women of the YPG and YPJ are being depicted as heroines. But does this group, closely affiliated with the PKK, really consist of heroes and heroines battling for freedom? What is the truth behind these organizations that are internationally recognized as terrorist groups?*

*There was a 100 percent turnout in 350 villages in the vicinity of Siirt. 100 percent of votes cast in these villages were for the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The results created doubts about how fair the elections in these regions were.*

An unusual female heroine has recently started to appear on television and in newspapers. The heroic Kurdish female fighters of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and People's Protection Units (YPG) are fighting alongside Kurdish men, striking fear into the hearts of the terrorists of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

One of these is Asia Abdulla, who, according to the BBC, is "co-chair of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant political party in Kurdish-controlled Syria. Like almost all officials here, a large portrait of the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan hangs in her office."

In the same article, another woman, Diren, says: "Women are the bravest fighters."

The article goes on to tell us that "she and three comrades are having lunch: flatbread, cheese and watermelon. Many of the fighters, like Diren, 19, are still teenagers.

"We're not scared of anything," she says. "We'll fight to the last. We'd rather blow ourselves up than be captured by IS (ISIS)."

The message being given here is clear – brave women are fighting for freedom, standing up against terrorism. It is a message that is cleverly and tidily packaged for our digestion. Without much thought most readers avidly eat it up, thinking, "Ah, women standing up for what is right, how wonderful."

Revolutions and revolutionaries are attractive. Che Guevara, William Wallace, Garibaldi, Lenin, these are men who stood up for what they believed in, fought

against injustice and strove to make the world a better place. Or so we are told. Perhaps it is the American legacy based on a revolution that makes revolutionaries so attractive to the modern middle-class mind.

But revolutionaries are no more glamorous than revolutions. Revolutions are dirty, bloody battles. And revolutionaries, more often than not, are men who will sacrifice almost anything in the name of their cause.

The YPG is directly affiliated with the PKK, thus, the portrait of Öcalan on the wall. The PKK is internationally recognized as a terrorist organization, but when the question is concerned with the YPG or PKK, the sacrifice these noble men and women are making is quite often a sacrifice of morals. In fact, what we are talking about here is not a revolution, but a battle being waged by one group of terrorists in the PKK against another group of terrorists in ISIS. And many major media outlets are asking us to choose the side that stands against ISIS.

The images presented by many major media outlets are nothing more than attempts to glorify something that is in fact base and horrific.

The PKK has terrorized southeastern Turkey for years, threatening the heads of families, executing them when they do not heed their warnings, kidnapping women and children and making sure that what the PKK wants the PKK gets.

The most innocent manifestation of this is the result of the last elections. There was 100 percent turnout in 350 villages in the vicinity of Siirt; 100 percent of votes cast in these villages were for the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Such results can only create doubts in how fair the elections in these regions were.

Yasin Aktay, a Justice and Development Party (AK Party) deputy from Siirt, gave a press conference in Istanbul yesterday in which he said that in his village of Halenza there was 80 percent turnout and he received 75 percent of the vote. This is democracy, Aktay said. People voted for other parties, too, and he was pleased that he did not get 100 percent.

Aktay also shared the fact that during the campaign the windows of his bus were broken a number of times. He never mentioned this because there were so many greater examples of oppression in the region, that this seemed negligible.

As an example of greater oppression, Aktay shared two letters with the journalists present. He said that copies of many such letters had been forwarded to him, but he had not shared them to protect the original recipients. But without showing us the names, he shared the contents. I want to do the same here.

The first hand-written letter paraphrased from the Turkish original reads:

"We hope you are well...

We are writing to you about an issue [that has remained unresolved] from last

year.

We called you. But you did not come.

So we are writing you this note.

Last year you were supposed to give us financial support.

But you have delayed this.

You should have come to us. But we have not been able to meet.

You should come to our center within three days.

Or you can send an intermediary to solve this problem.

This problem directly concerns the XXXXXX family.

But we thought it best to write to you.

Please deal with this situation in the next three days.

Greetings of the Revolution

Herekol Public Relations Department"

Below the "Public Relations Department" is a seal. A seal. A seal is something used by a legitimate state, business or institution to confirm that the document in question is legal. Not only does the PKK have a public relations department, it has an official seal.

The second letter reads:

"Your attitude to the elections after [our leader] Apo [Öcalan] declared the establishment of the Kurdish nation is an attack against this nation.

You have also attacked us by not acknowledging the message we sent you.

From this time on the attitude of yourselves and your close relatives has made you a clear and open target. The safety of your lives and property is at a risk."

This letter is also completed with a seal.

It is interesting that these letters are written in Turkish. In fact, one journalist asked why they were in Turkish. This question was almost immediately answered by other journalists. Kurdish is not a literary language, and Kurdish people find it easier to write in Turkish. The language of choice for correspondence of a people staging a revolution to establish a Kurdish state, people who are waging a war against the so-called oppression of Turkey, is Turkish.

*A sealed letter shared by AK Party Deputy Yasin Aktay, whom received it from locals, clearly shows that PKK threats toward locals who doesn't choose their side. "As a person who tempted many people before, [I am saying that] you either come here to see us or [dangerous] things will continue to happen to you. You can benefit from this process. There is amnesty. You have to come to us in order to be able to forgive yourselves. It is up to you. If ask us, it (amnesty) is a blessing for your family too. If you do not come, there is no salvation for you even after a century. Do not fool yourself. Come to your senses. You cannot sleep even at your house. Why? Because you are guilty."*

And the media is glamorizing the YPG, an organization directly affiliated with the PKK.

The glamorization of revolutionary ideals is nothing new. But just because it is not new, this does not make it ethical. Some of the women and young people who are fighting in the mountains have gone to defend their beliefs. But not all.

In the early 2000s one woman wrote about her experiences in a book, "The Escape to Freedom." Dilaram (a pseudonym) joined the PKK at the age of 13. She spoke with a number of women in the PKK about the abuse and rape they suffered. The picture of women who join the organization voluntarily only to find that they are being oppressed and abused and unable to leave, chills the blood. Not only are there brutal incidents of rape, young women who want to leave the group are executed.

So in contrast to the heroic depiction of brave women risking everything to fight for freedom and democracy, the reality is sordid. These terrorist organizations consist of criminals who threaten the local population, force them to vote as the PKK sees fit and force them to financially support this terrorist organization. This is an organization that lacks any form of morals, a group that kidnaps children and women, raping and pimping these women and executing anyone who does not do as they wish.

On April 23, 2014, National Children's Day in Turkey, the PKK celebrated this day dedicated to the joy and happiness of children by kidnapping 25 students aged between 14 and 16 from Lice in Diyarbakır. To bring this event to public attention, more than 21 of the families affected protested outside the Diyarbakır municipality building. The protest had to be abandoned in the end and the families were accused by some of "betraying the Kurdish cause." They betrayed the cause by wanting their teenage sons and daughters returned to them.

The governor of Ağrı, Musa Işın, told reporters that "[A] group of women were forcibly taken from their homes while their husbands were threatened with death. In another instance ... 40 young girls were abducted and raped." He also claimed that thousands of Kurdish children have been kidnapped, with as many as 6,000 children being forced into PKK ranks. The deaths of these children, occurring during attacks on Turkish people and land, are used as tools of agitation and defamation. Işın concluded by saying: "No sane person with a ... conscience and heart can claim that an organization that kills in your name, extorts money, sets fire to cars, rapes your young girls and offers them to their

leaders, and who starts a war against all holy values of the Kurdish people defends Kurdish rights."So many so-called revolutionary groups have been presented to us as being romantic and heroic. They are supported and supplied by the West to fuel a fight against a greater evil, for example, the Mujahidin in Afghanistan, fighting the Soviet threat, were supported by Western powers, and from these noble fighters al-Qaida and the Taliban emerged. ISIS directly and indirectly benefitted from the war against Saddam Hussein, most apparently in the use of the equipment and weapons left behind by the U.S. forces. There is a new spin being put on the women of the YPJ.

Surely, we will not be taken in again. These women may be heroines. They are surely brave. But before we support them, before we flock to be by their side, we have to ask ourselves, what will develop. The PKK, YPG and YPJ are terrorist organizations that do not hesitate to abuse women, tear families apart, threaten and intimidate. No matter how much they try to legitimize themselves with seals and uniforms, they are beyond being revolutionaries. In the world's eyes, they are terrorists. True, they are fighting ISIS. But can we say that one terrorist organization is inherently better or worse than another? Can something that is morally reprehensible suddenly be acceptable because it serves a certain aim? A terrorist is a terrorist is a terrorist. So before you write that check to help them, before you pack your bags to go and join them, remember that a spin is being put on the women of the YPG, YPJ and PKK, the reality is not at all as it is depicted in the Western press.

Şeyma Nazli Gürbüz (2017)

*PKK continues to abuse young women, while Western media turns a blind eye to terror group*

available at

<https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/08/04/pkk-continues-to-abuse-young-women-while-western-media-turns-a-blind-eye-to-terror-group-1501837277>

(accessed: 10 November 2018)

Several reports from national and international organizations cite several cases of abuse of women and children, giving evidence of the PKK and its affiliates forcibly recruiting underaged girls, without the consent of their families, along with other abuses. Yet, despite this evidence, western media remains silent on the issue

The abduction and exploitation of women by the PKK continues with the latest incident revealing that a young woman named Leyla Güneş was shot by PKK terrorists and survived death while trying to escape the terrorist organization last week. Yet, similar to many other cases of abuse of women, Güneş's story

was not covered in Western media, which overlooks PKK abuses and tends to glorify the PKK and other terrorist organizations affiliated to it, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, by portraying violations of human rights as freedom fighting women.

Güneş, who was brainwashed into joining the PKK three years ago, was saved from the terrorist organization and reunited with her family. She was only 15 when the PKK reached out to her and her friends when they were picnicking. Her mother tried to contact her and other PKK members in order to have her released, but failed each time. Three months ago, however, Güneş decided to surrender to security forces. Yet, when Güneş began running toward the military units who came for her, to surrender, other militants in a cave threw grenades at her before shooting her.

Thought to be dead after security forces killed the other militants, Güneş was sent to a hospital morgue until it was realized that she was still alive. Now Güneş suffers from memory loss and receives psychological treatment to recover her three lost years.

Güneş is only one example of dozens of young women who suffer from similar exploitation in PKK ranks. There are many reports from surrendered female terrorists, saying that they were forced to fight against Turkey.

A video the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) released in May shows another young woman from the PKK, Zehra K., who also surrendered, and who in another video says that she was fooled by the terrorist organization: "My biggest mistake was to be fooled by the PKK. Because the PKK is burning both the Republic of Turkey and the Kurdish nation. So what I want to say to young people is that the organization forced me into this, but what I understand [now] is that they should take refuge in the state."

In addition to abduction, it are also several cases in which the husbands of kidnapped women have had their lives threatened while the women were facing several abuses, including rape.

The book "The Escape to Freedom," which was written in the 2000s by a women who escaped from the PKK, reveals her and other women's experiences while in the terrorist organization. Joining the PKK when she was 13, Dilaram (a pseudonym) says in the book that even the women who joined voluntarily eventually find that they are oppressed and abused and are unable to leave. Even if they want to escape, there is a high possibility that they will be executed. An example is the story of five female PKK members who were claimed have been consumed by toxic fumes released from a generator in 2011, but turned out to have actually been executed.

An Interior Ministry report in February, "Exploitation of Children and Women by PKK/KCK [Kurdistan Communities Union] Terrorist Organization," cites several cases of abuse of women and children, but also points to other reports from international organizations concerning the issue.

Reports by Human Rights Watch, for instance, say that the YPG uses children under the age of 18 and the PYD and YPG does not deliver its commitment to discharge child soldiers, similar to reports from the U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry. A Human Rights Watch report with several interviews with families says that any children appeared in PYD youth centers without the knowledge of their families and afterwards, no communication was available with them and families figured that their children joined or were forcibly recruited at a later time.

"In May 2015, the YPG and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) announced compulsory 'self-defence duty' for all those aged 18 and older in the Kurdish canton of Afrin in the northern part of the Aleppo Governorate; however, in April 2015, a 16-year-old girl in Aleppo was allegedly recruited by the YPJ against the wishes of her family," the U.S. State Department June 2016 "Trafficking in Persons Report" says.

Similarly, according to the report by Kurds Watch, people are compulsorily recruited through the so-called self-defense law, adapted by the PYD, and children up to age 12 are subjected to the practice, as well. "While adults are trained in Syria, children are taken to the PKK's camps in northern Iraq," the report added, emphasizing that this issue is against international law.

Reports from Kurds Watch also cite stories of women's suffering, including Fatima Salim Ali's. "Fatima Salim Ali, one of many child militants used by the PYD/YPG, was recruited by the terrorist organization at age 12. During the interviews, her parents told that Fatima suddenly disappeared and they didn't want their daughter to join the organization – although they were supporters of PYD/YPG – as well as they were prevented from contacting with their child at later stages," the report said.

## **WESTERN MEDIA GLORIFIES PKK, IGNORES EXPLOITATIONS**

However, in spite of this evidence and the stories of many abused women, Western media continues to stay silent on the issue. Rather than revealing the true face of the terrorist organization, many media outlets glorify the PKK and other organizations linked to it, including the PYD and YPG. The portrayal of female terrorists as freedom fighters as well as pointing to the high number of female fighters to highlight how the terrorist organization gives importance to gender equality are the main themes while mentioning the PKK.

The internet is full of pictures of and articles on female PKK fighters who are glorified and act as heroines by highlighting their fight against Daesh. Yet, there are few sources that show the abusive acts of the terrorist organization on the women. Abductions, forcible recruitment, the armament of under-aged girls as well as rape seem to be seen as insignificant in the Western media compared to the fight against Daesh.

Last year, The New York Times published an article by Rod Norland with the headline: "Crackdown in Turkey Threatens a Haven of Gender Equality." The

article was one of the best examples of glorification of female PKK fighters, with claims like "Kurdish guerrilla units are fully integrated by gender," and that the outlawing of the terrorist organization by the Turkish government is "one big problem with this aspect of Kurdish life in Turkey." Praising the PKK's vision, the article further claims that it "may be a terrorist organization in the view of the Turkish government, Europe and the United States, but it has also long made women's rights a centerpiece of its political platform."

Responding to and condemning the article, the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM) published its own article, stating that the term "gender equality" was abused by using what it called blatantly false information.

"With this article in The New York Times, the Western media has produced a false image of female PKK fighters, tying together women's struggle for freedom and equality and their militarization in a terrorist organization. The PKK's radicalization of women with the incitement of violence should not be interpreted as emancipation," the KADEM's article says, adding that the PKK has not decreased violence against women and has instead pulled them into a vicious cycle of violence, socially justifying it through the women themselves.

"Kurdish girls are taken hostage, made hostile to their families and society and are militarized with psychological and ideological oppression. They are forced to live with a cold, numb identity that glorifies destruction and fighting," the article says.

However, the article in The New York Times is not the only one that manipulates facts regarding the PKK. Another example is Marie Claire's article titled "These Remarkable Women Are Fighting ISIS. It's Time You Know Who They Are." The article makes heroines out of the female PKK terrorists while failing to see that they have been radicalized. The same article was also published in Esquire magazine.

Similarly, Russia Today published a documentary titled "Her War: Women vs. ISIS: Women against DAESH". Focusing on the training process of the female terrorists, the documentary says that the age of those who join the organization falls to 16, but it has been claimed that the only precondition for joining is to be unmarried.

Outside of the media, the fashion retailer H&M's 2014 collection was inspired by the female terrorists of the YPJ, which, the company later apologized for. This is another noteworthy attempt to turn terrorists into heroes and overlook the suffering of abducted women.



Özge Bulur(2018)

*Tips from The New York Times on how to beautify YPG terrorism*

available at

<https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2018/02/03/tips-from-the-new-york-times-on-how-to-beautify-ypg-terrorism>

(accessed: 10 November 2018)

*Especially since the launch of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch against PKK-linked YPG terrorists in Syria, The New York Times has turned into a platform for the group's women's affiliate YPJ, which uses feminist rhetoric as a tool to aestheticize terror*

Will there come a day when The New York Times publishes an op-ed piece by a Daesh terrorist, or is it enough for now to provide a platform for People's Protection Units (YPG) terrorists to whitewash themselves disguised as pacifists? Since Turkey launched a military operation against the YPG in Syria's Afrin region, the newspaper has been paying special attention to the wellbeing of the members of the group, so much so that even Nujin Derik, the commander of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the women's branch of the YPG, wrote an op-ed for the paper on Monday, "We Fought for Our Democracy. Now Turkey Wants to Destroy It," letting the group take their provocation to a much higher level in mainstream media. In addition to that, an article by Rod Nordland, published on The New York Times website a day before the first one, with the title "Female Kurdish Fighter Kills Turkish Troops in Likely Suicide Bombing in Syria," portrayed the YPJ's terrorists as heroines who are brave enough to take a stand against Turkey's invasion.

Let me say from the very beginning that the instrumentalization of women as a means to legitimize violence and acts of the YPG, an affiliate of the PKK, itself recognized as a terrorist group by the U.S., EU and NATO, is of no use whatsoever, as it does not change the fact that a terrorist is a terrorist, no matter what gender.

Without a moment to spare, let's start with the first piece. YPJ leader Derik invites the world to become a partner in their crimes with the opinion piece she wrote for the American newspaper. Aside from all the elements of some heroic saga that she thinks her group accomplished what they consider their fight for democracy, Derik resorts to this very typical tactic to speak in the name of women who supposedly pursue liberation in their battle against Turkey, which she believes is "a different evil" that allied itself with "Islamist jihadists." That part of the story is not new, as we keep seeing how Turkey, a country that suffered long enough from the PKK's brutal attacks and is now more than resolute to not give passage to any terrorist threats, is depicted as an invader in Syria since the beginning of Operation Olive Branch. What Derik additionally does, and The New York Times mirrors, is to sugarcoat all the violence of the group under the guise of fighting for women's liberation.

Once women were equated with innocence and fragility, as beautiful souls, in American political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain's terms, waiting for their

men at war to come back home. However, feminism stood against such discourse, with the idea that it gives women no agency in warfare. In the age of mediatized warfare, nevertheless, there has been a considerable change regarding the way women are represented in war. Adapting feminist discourse for their own purposes, a terrorist woman can now be praised as a freedom fighter who kills for women's liberation and empowerment, which is what the two New York Times articles, directly or not, also do with eulogies to the YPJ fighters.

Among accusations against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of crushing dissent, threatening democracy and centralizing power, the YPJ's chair portrays the president in her opinion piece as "an enemy of women" in order to turn the armed group's terrorism into a women's issue with which the world can empathize. In the name of those female fighters, she takes a chivalric oath to "resist invaders" in Afrin. The way she idealizes the YPJ sounds as if the armed women never hurt any civilians, let alone killing soldiers, but they just fought against terrorists like Daesh. One can say that it is the same old stuff but a different day when the leader of such a group tries to legitimize its terrorist actions in the name of democracy and freedom. However, using womanhood to legitimize terrorism is far beyond that, and even worse.

When it comes to Rod Nordland's article, it similarly reads like a eulogy to the YPJ's Zuluh Hemo, whom he describes as "a female Kurdish fighter" who killed "several Turkish soldiers with a grenade" in order to prevent the advance of Turkish soldiers and Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters toward Afrin. Taking direct quotes from the YPJ's statement in which the 20-year-old terrorist is hailed as a heroine and "a model for free Kurdish women," Nordland does not just report but also informs the reader that this young fighter was likened to Arin Mirkan, another YPJ suicide bomber who had previously attacked Daesh in Syria. Putting Daesh and Turkish soldiers into the same basket against the YPJ is a clever way of representing those terrorists as icons of female liberation and resilience, which is identical to what the YPJ's leader did in her op-ed when she compared the YPG's fight against Turkish soldiers to their previous fight against Daesh in Raqqa in order to justify the YPG's terroristic actions during the Afrin operation.

For those who did not get enough YPJ propaganda, Nordland's article offers more by sharing two videos, one a Facebook video of Humo singing as well as pictures of her, and another from the YPG press office in which the reportedly female suicide bomber's story is lauded in addition to some other terrorist women. Unlike the clear-cut distinction between being a beautiful soul and an active fighter that the YPJ leader made in her opinion piece, Nordland's article seems to combine both. In one of the videos accompanying the article, Humo says: "People told me to stay at home, that I'm too soft to carry weapons, that I'm not tough enough to fight, yet I knew that this step would be the first of many." No matter how young she is, positioning a terrorist against all those previous arguments that women suicide bombers are incapable of making their own choices to participate in warfare, the video characterizes the young terrorist as having agency, leaving no space to any bigger arguments like the aestheticization of terrorism.

I do not think there is any need to say that the second article, which extensively quotes what the women in the YPJ forces think of the Afrin operation, does not report any information from Turkey's perspective other than giving the numbers of YPG casualties and stressing Erdoğan's threats. Nevertheless, it is a rather different story, so let's return to our subject and sum up: Framing YPJ terrorists as peaceful guardians as they hold guns to allegedly only target jihadists or evil under the guise of women's freedom and empowerment does not justify the group's terrorism at all.

(Kiziltan,2014)

**PKK and the 'free female fighter' rhetoric available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/pkk-and-the-free-female-fighter-rhetoric-73444>**

(accessed: 10 November 2018)

Over the last two months, there have been dozens of articles published on how the brave Kurdish women of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) have been fighting fiercely against the militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), including publications by BBC News, Foreign Policy magazine and the Huffington Post. Indeed, at first sight one feels proud at the fact that women are as strong as men and are fighting for what they believe in. Yet, something about the rhetoric used by news sources on Kurdish female fighters feels deeply dissatisfying.

“Gender equality is a fundamental feature of the PKK, which was founded as a Marxist organization,” many news sources reported, while depicting the heroines of the PKK, conducting individual interviews and sharing their extraordinary life stories. Nevertheless, there are serious complications about these statements. Among many, the claim that PKK is still a Marxist organization is highly disputable when its political discourse has been redefined over many decades. However, what we should concentrate on is the hyperbole of "female power and independence" within the PKK.

It is true that since its establishment, the PKK has recruited women as well as men. While some of these recruitments were voluntary, others were by force. Nihat Ali Özcan, who is an expert on the PKK, claims that women have voluntarily joined the PKK because they are attracted to the propaganda and aims of the organization, or because of family pressure. However, especially during the early stages of the PKK's existence, it is well-known that the group kidnapped young women for recruitment and forced children whose families were already involved with the PKK to join the organization. In time, they were successful in creating a false notion of gender-equality.

“For me, the freedom of women is more important than land and culture. A woman must be a freedom fighter. You must liberate yourselves,” said Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, on international women's day this year. However, during an interview in 1997, when asked about his alleged

“harem” (where the main male character was surrounded by a group of females), he dismissively responded that it is completely natural to have a desire to be close to the leader in guerrilla movements, as “the leader delivers light and power to those who are around him.” Moreover, the gender-equality façade of the PKK took a serious blow when one of its own female militants, who escaped from it and found refuge in Iraq, published a book on her experiences titled “The Escape to Freedom” in the early 2000s.

After joining the PKK at the age of 13, Dilaram (her codename) spoke to almost 100 ex-militants about the beatings and rapes taking place within the PKK by its leaders and high-level commanders. The story in the book is of a woman who voluntarily joined the organization, but then could not leave it once she was in. Dilaram became a victim of all types of misconduct. The horrific stories range from brutal incidents of rape, to the execution of young women who wanted to run away from the group. Thus, all today's arguments suggesting that the PKK provides freedom and power for women within the organization should be taken with a grain of salt.

Moreover, those who are familiar with the history of PKK attacks in Turkey will recall that more than half of its suicide attacks have been conducted by women. There was a time in the country when people became restless when they saw a pregnant woman in a crowded place, suspecting that she could be a PKK militant ready to detonate a bomb. Indeed, in the book “Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs” by R. Kim Cragin and Sara A. Daly it is written that while the PKK has utilized female militants as suicide bombers because they would be better able to slip past Turkish security measures, many of the female operatives became suicide bombers out of eagerness to prove that they could be as fierce as their male counterparts, after being accused of being passive fighters.

Needless to say, the PKK is not the only armed group to employ female militants in its activities – in its occasionally ideological and at other time pragmatic strategy. What's more, there is a great irony in the fact that PKK women have lately been combating ISIL, which as an Islamist organization that not only prohibits any female fighters' involvement but also conducts unspeakable violence against females in the raided towns. All of this being said, before displaying euphoria about women being equal to men in their “fight” and before portraying the PKK as if it has no record of gender discrimination, one should take a better look at its history. Regrettably, not all stories are as marketable as others, but there are many lives that have fallen between these gender cracks and deserve to be remembered.

The wide band of territory in northern Syria that is controlled by the Syrian Kurds has attracted enormous interest worldwide.

Media coverage of the area known as Rojava has been broadly favourable. The main Syrian Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units or YPG has attracted particular sympathy for its spirited battle against the so-called Islamic State. But foreign journalists usually do not spend more than a week or two in the region. And the steady blast of pro-YPG propaganda dressed up as news can blur the picture.

*Dutch journalist spends five months in Rojava, says YPG and PKK are separate but closely linked* available at <http://www.diken.com.tr/in-rojava-ypg-pkk-separate-closely-linked/>

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Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, a Dutch freelance journalist and researcher, is an exception. Fluent in the main Kurdish dialect Kurmanji, Van Wilgenburg recently spent five months in Rojava, covering the YPG's operations in Manbij and northern Raqqa and collecting material for a book that he is planning to co-author with Harriet Allsop on the Syrian Kurds' experiment with self-rule. Diken interviewed van Wilgenburg a few weeks after he left northern Syria in August just as Turkish troops were moving in from across the border. Here are the highlights from that interview.

The rules are different for foreign and local journalists. Local journalists need to have their outlet registered with the canton [Syrian Kurdish] administration. One has to register separately with each canton. And you need to get permission each time you move from one canton to the other. I was able to move around freely without any minder. I did whatever I pleased with a translator or on my own. But if you go into an area where military operations are taking place, like Manbij for instance, then its tightly controlled. You can't just show up. What would happen if you wrote negative stories? Would you be permitted to return Rojava? What are the red lines?

There is a lot of tension between the [ruling] PYD [The Democratic Unity Party is the YPG's political arm AZ] and the pro- [Massoud] Barzani bloc of parties forming the Kurdish National Council (KNC). If you interview them [the KNC] and reflect only their views they [the Rojava administration] get upset. It's also worth noting that they allow journalists who are sympathetic to the Syrian opposition and even to jihadist groups like Jabhat al Nusra to come and senior officials grant them interviews. I saw this for myself.

Can you tell us a little about the internal politics of Rojava? Who are the main players?

Broadly speaking there are two blocs. The PKK, the KDP, and their respective affiliates. So you have the PYD and TEVDEM [Movement for a Democratic Society] and the KNC. The strongest parties within the KNC are the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDP-S) and the Yekiti party of Ibrahim Birro. Then you have a third bloc of parties that have some relations with the PYD and TEVDEM. Most journalists don't know about them but they exist.

Which of the parties are armed?

There is the YPG of course. The pro-Barzani parties have fighters but they are based in Iraqi Kurdistan where they are fighting against ISIS in Gwer, Sinjar and in Khazir. So getting battle hardened.

Ibrahim Birro leader of Yekiti was recently kicked out of Rojava. Why? Well the KNC says it doesn't recognise the local administration, or its laws. Their differences date back to October 2014 when their power sharing agreement [brokered by Massoud Barzani] broke down completely and Turkey played a role in this. Since then tensions have been growing worse. Several KNC leaders were arrested after staging protests. The PYD says they were arrested because you are supposed to seek permission from the local authorities before staging a protest. The KNC says it won't seek permission from an administration that it does not recognise. Relations between the PYD and Turkey and between the PYD and Barzani are also very bad and this is reflected through local rivalries, tensions and arrests. For instance the KDP prevents PYD politicians from traveling through their territory to Europe. And the PYD also put restrictions on KNC entering Rojava. Turkey also supports the KNC and wants it to have more influence, which often makes life worse for the KNC.

How would describe the ideological differences between these two blocs?

The KNC says it wants a Kurdistan region in Syria similar to what the Kurds have in northern Iraq. But that is hard to achieve because if we draw a line from Derik to Efrin and accept this as Rojava the Kurds will be in the minority.

How so?

I don't much believe in percentages but the Kurds would amount to around 40 percent of the population in that band of territory.

Going back to the differences, PYD and TEVDEM say they want federalism for northern Syria but they want this not just for the Kurds but also for other groups, meaning Christians and Arabs as well.

How much support does the KNC have?

There is no way to measure this because there are no elections but the KNC parties have a good amount of support in al-Hasakah province but as you go towards Afrin and Kobane, significantly less so. The PYD and YPG are especially popular in Kobane. Also you have a lot of Kurds who support Barzani who don't necessarily support the KNC.

People often draw comparisons between Rojava and the Iraqi Kurds' administration? Are there any similarities?

The political dynamics are very different in Iraqi Kurdistan where you have two political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan governing over two separate zones. Yes, you do have a [Iraqi] Kurdistan parliament and a [Iraqi] Kurdistan regional government that binds them but they are still quite separate in many ways. This fracturing was avoided in Rojava because they resisted the KNC's attempts to divide territory and power. Rojava is far more bureaucratic and better organised. And there are obviously ideological differences. Rojava is all about self-sufficiency, communalism.

Tell us about the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Does the YPG call all the shots?

There isn't much difference between the YPG and the SDF, its kind of like two different names for the same group. The SDF is a coalition of different factions but the dominant force is the YPG.

Its mainly Kurdish right?

It's impossible to call it "Kurdish" anymore because the YPG is recruiting a lot of Arabs especially in Manbij and Shadadi. The number of Kurdish recruits from

Turkey has gone down. Military service is obligatory in the cantons so the draft applies to all local residents including Christians but this does not necessarily mean they will be fighting on the frontline. The Christians are happy about this and the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate just put out a statement criticising the forced drafting of Christians.

So do the Arabs support the canton system?

They deal with the realities on the ground. They look at who is the dominant actor. Plus they get salaries from the administration. Something, between 30 to 50 dollars, the same as Kurds working for the administration would. Their families enjoy protection again as the YPG fighters' families would.

Is the Rojava experience rubbing off on the PKK? Transforming it in any way?

It's hard to pin down. There are some PKK in the leadership and among the cadres [of the Rojava administration] but the PKK likes to keep things separate. I don't see them changing their own rules but they have to deal with the reality on the ground. You can't have everyone living like PKK cadres. There is a difference between PKK cadres and the YPG fighters who can marry and have kids. Also some YPG fighters volunteer for a given period and return to civilian life when the battle is over.

What exactly is the relationship between the PKK and the Rojava administration?

It's difficult to understand this relationship between Qandil [the PKK headquarters in the Qandil mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan] and Rojava. There are a lot of administrators who were in Qandil. But it's unclear to me whether they do their own thing or report first to Qandil and then do it. And for example you recently had comments from a senior PKK commander Riza Altun who said the PKK only made suggestions [to the canton administrations]. In the same interview he criticized the cantonal authorities for failing to adequately explain the "democratic federalism" project and for continuing to call the areas under their control "Rojava" [which connotes Kurdish ethnicity AZ] instead of [the all embracing AZ] "northern Syria."

How important is Abdullah Ocalan in Rojava?

Ocalan is viewed as the person who created the idea of Rojava, who came up with the whole system, who embodies the "Rojava Revolution" as they call it. You see his pictures everywhere. He's a symbol.

If Turkey and Ocalan struck a deal whereby the Rojava authorities gave up on linking the cantons with Efrin and in return Turkey normalised relations with Rojava, allowed unfettered access to Efrin, and helped to rebuild Kobane for instance, would the Syrian Kurds accept this?

It's very complicated because they have been talking about Efrin for such a long time. Giving up on connecting Kobane with Efrin would be a tremendous loss of face. Yet the Rojava administration can be very pragmatic. If there are real guarantee that Efrin will no longer be besieged by Syrian rebel groups and that its secure and that Syrian Kurds are allowed to travel freely to Efrin via Turkey without any negative repercussions of any kind then perhaps. But there needs to be a lot of trust between Turkey and the Canton administrations.

What if Ocalan stepped forward as a guarantor?

Well I think its very hard for them [the Rojava administration] to go against anything Ocalan says. But then Ocalan is not stupid either. He will not commit himself in ways that would damage his own credibility. More likely he will make vague pronouncements that can be interpreted in many different ways. I don't

think he can make concessions to Turkey without securing something substantial in exchange like decentralisation in southeast Turkey, letting the Kurds have their own political system. I do think if relations improved between Turkey and Rojava it would be better for Syrian Kurds' economic future. Until relations are normalised they can survive but not much more.

The US has repeatedly said it will not help the YPG connect the cantons. At the same time the US envisages a key role for the SDF in capturing Raqqa. Is the YPG ready to do Raqqa without US help in linking the cantons?

TEVDEM officials say they want recognition of their federal region [the Northern Syrian Democratic Federation] and that they want to be at the table during any future Syria peace talks. They are unlikely to do Raqqa without support for linking the cantons. The Americans seem to be trying to make up for the lack of support by offering the YPG more weapons. If the Americans don't help them then they will work with the Russians to capture al Bab. Its not 100 percent confirmed whether they received Russian help in doing so but the YPG recently captured ten villages moving eastwards from Efrin towards el Bab. They are 25 to 30 kilometers away from el Bab.

After five years of self-rule how separate is Rojava from the rest of Syria?

It's getting more and more separate [from the rest of Syria]. For instance the official Syrian education system is being phased out. Most education is now in the Kurdish language but Christians are allowed to have their own Christian education and the Canton Administration formally announced this. The Arabs are also permitted to have their own separate schools.

Are any of these schools funded by the central government?

Teachers in the new schools are paid directly by the Canton administrations. And those among them who previously worked for schools run by the central government no longer receive salaries from the central government.

How does the Rojava administration fund teachers' salaries?

By taxing civilians and through its control over economic resources in northern Syria, like oil for instance.

So do kids born after the canton administrations were declared in 2012 learn Arabic?

They do, but not as their main language.

How secular are the Syrian Kurds?

I think the Syrian Kurds are quite secular because Syria in general is quite secular. This has nothing to do with the PKK YPG ideology per se. The Syrian Kurds are not very observant and there aren't that many women who cover their heads.

There is a lot of talk about women's rights in Rojava. How much real power do women actually have?

Women are far more powerful now in Rojava than they have ever been. So much so that even parties that oppose the PYD joke about it saying "we no longer have any power as men." Marriage of minors has been banned. Polygamy [permitted under Syrian law] has also been banned in Rojava. The canton administrations are very eager to pass new laws to improve women's rights even though there is some resistance to this among locals. There are plenty of women in key positions. But when you look at the pro-Barzani parties the number of women in power is close to zero. While there are numerous women fighters in the YPG, mandatory conscription applies to men only



How would you characterize relations between the Syrian Kurds and the Assad regime particularly after the regime bombed YPG targets in al-Hasakah?

I think the YPG was initially quite happy about what happened in al-Hasakah because they gave a message to the Assad regime. The message was: “don’t think you can do your deals with Turkey and that there will be no consequences.” As you know there was a lot of talk at the time of secret deals between Turkey and the regime that targeted the Kurds. And the American chased away the Syrian planes. But the situation changed when Turkey intervened in Jarabulus soon after. The timing of the Turkish intervention suggested there was a deal between Turkey, Iran, Assad and Russia.

So do you think what happened in al-Hasakah is part of an emerging pattern of regime YPG confrontation?

Not necessarily. A lot of the tensions are local. There have been clashes between pro-Assad militias and the YPG. For instance in Qamishlo a pro-regime Christian militia was unhappy about checkpoints set up by the Asayish (the Rojava administration’s internal security units) and so there were clashes. Assad’s strategy is to deal with the insurgency first. Once he feels stronger he will of course shift his gaze to the Kurdish areas because this area is rich in oil and agriculture. He would not want to leave this in the hands of the Kurds.

What sort of contact is there between the regime and the Kurds?

There is an airport in Qamishlo controlled by the regime. And there are civilian flights between Qamishlo and Damascus. In the past there was medicine coming from Damascus to Qamishlo but recently because of the tensions that has stopped so there are huge medicine shortages in Kobane and Jazeera cantons. There are still some economic deals with oil and products being sold back and forth.

How do the Syrian Kurds get along with US Special Forces?

It’s difficult to gauge. You see them riding around but reporters are not allowed to get close to them, especially after the incident when they were photographed with YPG patches on their uniforms. The YPG does view the whole thing as more of a tactical alliance but it’s very popular among locals. Be they pro or anti-PYD people like westerners. You will never hear anti-PYD people criticizing this alliance with America. They say American support is good and that there should be more.

## **Bianet articles on Kurdish Female fighters**

Necla Açıık (2014)

*Kobane: the Struggle of Kurdish Women Against Islamic State* available at

<https://bianet.org/english/world/159851-kobane-the-struggle-of-kurdish-women-against-islamic-state>

The international community should support a secular, multi-religious and multi-ethnic Rojava with democratic ambitions, that is a threat for IS and equally for the conservative Islamic government in Turkey. This is democracy in action in the Middle East.

For several days tens of thousands of Yazidis [Ezidi people] got trapped on Mount Sinjar in early August 2014 in an attempt to flee the attacks of the Islamic

State (IS) on their towns and villages in Sinjar region in north-west Iraq, close to the Syrian border.

It soon turned out that these attacks were not just a strategic move by IS to provide them with a free gateway to northern Syria, but horrific tales of execution, abduction of women and children, forced conversions to Islam, and the mass exodus suggests a more sinister plan.

Amnesty International documented the atrocities of IS and accused them of carrying out ethnic cleansing on a historic scale, systematically targeting non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim local communities, such as the Yezidi Kurds, Assyrian Christians, Turkmen Shi'a, Shabak Shi'a, Kakai and Sabeen Mandaean.

Several months before the IS attack, Yezidi leaders feared that they would be targeted by IS and tried to lobby for protection and intervention with trips to Baghdad and to the Kurdish capital Erbil. The Iraqi Army had already deserted the region, but they were reassured by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that their Peshmerga Armed Forces were prepared for an onslaught by IS and were ready to defend their Kurdish co-patriots.

Yet, as IS started to advance and attack village by village, to the surprise of everyone, the Peshmergas quickly withdrew, leaving the civilian population widely unprotected. Left behind were poorly equipped local militia and a few Peshmerga fighters who, at their own risk, stayed behind. They managed to hold back IS for a few days, enabling civilians to flee to the Sinjar mountains, but they had little power to prevent what Yezidis call the 73rd massacre on their community. This included group executions, abduction of women as spoils of war, rape and the trafficking of women and girls as sex slaves.

### **Kurdish female fighters rescue the trapped Yezidis from IS**

As news of this humanitarian disaster went around the world and the international community was debating about a possible intervention, help came from somewhere else. The Kurdish women fighters (Women's Protection Unit, YPJ) of Rojava (the self-proclaimed Kurdish autonomy region in northern Syria) and the women's guerrilla units (YJA-Star) of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) along with their male comrades were the first forces to respond to the calls of the trapped Yezidi refugees. Setting off from Rojava, these fighters cleared more than a 100km passage through northern Iraq to Mount Sinjar and broke the siege of IS. They provided the desperate refugees with a secure corridor, which enabled them to embark on a 24 hour march into the relatively safe northern part of Syria/Rojava, where they received immediate medical attention, food and shelter.

The PKK guerrillas and the fighters from Rojava were the only force on the ground to respond immediately to the crisis preventing further IS massacres in early August. It was also striking that whole women's units were among them, not just individual female fighters. Especially, as female fighters arouse so much attention. IS fighters were said to be dreading that the door to paradise would be shut to them if they had been killed by a woman.

While such tales have certainly increased the popularity of Kurdish female fighters in the international media - this was even featured in the free paper Metro - the reality is that these women and men who dared to stand up against IS put themselves in a very vulnerable position; they became the primary target of IS. Although they have been the strongest to fight back against IS, only the

Peshmergas have been supplied with weapons and included in the US coalition to combat IS.

The PKK and Rojava administration were neither consulted about co-ordinated actions against IS, nor were they supplied with weapons to defend themselves and the population against further IS attacks. As the founder of Medecins Sans Frontieres Dr Jacques Bérès has stated, the Kurdish women fighting IS have nothing but their “courage and Kalashnikovs”. Even two months after the IS massacre on Mount Sinjar, it is again the women’s defence force of the PKK who are protecting the civilian population from ongoing IS attacks. They have also vowed to find the thousands of abducted Yezidi girls and women. Swedish politicians joining this campaign have urged the United Nations to investigate and identify the young women who may have been trafficked to other countries.

### **The ‘Rojava Revolution’ and the Kurds in North Syria**

Amid the civil war in Syria and the withdrawal of the Syrian Army in the north of Syria in 2012, the population of Rojava took control of their region and declared a democratic multi-ethnic and multi-religious autonomy similar to the Swiss model with three separate and geographically detached administrative regions or cantons (Kobane, Afrin and Cizire).

Despite economic hardship and a de facto embargo from trade with other parts of Syria, Turkey and KRG, the people of Rojava have been using their newly acquired freedom to experiment with radical democracy. They are applying the Democratic Autonomy project propagated by the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, which is also being embarked upon by the Kurdish movement in North Kurdistan/ Turkey.

Within two years Rojava has witnessed substantial institutional and political changes and for the first time in Syrian history, the communities are governing themselves without the intervention of an authoritarian central government. Referring to these developments as the ‘Rojava Revolution’, the people of Rojava have eagerly been involved in organising their own affairs, from running schools and hospitals to generating electricity and even making their own tanks. The most visible change has perhaps been the inclusion of women in the defence force and the police as separate units through the establishment of the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) and the Women’s Security Forces (HAJ). According to various estimates, female fighters make up between 7,000 and 10,000 of the Kurdish forces fighting in Syria, representing roughly one third of the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) in Rojava, the military force that has been set up to defend Rojava.

The empowerment of women has been a key to the Rojava revolution, which explains its popularity particularly among women. A recent report on Rojava commissioned by the London based women’s rights and advocacy group Roj Women, shows that since the self-declared autonomy, Kurdish women have established a dozen women’s unions, associations and committees and have carried out gender awareness campaigns on a large scale in all three cantons. Among the new regulations instigated to combat gender discrimination are a ban on polygamy for men and underage marriage. Also, unusual for the region, cases of domestic violence are being taken more seriously by being referred directly to the police and courts, while women and their children are provided with temporary safe accommodation. To ensure that women are represented in public offices and in civic life, positive discrimination measures, similar to those practiced within the Kurdish movement in Turkey, are introduced. These include

the co-chair system where key decision-making positions are shared by men and women, and the establishment of various women-only bodies making sure that women's voices and interests are no longer ignored.

### **Rojava's model of gender equality borrowed from the Kurdish movement in Turkey**

Rojava's model of empowering women is based upon the gender liberation perspective developed by the PKK and applied by the Kurdish movement and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in Turkey, which runs the local governments in a number of Kurdish provinces in the South-East of Turkey or Northern Kurdistan.

A strength of the PKK and the Kurdish movement in North Kurdistan has been their criticism of Kurdish society in terms of class and gender inequalities. Women's participation in the armed struggle and their success as political activists has broken many taboos in Kurdistan as national movements very often do, but it has not stopped there.

While in the 1990s women were mobilised into the Kurdish national movement primarily to support and legitimise the national cause, with the new political shift towards Democratic Autonomy, stronger emphasis has been put on everyday politics and of provoking change from below and within the society rather than waiting for the 'big revolution' to happen. The Kurdish movement and the PKK put so much emphasis on women's liberation, that women's demands for more power and recognition within the movement could not easily be ignored.

In addition to this, very much to the dismay of many feminists however, the women trusted Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, in guiding them towards gender liberation. Despite his imprisonment since 1999, it was women who supported him most during the turbulent years following his arrest and the declaration of his new political, and at that time controversial, line. In return Öcalan became more radical in his promotion of gender liberation and urged women within the party to question male dominance within their own ranks. Thus, the ideological support provided by the PKK and its leader Abdullah Öcalan has helped women within the Kurdish movement in North Kurdistan/Turkey to question and challenge women's oppression and gender inequalities and many women began to develop a feminist consciousness. They strengthened their position within the legal Kurdish movement and built autonomous and semi-autonomous organisations including women's assemblies within the pro-Kurdish political parties, women's centres and associations, a press agency, women's cooperatives, women's academies and so on.

Within the guerrilla movement, women also organised as separate and independent units by setting up their own party, the Kurdistan Woman's Liberation Party (PAJK) and their own guerrilla force (YJA-Star).

Today, women constitute a strong force within the pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey. They have been working initially on low level grass-roots mobilization but have also demanded more recognition for their political work. This has led to the introduction of positive discrimination policies and includes the implementation of a 40 per cent quota of women by the pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey. It ensured that women were elected into local and national governments as councillors, mayors and as members of parliament.

For example in the 2007 national election the pro-Kurdish parties won 21 seats, with a female representation of 38 per cent. This was a significant achievement

as the overall female representation in the parliament of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the main opposition, the Republican's Peoples Party (CHP) was only 9 per cent. In the latest local elections in March 2014 in Turkey, only 37 women were elected as mayors (out of a total 1,364), of which over half were women from the pro-Kurdish parties who have applied the women's quota rigorously. Besides the quota, the pro-Kurdish parties have been applying a pioneering power sharing system since 2009 that allows key decision-making positions within the party to be shared by both men and women. This means that all elected mayors and councillors have a co-chair who share their salary as well as duties and have equal rights of representing their constituency.

This system has been expanded to other civil society organisations embedded within the Kurdish movement. These and other positive discrimination policies have been highly effective in bringing women's issues to the agenda of Kurdish politics and raising the profile of women in politics more generally. Arguably, Kurdish women's representation in political positions and parties has become a yardstick for democratization that has challenged other parties in Turkey to follow suit.

Rojava benefited from the political expertise of the PKK and the Kurdish movement in North Kurdistan/Turkey in setting up a self-governing system and in pursuing gender equality initiatives. The Rojava revolution might seem very ambitious, given that no regional or international power has any interest in supporting and maintaining them. Yet, it was their idealism and their belief that diversity in the Middle East is an asset rather than a problem that led them to take responsibility and to go to Mount Sinjar to rescue the besieged civilian population. Their vision of self-rule and their success in building political capacity has enabled Rojava to become a relatively stable and secure region, offering tens of thousands of refugees from Syria and Iraq, a shelter. This however changed with Rojava becoming the focus of intense IS attacks.

### **The siege of Kobane**

Rojava is now paying the price for taking on IS and for exercising popular self-governance. Despite ongoing US air-strikes on IS strongholds for over three weeks, the Kobane canton of Rojava has been under heavy attack by IS since September 15. The geographical position of Kobane makes it difficult for any outside help from the other cantons and the PKK guerrillas to get through. Its border to the north with Turkey is heavily guarded. The rest of Kobane is encircled by IS. The surrendering of Kobane is most likely to set off another massacre similar to that on Mount Sinjar. Most of the estimated 160,000 inhabitants of Kobane have already fled the area, but for those thousands of residents who have remained in Kobane attempting to defend themselves against IS, the future looks very grim.

An unclassified US memo written by the former US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, suggests that Turkey is pushing for a Sunni-Islamic state in Syria, regardless of the demands of much of the opposition for a secular and multi-ethnic federation as suggested by many Syrians and particularly the minorities such as the Christians, Alawites, Druze and Kurds.

Moreover, in the same memo, Turkish officials are reported to have suggested that a future Syrian constitution should be "Without mention of the Kurds and that any Kurdish problems should be resolved through local municipalities". It is exactly this mentality of denial and the subsequent assimilation policies of the

Turkish state – and similarly that of Iraq, Syria and Iran - that led to the uprisings of the Kurds in the region, causing the loss of over 40,000 lives in the conflict in Turkey alone.

Thus, despite being besieged by IS in Kobane, the Kurds in Rojava deeply mistrust any Turkish military intervention, not least because they accuse Turkey of actively supporting IS by allowing them to cross the border back and forth. For Turkey, struggling with concessions for their own Kurdish population, an autonomous Rojava run by Kurds affiliated to the PKK is an absolute no. A Turkish intervention in Rojava would not only threaten the autonomy of Rojava, which represents a model for the PKK in Turkey, but would also threaten the peace process with its own Kurds in Turkey.

### **Democracy in action in the Middle East**

The autonomous region of Rojava and its unique population is illustration enough of what we have long understood from Afghanistan, Iraq and other conflicts around the world; that democracy has to come from within. No military intervention from the west or from a third power can teach a country and its citizens how to reconcile differences and build a future together.

Yet, Rojava is being punished for trying to stand on its own feet and for their alliance with the PKK which has helped them ideologically and logistically to set up their own administration as well as with their fight against al-Qaida affiliated groups.

Although the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation, and has indeed been engaged in violent conflict and has been ruthless at times towards internal opposition, their policies and strategies have changed over the years. Their popularity among the Kurds remains high as they have been leading the struggle for civil liberties, political representation and recognition of cultural rights for the last 30 years or more.

The Democratic Autonomy project has been one of the key political projects of the PKK devised as a long term solution for the Kurdish question in the Middle East. Proposed as an alternative to a separate Kurdish nation state, it focuses on widening democratic forms of participation and developing alternative forms of governance and economy. This moderate political line of the PKK, compared to the 1980s and 1990s, has allowed the Kurdish movement in Turkey to strengthen its legal political struggle and aims to open up negotiations for a peaceful political solution.

A secular, multi-religious and multi-ethnic Rojava with democratic ambitions constitutes a threat for IS and equally for the conservative Islamic government in Turkey. For the west however, which complains about the lack of democracy in the Middle East, what makes them hesitate to support such a progressive movement, one wonders?

This movement has not only been halting the advance of IS but has also providing security and stability in the areas run by them, it has empowered women and built an inclusive form of governance, involving many of the region's diverse populations such as the Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and Armenians.

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La Repubblica'articles about female Kurdish fighters

*(La Repubblica 2008) PKK . Così combattono le donne-guerriere*

*Kobane, la guerra delle donne curde contro l'ISIS*

available at

<https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2008/10/17/pkk-cosi-combattono-le-donne-guerriere.html> (accessed 10 November 2018)

DIYARBAKIR «Noi non abbiamo paura. L' attacco dell' altro giorno vicino a Sendimli è stato un massacro. Per noi e per loro. I soldati turchi vengano pure a colpirci ancora, come hanno annunciato. Il Pkk continuerà la sua battaglia fino a quando i curdi non otterranno i loro diritti. E saranno considerati cittadini pari agli altri e non un popolo di serie B». Le montagne dietro Diyarbakir sanno ancora di guerra. Quella di un tempo. Fosse, muri e trincee. E guerriglia che ti sorprende all' improvviso. Basta allontanarsi di qualche chilometro dal grande centro curdo non lontano dalla frontiera irachena, e inerpicarsi lentamente per strade che pullulano di carri armati e soldati con il volto dipinto di pietra nera, la migliore per mimetizzarsi, per piombare subito in un' atmosfera fatta di agguati e di tiri con il kalashnikov. Una battaglia durissima e interminabile. Una guerra a bassa intensità, quella che da quasi 25 anni oppone i poco più di 4 mila guerriglieri comunisti del Pkk alle truppe di Ankara, un' armata seconda nella Nato come quantità e volume di fuoco solo all' esercito americano. Una guerra che, con l' ultimo massacro di alcuni giorni fa (40 morti, 17 militari e 23 ribelli, tra loro alcune donne), ha sfondato il muro delle 40 mila vittime. La Turchia è sconvolta dalla nuova strage, che in un lampo ha catalizzato l' attenzione dell' opinione pubblica, lasciando in secondo piano la crisi finanziaria che attanaglia l' economia anche qui. «E' terrorismo - urlano le tv, i giornali, i politici - il Pkk vuole rafforzare la linea dura, costringere l' esercito a continuare il conflitto trasferendolo sui monti del Nord Iraq (dove si annidano le basi guerrigliere, ndr), e nelle città della Turchia, atterrendole con l' esplosione di ordigni». Ikram non ha paura. Porta una frangetta nera sopra occhiali da intellettuale. Nascosta all' ombra di un solido rifugio, condivide il tè con alcune compagne. «Terrorismo? - replica all' accusa che tutti imputano al Pkk - può essere. Dipende dai punti di vista. Noi consideriamo questa guerra una battaglia per la libertà. I metodi possono essere discutibili, il nostro fine è però chiarissimo. Perché senza le nostre incursioni il popolo turco si dimenticherebbe completamente del problema curdo, e il mondo ci abbandonerebbe al nostro destino. Invece noi dobbiamo continuare a lottare per la visibilità e la nostra sopravvivenza». Non ci sono solo uomini fra i "santuari" sicuri del Kurdistan. A combattere assieme a loro una battaglia antica e disperata spuntano ragazze fra i 18 e i 35 anni. Donne severe, il fisico tosto e il volto indurito da anni trascorsi in un territorio aspro come quello delle montagne curde. Dove il confronto con la morte è quotidiano. «Naturalmente siamo più deboli degli uomini - dice Ikram - e alcune, invece di combattere, si occupano dell' organizzazione del movimento. Ma da un punto di vista mentale le donne

reagiscono meglio e possono sopportare di più le durezze della guerra. E anche il Pkk alla fine ha dovuto cambiare idea su di noi, per la passione che ci mettiamo. Capisco che non sia normale per una ragazza prendere un' arma e mettersi a sparare. Io l' ho fatto anche come una forma di ribellione nei confronti della mia famiglia e della società. Da un punto di vista emozionale noi donne siamo più esposte in guerra. Se catturate finiamo per essere torturate più a lungo. Un uomo può anche accettare di essere preso vivo, una donna preferisce morire». Dentro il Pkk c' è una gerarchia ferrea, ma anche molto cameratismo. Le ragazze si conoscono e si aiutano. Molte comandano i corsi politici, organizzati nelle strutture mobili dentro la foresta. In una di queste sembra di entrare a scuola. La cattedra da una parte, i banchi in fila come in un' aula. Alle pareti i poster con il volto di Apo, e le bandiere rosse giallo e verdi dei curdi. «Ora sono quattro anni da quando sono salita in montagna. Qui la vita è diversa rispetto alla città. E' un altro mondo. L' amicizia è una cosa vera e i rapporti sono solidi. A casa ero sorda e cieca. Qui ho imparato molto. La tua visione delle cose cambia. Ed è come rinascere. Solo fra queste montagne prendiamo finalmente coscienza della nostra identità, e impariamo a rapportarci nel modo giusto con il mondo. Nei grandi centri la società ti impedisce di farlo». Dai "santuari" segreti i guerriglieri si spostano in continuazione. L' esercito va alla loro caccia, e le marce avvengono soprattutto di notte. Si mangia poco, i frutti che il bosco offre. «Capisco i turchi che ci prendono per semplici terroristi - continua Ikram - i giornali pubblicano le foto dei funerali dei soldati. A me dispiace per queste vite. Ma anche i guerriglieri sono uccisi, hanno delle madri e spesso non vengono seppelliti. Questa è una guerra, è dolore, da entrambe le parti. E la loro parte è raccontata molto. La nostra, no. Molti dei soldati turchi sono di origine curda. Qui i fratelli uccidono i fratelli. C' è una famiglia con 5 figli: 3 sono diventati guerriglieri, gli altri 2 si sono arruolati come militari. Due ragazzi sono morti, uno era un membro del Pkk e uno un soldato dell' esercito. La loro madre, adesso, li piange entrambi».

*Paolo Gallori, 2017), La liberazione di Raqqa ha il volto di una donna in armi:*

*ecco chi è Rojda Felat, La Repubblica 17 ottobre 2017, available at*

[http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2017/10/17/foto/rojda\\_felat\\_la\\_comandante\\_curd\\_o-siriana\\_della\\_raqqa\\_liberata-178553602/1/#1](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2017/10/17/foto/rojda_felat_la_comandante_curd_o-siriana_della_raqqa_liberata-178553602/1/#1) (accessed 10 November 2018)

Quando a Raqqa l'insopportabile crepitio dei proiettili è finalmente sostituito dalle urla di giubilo, la combattente curdo-siriana impugna la bandiera delle Forze Democratiche Siriane per sventolarla in piazza al Naim, dove i fotografi catturano tutta la sua gioia. Il suo sorriso diventa il simbolo della liberazione della città siriana che lo Stato Islamico aveva eletto a sua capitale. Ma dietro quel sorriso c'è molto di più. Perché Rojda Felat, questo il suo nome, comandante del Ypj (Unità di protezione delle donne), braccio femminile del Ypg, le "unità di protezione curdo-siriane", è soprattutto l'ufficiale che ha guidato le operazioni militari delle Fsd nella riconquista di Raqqa. Prima di lasciarsi andare nel giorno della gioia e dei festeggiamenti, per mesi ha impartito ordini, studiato mappe, discusso con i consiglieri militari statunitensi, affrontato il nemico. Felat si era arruolata nel Ypj nel 2013, per contrastare l'avanzata dell'Isis. Della sua vita precedente si sa poco o nulla, se non che la sua età si aggira tra i 30 e i 40 anni. Da allora, ha scalato la gerarchia militare, nel suo



gruppo e nelle Fsd, fino ad assumere il comando delle operazioni nella spallata decisiva a ciò che restava del Califfato. Ha combattuto per la libertà di un popolo dal terrorismo e dalla tirannia avendo ben presente anche la conquista di un'altra libertà: "Quella delle donne curde, e siriane in generale, dai vincoli e dal controllo della società tradizionale", ha detto in passato. Una femminista radicale piantata nell'inferno siriano, Rojda Felat, in prima linea per una mutazione culturale che porti al pieno riconoscimento dei diritti, delle aspirazioni, delle vite delle donne di ogni etnia in Siria. E non solo. Perché, a ben vedere, per Rojda Felat anche le donne d'occidente ne avranno bisogno finché "il sistema capitalistico le considererà come oggetti". Oggetti perfettamente in grado di guidare uomini alla vittoria. "In ambito militare, spesso siamo viste con condiscendenza, ci si crede troppo delicate e prive del coraggio necessario per usare anche solo una pistola o un coltello. Potete vedere da voi che nel Ypj usiamo mitragliatrici e mortai. E conduciamo anche operazioni di sminamento".

Il Corriere della Sera' article on Kurdish Female fighters

Il Corriere della Sera

(Lorenzo Cremonesi, 2016)

*Arin, dall'università alle trincee. Noi, ragazze curde contro l'ISIS, Il Corriere della Sera, 7 May 2013*

available at

[https://www.corriere.it/economia/14\\_ottobre\\_16/arin-dall-universita-trincee-noi-ragazze-curde-contro-l-isis-11a47324-54f5-11e4-af0d-1d33fddfa710.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/economia/14_ottobre_16/arin-dall-universita-trincee-noi-ragazze-curde-contro-l-isis-11a47324-54f5-11e4-af0d-1d33fddfa710.shtml)

(accessed 10 November 2018)

MURSITPINAR (Frontiera turco-siriana) «Quei mostri ci vogliono umiliare. Minacciano di decapitare quelle tra noi che cadono prigioniere, perché dicono che i loro uomini uccisi nella cosiddetta guerra santa dalle donne nemiche non vanno in paradiso. Che stupidi! Che terribili stupidi e ignoranti Non sanno che comunque andranno tutti all'inferno?». Ride, ride di gusto Arin Mahmud Mohammad. Ha solo 19 anni, ma dal cellulare il timbro leggero della voce sembra molto più giovane, una bambina. Timida, allegra, eppure anche terribilmente seria. È in prima linea con le brigate dei curdi siriani che combattono in difesa della cittadina di Kobane. Da un mese resistono all'assedio dei guerriglieri jihadisti del cosiddetto Stato Islamico. «Li vedo tutti i giorni quei criminali. Sono ad un centinaio di metri dalla nostra postazione. Bestie che non hanno nulla di umano, che godono nel terrorizzare e torturare civili inermi e prigionieri. Sono animali: si muovono come animali, agiscono come animali», aggiunge.

**A dire il vero Arin ci fa anche vergognare un poco.** Noi qui al riparo, dietro i fili spinati del confine controllato notte e giorno dalle unità corazzate turche. E lei invece esposta sulle barricate che sorvegliano i quartieri sud-orientali, dove più profondamente sono penetrate le avanguardie jihadiste. Un anno fa ha

abbandonato la facoltà di ingegneria edile all'università di Aleppo ed è tornata dalla famiglia a Kobane per battersi tra la sua gente. Per lunghi mesi si è addestrata all'uso delle armi. Come tante, si è anche data un nome di battaglia: Nesrin, una sorta di stella alpina del Medio Oriente. «I miei genitori e sei tra fratelli e sorelle sono profughi in Turchia. Da oltre un mese vivono nella cittadina di Soruch, a soli quindici chilometri dal confine. Ma mi sostengono pienamente, ci sentiamo spesso per telefono e sono fieri che io sia qui a difendere le nostre case».

**Non è facile però restare ben sapendo che il rischio è altissimo.** A metà settembre erano un migliaio le donne soldato nell'enclave isolata di Kobane. Poi sono diminuite. «Adesso siamo rimaste in 450 combattenti del Ypj», specifica lei utilizzando l'acronimo che indica le «Unità di autodifesa femminili», in poche parole le donne soldato curde siriane, che sono trattate in tutto e per tutto al pari dei commilitoni maschi. Combattono come loro, muoiono come loro. I jihadisti hanno diffuso sulla rete le foto di almeno tre sue compagne decapitate. Altre immagini mostrano soldatesse morte con le mimetiche insanguinate, i capelli lunghi trasformati in blocchi di polvere e fango, mischiate tra mucchi di cadaveri scomposti. Il momento più pericoloso? «È stato venerdì scorso. Ero con la mia unità nel nostro quartier generale in pieno centro, quando siamo stati attaccati a colpi di mortaio. Ho visto morire dodici compagni, altri quindici erano feriti gravi. Siamo riusciti a scappare. Dopo esattamente 25 minuti i caccia americani hanno bombardato, distruggendo l'intero edificio».

**Tuttavia, ieri Arin-Nesrin aveva ben motivo per essere sollevata.** «Ormai da tre giorni è evidente che i raid aerei americani assieme agli alleati hanno finalmente fermato l'avanzata dello Stato Islamico su Kobane. Non so quanto durerà. Ma adesso il nostro morale è molto migliore che non la settimana scorsa. Ho visto le bombe americane distruggere con precisione i carri armati e i cannoni che stavano per ucciderci tutti. Noi curdi siamo passati dalla difesa all'attacco. E abbiamo ricevuto cibo e acqua in quantità sufficienti per tre mesi», ci ha detto. A riprova ci fa avere la foto di lei assieme ad alcuni commilitoni ripresa da una compagna due o tre giorni fa nei pressi della sommità della collina di Mishtanur, che domina da sud tutta la cittadina. Quando due settimane orsono i jihadisti vi avevano piantato sulla cima la loro bandiera nera, Kobane era stata data per spacciata. Ora anche Arin col suo sorriso semplice e disarmante è lì, di guardia.

(Marta Serafini, 2018), *Il Corriere della Sera*

*Afrin, l'indignazione dei curdi «Hanno mutilato e ucciso una nostra combattente*

available at [https://www.corriere.it/esteri/18\\_febbraio\\_03/afrin-indignazione-curdi-hanno-mutilato-ucciso-nostra-combattente-4d894b46-08be-11e8-8b93-b872f63dbb4d.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/esteri/18_febbraio_03/afrin-indignazione-curdi-hanno-mutilato-ucciso-nostra-combattente-4d894b46-08be-11e8-8b93-b872f63dbb4d.shtml)

(accessed 10 November 2018)

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### Appendix A- The Guardian articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>6</sup>

| Title  | Favourable | Neutral | Unfavourable | Idealistic | R | O | L |
|--|------------|---------|--------------|------------|---|---|---|
| Turkish women get behind the wheel   | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Sakine Cansiz: 'a legend among PKK members'  | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Kurdish peshmerga fighters: women on the frontline - in pictures                       | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Ottawa investigates reports that Isis has captured Canadian-Israeli woman              | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| 'We are so proud' – the women who died defending Kobani against Isis                   | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| First female western fighter dies fighting Islamic State                               | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Women warriors: the extraordinary story of Khatoon Khider and her Daughters of the Sun | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Slaves of Isis: the long walk of the Yazidi women                                      | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Why are world leaders backing this brutal attack against Kurdish Afrin?                | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |

<sup>6</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love

## Appendix B- The Guardian articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters

| Title  | Historical context | Background ideology | Pictures include women | Features women |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Turkish women get behind the wheel   | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Sakine Cansiz: 'a legend among PKK members'  | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      |                |
| Kurdish peshmerga fighters: women on the frontline - in pictures                       | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      |                |
| Ottawa investigates reports that Isis has captured Canadian-Israeli woman              |                    | 1                   |                        |                |
| 'We are so proud' – the women who died defending Kobani against Isis                   | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| First female western fighter dies fighting Islamic State                               | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      |                |
| Women warriors: the extraordinary story of Khatoon Khider and her Daughters of the Sun | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      |                |
| Slaves of Isis: the long walk of the Yazidi women                                      | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      |                |
| Why are world leaders backing this brutal attack against Kurdish Afrin?                | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |

**Appendix C- The Times articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>7</sup>**

| Title   | Favourable | Neutral | Unfavourable | Idealistic | R | O | L |
|---|------------|---------|--------------|------------|---|---|---|
| Woman volunteer with Kurd fighters 'kidnapped by Isis                         | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Revolutionary Kurdish feminist leads assault on Raqqa                         | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| US mother, 25, leaves three children to fight for Kurds                       | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| YPJ fighter Anna Campbell 'knew the risks she faced' when travelling to Syria | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Married to a jihadi   |            |         | 1            |            |   | 1 | 1 |
| Heroine of the Kurds dies fighting Isis suicide attack                        | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| British fighter Anna Campbell's body left lying in rubble                     | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Girls of the Sun: War reporter Marie Colvin inspired Cannes hit               | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Kurds say West has betrayed them after purge of Isis                          | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |

<sup>7</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love

### Appendix D- The Times articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>8</sup>

| Title   | Historical context | Background ideology | Pictures include women | Features women |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Woman volunteer with Kurd fighters 'kidnapped by Isis                         | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Revolutionary Kurdish feminist leads assault on Raqqa                         | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| US mother, 25, leaves three children to fight for Kurds                       |                    |                     | 1                      | 1              |
| YPJ fighter Anna Campbell 'knew the risks she faced' when travelling to Syria | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Married to a jihadi   | 1                  |                     | 1                      | 1              |
| Heroine of the Kurds dies fighting Isis suicide attack                        | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| British fighter Anna Campbell's body left lying in rubble                     | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      |                |
| Girls of the Sun: War reporter Marie Colvin inspired Cannes hit               | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Kurds say West has betrayed them after purge of Isis                          | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |

<sup>8</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love



## Appendix E- La Repubblica articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>9</sup>

| Title  | Favourable | Neutral | Unfavourable | Idealistic | R | O | L |
|--|------------|---------|--------------|------------|---|---|---|
| Zelukh, 20 anni la prima kamikaze della guerra curda   | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| A Raqqa, nel carcere delle donne della Jihad   |            |         | 1            |            |   |   | 1 |
| La guerra delle curde vive sul grande schermo  | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Siria, l'impavida combattente curda: sfiorata da un proiettile dell'Isis reagisce con un sorriso     | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Mosul, le donne curde che sfidano l'Isis al fronte: "Un proiettile sempre pronto in caso di cattura" | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Siria, comandante curda si fa saltare contro jihadisti dell'Is che assediano Kobane                  | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| PKK . Così combattono le donne-guerriere   | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Kobane, la guerra delle donne curde contro l'Is  | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| La liberazione di Raqqa ha il volto di una donna in armi: ecco chi è Rojda Felat                     | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |

<sup>9</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love

|  |   |  |  |   |  |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|---|--|--|--|
| Anna, Samuel e gli altri: quei giovani europei morti in Siria per difendere Afrin e la libertà dei curdi | 1 |  |  | 1 |  |  |  |
| Cosa è rimasto di Afrin, la città curda che ha resistito all'Isis ed è stata invasa dalla Turchia        | 1 |  |  | 1 |  |  |  |

## Appendix F- La Repubblica articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters

| Title  | Historical context | Background ideology | Pictures include women | Features women |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Zelukh, 20 anni la prima kamikaze della guerra curda   | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| A Raqqa, nel carcere delle donne della Jihad   | 1                  |                     | 1                      | 1              |
| La guerra delle curde vive sul grande schermo  | 1                  |                     | 1                      | 1              |
| Siria, l'impavida combattente curda: sfiorata da un proiettile dell'Isis reagisce con un sorriso     | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Mosul, le donne curde che sfidano l'Isis al fronte: "Un proiettile sempre pronto in caso di cattura" | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Siria, comandante curda si fa saltare contro jihadisti dell'Is che assediano Kobane                  | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| PKK . Così combattono le donne-guerriere   | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Kobane, la guerra delle donne curde contro l'Is  | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| La liberazione di Raqqa ha il volto di una donna in armi: ecco chi è Rojda Felat                     | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |

|  |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| Anna, Samuel e gli altri: quei giovani europei morti in Siria per difendere Afrin e la libertà dei curdi | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Cosa è rimasto di Afrin, la città curda che ha resistito all'Isis ed è stata invasa dalla Turchia        | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

**Appendix G - Il Corriere della Sera articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>10</sup>**

| Title  | Favourable | Neutral | Unfavourable | Idealistic | R | O | L |
|--|------------|---------|--------------|------------|---|---|---|
| Il dramma delle giovani curde in Siria<br>«Noi, prede dei miliziani di Al Qaeda»         | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Arin,<br>dall'università alle trincee<br>«Noi, ragazze curde contro l'Isis»              | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Chi è l'angelo di Kobane e i dubbi sulla sua storia                                      |            | 1       |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Tra le soldatesse curde contro Isis:<br>«Pronte a morire per non finire nelle loro mani» | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| La curda Nisir che si è arruolata perché le donne non restino in cucina                  | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| In pace e in guerra, se le donne curde possono fare la differenza                        | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Così il movimento delle donne curde sta cambiando la politica in Turchia                 | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Le peshmerga curde addestrate dalle italiane   | 1          |         |              |            | 1 |   |   |

<sup>10</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love

|   |   |  |   |   |  |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|---|--|--|---|
|   |   |  |   |   |  |  |   |
| In Siria nasce «Tqila», la prima brigata Lgbt che combatte contro Isis          | 1 |  |   | 1 |  |  |   |
| donne-isis-spose-jihadiste-combattenti  |   |  | 1 |   |  |  | 1 |
| La combattente curda uccisa e mutilata diventa un simbolo                       | 1 |  |   | 1 |  |  |   |
| Afrin, l'indignazione dei curdi «Hanno mutilato e ucciso una nostra combattente | 1 |  |   | 1 |  |  |   |
| Giovani curde in lotta  | 1 |  |   | 1 |  |  |   |

#### Appendix H - Il Corriere della Sera articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters

| Title   | Historical context | Background ideology | Pictures include women | Features women |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Il dramma delle giovani curde in Siria «Noi, prede dei miliziani di Al Qaeda» | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Afrin, dall'università alle trincee «Noi, ragazze curde contro l'Isis»        | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Chi è l'angelo di Kobane e i dubbi sulla sua storia                           |                    | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |

|   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tra le soldatesse curde contro Isis: «Pronte a morire per non finire nelle loro mani» | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| La curda Nisir che si è arruolata perché le donne non restino in cucina               | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| In pace e in guerra, se le donne curde possono fare la differenza                     | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Così il movimento delle donne curde sta cambiando la politica in Turchia              | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Le peshmerga curde addestrate dalle italiane  | 1 | 1 | 1 |   |
| In Siria nasce «Tqila», la prima brigata Lgbt che combatte contro Isis                | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| donne-isis-spose-jihadiste-combattenti  |   |   | 1 | 1 |
| La combattente curda uccisa e mutilata diventa un simbolo                             | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Afrin, l'indignazione dei curdi «Hanno mutilato e ucciso una nostra combattente       | 1 | 1 | 1 |   |

|                        |   |  |   |   |
|------------------------|---|--|---|---|
|                        |   |  |   |   |
| Giovani curde in lotta | 1 |  | 1 | 1 |

**Appendix I- Daily Sabah articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>11</sup>**

| Title   | Favourable | Neutral | Unfavourable | Idealistic | R | O | L |
|---|------------|---------|--------------|------------|---|---|---|
| PKK continues to abuse young women, while Western media turns a blind eye to terror group |            |         | 1            |            |   | 1 |   |
| Tips from The New York Times on how to beautify YPG terrorism                             |            |         | 1            |            |   | 1 |   |
| US support for the PKK/YPG and the destabilization of the Middle East                     |            |         | 1            |            |   |   |   |
| PKK uses photo from Aleppo to defame Turkey's Afrin operation on New York streets         |            |         | 1            |            |   |   |   |
| <i>The reality behind YPG heroines: Intimidation, signed, sealed and delivered</i>        |            |         | 1            |            |   | 1 |   |

<sup>11</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love



**Appendix K- Daily Sabah articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters**

| Title   | Historical context | Background ideology | Pictures include women | Features women |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| PKK continues to abuse young women, while Western media turns a blind eye to terror group | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Tips from The New York Times on how to beautify YPG terrorism                             | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| US support for the PKK/YPG and the destabilization of the Middle East                     | 1                  | 1                   | 0                      |                |
| PKK uses photo from Aleppo to defame Turkey's Afrin operation on New York streets         | 1                  | 1                   | 0                      |                |
| <i>The reality behind YPG heroines: Intimidation, signed, sealed and delivered</i>        | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |

**Appendix L- *Hürriyet*\_news articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>12</sup>**

| Title  | Favourable | Neutral | Unfavourable | Idealistic | R | O | L |
|--|------------|---------|--------------|------------|---|---|---|
| H&M apologises after being accused of modelling outfit on Kurdish fighters |            | 1       |              | 0          |   |   |   |
| German woman killed fighting ISIL in Syria                                 |            | 1       |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| <b>British woman who sided with YPG killed in Syria's Afrin</b>            |            | 1       |              |            |   |   |   |
| PKK and the 'free female fighter' rhetoric                                 |            |         | 1            |            |   | 1 |   |

<sup>12</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love

**Appendix M- *Hürriyet* news articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>13</sup>**

| Title  | Historical context | Background ideology | Pictures include women | Features women |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| H&M apologises after being accused of modelling outfit on Kurdish fighters | 0                  |                     | 1                      |                |
| German woman killed fighting ISIL in Syria                                 | 1                  |                     | 1                      |                |
| British woman who sided with YPG killed in Syria's Afrin                   |                    |                     | 1                      | 0              |
| PKK and the 'free female fighter' rhetoric                                 | 1                  | 1                   |                        |                |

**Appendix N- *Diken* news articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters<sup>14</sup>**

| Title   | Favourable | Neutral | Unfavourable | Idealistic | R | O | L |
|---|------------|---------|--------------|------------|---|---|---|
| Dutch journalist spends five months in Rojava, says YPG and PKK are separate but closely linked | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |

<sup>13</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love

<sup>14</sup> R=Revenge; O=Out of Touch from Reality; L=Love

**Appendix O- *Diken* news articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters**

| Title   | Historical context | Background ideology | Pictures include women | Features women |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Dutch journalist spends five months in Rojava, says YPG and PKK are separate but closely linked | 1                  | 1                   |                        | 1              |

**Appendix P- *The Bianet* news articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters**

| Title   | Favourable | Neutral | Unfavourable | Idealistic | R | O | L |
|---|------------|---------|--------------|------------|---|---|---|
| Kurdish female fighters rescue the trapped Yezidis from IS      | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Operations against PKK, ISIS and DHKP-C in İstanbul, One Killed | 1          |         |              | 1          |   |   |   |
| Times: Erdoğan Insures Not to Attack on Kurdish Forces in Syria | 1          |         |              |            |   |   |   |

**Appendix H- The *Bianet* news articles on the Kurdish Female Fighters**

| Title   | Historical context | Background ideology | Pictures include women | Features women |
|---|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Kurdish female fighters rescue the trapped Yezidis from IS      | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      | 1              |
| Operations against PKK, ISIS and DHKP-C in İstanbul, One Killed | 1                  | 1                   |                        |                |
| Times: Erdoğan Insures Not to Attack on Kurdish Forces in Syria | 1                  | 1                   | 1                      |                |