

Gender in the representations of an armed conflict:

Kurdish female combatants in French and British media

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***Abstract.** The Syrian civil war has been without doubt the most widely covered war by the international media in this millennium. Having engaged in an armed combat against the IS, the Kurdish military troops, especially the female battalion, have received considerable media attention internationally. This study examines the gender dimension of media representations in national media outlets of Kurdish female combatants belonging to the Protection Units (YPJ) in Syria. How have the female combatants been framed in British and French media? To what extent are these representations gendered? The overall data consists of news articles from national media outlets in France and in the United Kingdom between 2014-2015 that is analysed with frame analysis. The results show that the juxtaposition of female combatants with IS fighters allows depicting the participation of the former as exceptional and heroic and as one that deconstructs the masculinity of its adversary. The role of female combatants in the on-going conflict is represented in the British and French media through the construction of sexualized and modern-day heroine figure that is largely glorified.*

Keywords: Kurdish, media, gender, framing, female combatant, Islamic state

Introduction

The Syrian civil war has been without doubt the most widely covered war by the international media in this millennium. While the gruesome acts committed by the “Islamic state” (IS/ISIS) have been attracting considerable media coverage, simultaneously there has been a sharp increase in interest towards the Kurdish combatants¹ and their armed battle. The representation of the battle between these oppositional forces, often portrayed as one between civilisation and barbarism, contains one particularly interesting dimension – that of gender. The Kurdish military troops, namely the People’s Protections Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG), have engaged in armed battle against IS in the outskirts of the de facto autonomous region of Rojava in Northern Syria since 2013 (see Jongerden & Akkaya 2013). The Kurdish military unit include a female battalion, called the Women’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ) that has equally taken part in the armed conflict. Non-surprisingly, the YPJ has enjoyed quite remarkable media visibility, particularly since the siege of Kobane. Numerous international media outlets, including the BBC, NBC News and CNN², as well as social media platforms have provided a close-up perspective to the armed conflict by focusing on female combatants and their military action.

One of the most widely circulated YPJ-related news stories, titled “These remarkable women are fighting ISIS. It is time you know who they are”, was published in the

¹ We will employ the relatively neutral term “combatant” in relation to the Kurdish fighters in Northern Syria, instead using terms such as “terrorist”, “guerrilla” or “freedom fighters” that have different connotations and political implications.

² For instance, CNN featured Kurdish female fighters in their news story “Your Leading Women of 2014”, together, for instance, with the Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai and the actress Emma Watson. December 22nd, 2014. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/19/business/gallery/leading-women-2014/index.html>

women's magazine, *Marie Claire* in September 2014 at the outset of Kobane siege.³ It featured a series of photographs of Kurdish female combatants posing with their military uniforms and heavy weaponry. Some days earlier, photographs of the same photojournalist, Erin Trieb, were published in the NBC News story "Meet the Kurdish Women Fighting ISIS in Syria".⁴ This time photographs portrayed female combatants in military-related action, loading their weaponry, burying the fallen combatants and completing military exercises, but also taking part in more mundane (often considered feminine) tasks of fixing their hair, dancing and plucking each other's eyebrows. Numerous news stories, illustrations and reports have been published on Kurdish combatants in Northern Syria in a variety of magazines, national news media and social media sites over the last two years. Several have explicitly highlighted the participation of female combatants in the armed conflict accompanying it with visual illustrations or yet with interviews with combatants.

This study examines the media representations of Kurdish female combatants and their participation in the armed combat against IS in the British and French national media between January 2014 and December 2015. How are female combatants in Northern Syria framed in French and British media debates? How is their participation in an armed conflict represented and to what extent are these representations gendered? The data set, analysed with a frame analysis, includes news articles published in French and British journals that deal with Kurdish female combatants in Syria. This comparative study contributes to the existing research literature on media representations of women in war through an empirical study on the gendered representations of Kurdish female combatants in two national media.

³ September 30th, 2014. <http://www.marieclaire.com/culture/news/a6643/these-are-the-women-battling-isis/>

⁴ Sept. 10th, 2014. <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/meet-kurdish-women-fighting-isis-syria-n199821>

We will first provide contextualization of the on-going armed conflict in Northern Syria, currently controlled by the YPG and YPJ, and of the largely mediatised siege of Kobane. This is followed by a theoretical and methodological discussion before presenting the results from national contexts.

Rojava and all eyes on Kobane

The People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ)

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) now ruling Northern Syria was established in 2003. Since the withdrawal of the Syrian government forces in 2012, the PYD filled the power vacuum and declared three Kurdish cantons located in the region of Rojava, Efrin, Ciziri, and Kobani, autonomous. The People's Protection Units have operated as the security forces of Rojava since 2012. The YPG is affiliated with the Kurdistan's Worker's Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK*), although this relationship is often contested since the latter features on EU's and United States' list of terrorist organisations.⁵ For instance, the YPG received combatants from the ranks of the PKK after attacks on Kobane following the call by the jailed Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, regardless of Turkish border control authorities aiming to block their access to Northern Syria.⁶

There is a historical background for the presence of female combatants in Kurdish forces (van Bruinessen 2001), namely in the ranks of the PKK, where they taken part in the armed conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state since the 1980s. However, the Kurdish movement and its military sections in Turkey have changed

⁵ "Turkey v Syria's Kurds v Islamic State", the BBC, February 19th 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>

⁶ "PKK Appeals to Kurds in Turkey to Fight for Kobane", Rudaw, September 19th 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/19092014>

since the 1990s, both in terms of the number of female combatants, but also in terms of ideological discourses that put the liberation of women at the heart of the national struggle (Cağlayan 2012). The PKK created military units for women in 1995 and the doctrine of a “free woman”, developed by Öcalan, emphasized the role women play in the Kurdish liberation movement via different sectors of the society, including the policy-making and the military.⁷

Currently, the YPG troops include an estimated number of 30 000-35 000 combatants, of whom approximately 20-40% belong to the female battalion, the YPJ.⁸ The YPG and YPJ combatants are largely trained in the military academy located in Qamishli, following the ideological tenets of Öcalan’s writings, including his doctrine of the “free woman”. In a presentation given in January 2016, the YPJ commander Nessrin Abdullah highlighted not only the international dimension of YPJ’s struggle, but emphasized that Kurdish women were engaging in two simultaneous battles. The first was the national struggle for the liberation of the Kurdish people, and the second one a struggle for women’s rights via raising awareness on the significance of emancipation and self-determination.⁹ The equal representation between men and women is also reflected in the composition of Rojava’s central administrative bodies as one of their central organising principles. This also applies to the military organisation.

⁷ The discourse of emancipation of women due to their participation in the Kurdish movement has been critically discussed by various academics (see Cağlayan 2012).

⁸ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ypg.htm>. These numbers can be compared to some few hundreds of female combatants in the ranks of the Kurdish peshmerga troops in Iraqi Kurdistan, out of approximately 200 000 combatants (estimates by Grojean, 2015).

⁹ These remarks are based on Nessrin Abdullah’s speech given in January in Paris.

The Kobane momentum

Besides the cruelties committed by IS in the region (Human Rights Watch 2015) that have been extensively mediatized by leading news outlets in Europe and North America, the siege of Kobane, suddenly threw the Kurdish combatants in Northern Syria into the international spotlight.¹⁰ Located at the Turkish-Syrian border in Northern Syria, the city was sieged by IS in September 2014, and subsequently liberated by the Kurdish Protections Units in spring 2015. Previously unknown, the city featured almost daily in the headlines of prominent newspapers during its siege. Seminars on the situation of Kurds were organised at the European Parliament, and TV channels allocated a significant amount of time to expert interviewees discussing Kobane. The BBC even released a news story, titled "The Kurdish female fighters bringing the fight to IS"¹¹, accompanied by a short video documentary with nearly 1.3 million views on YouTube.¹²

As one of the main groups fighting IS in Kobane was the PKK, the political powers (namely the United States) as well as the media initially avoided associating the latter with the YPG. Since the 1990s, the PKK has been criminalized in Europe and the United States, which made a sudden shift of discourse seem quite improbable. With the increased media visibility, this unpacked the questions of criminalization of certain Kurdish movements in Europe. However, once referred to as "terrorists" in the mainstream media, the representation of the PKK and YPG has significantly changed. The Kurdish YPG and YPJ troops were soon depicted as the only forces capable of deterring the attacks by IS in the region, particularly after the massive breakdown of

¹⁰ This is visible in the rapid increase in the usage of search words, such as "Kurds", "Rojava and "Kobane" that peaked in October 2014 (Google Trends).

¹¹ The BBC, September 5th, 2014: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29085242>

¹² "Islamic State are afraid to see women with guns", BBC News (YouTube channel) September 5th, 2014. Last accessed on February 29th, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGVbpsGmLV0>

the Iraqi army and the flight of its soldiers that left a sizeable arsenal of weaponry to the hands of the advancing IS. Whereas glorification of female combatants of the PKK has always been present in pro-Kurdish media outlets, more recently they have received close-up and mostly positive attention by the international media.

The Kurdish actors, similarly to IS, have taken advantage of the online forums and channels to increase visibility for their cause and battle they are waging. The news story of the “the angel of Kobane”, Rehana, referred to as the “poster girl” of YPJ, was widely spread across the social media sites, and was even picked up by mainstream media outlets¹³, before the BBC published a news story setting the record straight.¹⁴ Rehana, was constructed as the heroic incarnation of a female combatant. She allegedly took part in the battle against IS by killing a hundred of its combatants. Then she was supposedly beheaded by the organisation, before finally making an appearance in Kobane. Indeed, it can be said that Kobane was a turning point in the representations of Kurdish combatants and their role in the armed conflict in Syria. The representation of female combatants played a significant role in this regard.

Women and their media representation in armed conflicts

Traditional views presume that the participation in armed conflicts and warfare remains largely on the responsibility of men. The military and war have historically been and continue to be spheres strongly associated with masculinity. Women’s role in warfare is often perceived as being more passive, as the caregiver to family members, the mourner of fallen combatants or as the potential victim of sexual

¹³ ”Rehana, the Kurdish Female Fighter who ‘Killed’ 100 Isis Fighters, Spotted in Kobane”, International Business Times, June 8th, 2015: <http://www.ibtimes.co.in/rehana-kurdish-female-fighter-who-killed-100-isis-fighters-spotted-kobane-photo-635123>

¹⁴ ”#BBCTrending: Who is the ‘Angel of Kobane’?”, 3.11.2014: <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-29853513>

violence (de Pauw 1998, Utas 2005, Coulter 2008, Coulter et al. 2008, Cohen 2013). Concerning female combatants, they have been more often framed as victims, targets of abduction, physical or sexual abuse and forced labour, rather than as combatants, who have agency (Utas 2005). The victim frame has long been the dominant one to analyse the participation of women in war over other alternative frames (Coulter 2008: 55).

However, as Coulter (2008: 56) observes, “the presence and participation of women in war is neither unusual nor new”. There is ample evidence that “women in armed groups may function as more than just cooks, cleaners and sexual slaves” despite the dominant frames, which tend to depict women as inherently nonviolent (Cohen 2013: 384). Most referred case studies have focused on armed conflicts in Uganda, Eritrea, Congo, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Liberia, Peru and Sri Lanka among others (Coulter et al. 2008). The gendered assumptions concerning the role of women as combatants or perpetrators of violence have long been overlooked by academics and practitioners. This has had imminent policy consequences, including the exclusion of women from post-conflict reconciliation processes (Cohen 2013: 410). Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs have also failed to address the issue of female combatants, which in the end has rendered them more or less invisible (Coulter et al. 2008).

Feminist studies have focused on the construction of masculinities and femininities in the context of an armed conflict by attempting to deconstruct women’s role as victims or alternatively as perpetrators of violence (Goldstein 2003; Alison 2009; Kronsell & Svedberg 2012). The latter has been conceptualized within the frames of agency and emancipation (Coulter 2008). Coulter (2008: 57-59) also argues that in some cases the female combatants might be perceived by the civilian population “as monsters,

barbarians and frequently as more cold-blooded than male rebels” and they can even commit more brutal engagements than their male counterparts (see Coulter et al. 2008). As fighting is usually associated with masculinity, female participation in political violence can be perceived as “unusual, “unnatural”, “deviant” or “incomprehensible” by others (Coulter 2008: 62, Coulter et al. 2008: 8). This echoes Braden’s (1996) observation that women tend to become newsworthy material at times when they act in an unladylike manner. We line with Zarkov (2006: 227), who argues that instead of focusing on the victimization or alternatively on the agency of women in armed conflicts, it would be more useful to ask “when and how agency and victimization are prioritized in the experiences and representations of war, what other narratives of women’s and men’s positioning within the war there are, and how they are obscured or denied”.

Newspapers’ way to frame stories can influence public opinion and policies in the long run (Goffman 1974; Devereux 2007). To make news stories appealing, journalists sometimes use gendered frames particularly in news stories on war and political violence.¹⁵ The frames can be employed to “justify” or to “explain” behaviour that is deemed as out-of-character for women. For instance, Nacos (2005, 463) discovered six dominant frames that were employed in media portrayals concerning female terrorists: 1) *physical appearance*, 2) *family connection*, 3) *terrorist of the sake of love*, 4) *women’s liberty/equality*, 5) *tough-as-males/tougher-than-men*, and 6) *the bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality* frame. Media coverage relying on such frames suggests that women get involved in political violence for ideological or emotional reasons, and while doing so they either show masculine features or behave in a way that is controversial with their feminine identity.

¹⁵ For instance, Palestinian female suicide bombers were referred to as “Lipstick Martyrs” by media outlets (Nacos 2005: 438).

Highlighting women combatants' "fashionable attire", feminine traits such as hair-do, make up and clothes, can lead to reproducing and reinforcing the dominant narratives of traditional gender roles via a framing that fetishizes women's participation in armed conflict. One such case was that of Colonel Black Diamond, head of the women's auxiliary corps in Liberia, who became a debated figure in Western media in 2003.¹⁶ A BBC article depicted Black Diamond and her fellow combatants as "sexy ghetto chicks", wearing tube tops and having polished fingernails, thus resonating Coulter's observation (2008: 64) that "there is decidedly a sexualized language in Western media descriptions of West African female fighters". According to Utas (2005, 404), the media represented the Black Diamond and her co-combatants as challenging the dominant gendered discourse of women as victims of war. However, he observes that many narratives also reinforced a dominant media frame that established Liberia "as a case of difference - of the 'African Other'" (*ibid.*). Media studies on women as legitimate political actors also show that not only do the media report more on women's physical appearance, while male politicians get more issue-oriented coverage, but that women's participation in politics is underlined as being singular (Braden 1996; Nacos 2005; Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen 2012).

¹⁶ "Everyone is afraid of her", The Guardian, August 25th, 2003: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/aug/25/gender.uk>

Media framing of Kurdish female combatants

Methodology and the material

The material for this study consists of news articles from selected national press in France and in the United Kingdom¹⁷ (see Table 1), available online. The national data include articles that deal with Kurdish female combatants in Northern Syria¹⁸, published in both right and left-leaning newspapers between January 2014 and December 2015.

Table 1
Analysed newspapers, their circulation and political stance

Country	Newspaper	Number of articles	Circulation	Political stance
France (52)	<i>Le Figaro</i>	19	311 737	Centre-right
	<i>Le Monde</i>	10	267 897	Centre-left
	<i>L'Humanité</i>	10	36 931	Communist
	<i>La Libération</i>	8	88 401	Left
	<i>Le Parisien</i>	3	215 006	Neutral
	<i>L'Express</i>	2	423 309	Right
UK (56)	<i>The Daily Mail</i>	13	1 626 322	Right
	<i>The Guardian</i>	11	174 941	Centre-left
	<i>The Independent</i>	7	58 751	Liberal
	<i>The Daily Star</i>	6	424 453	Populist
	<i>The Daily Mirror</i>	6	897 786	Labour
	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	5	479 290	Center-right conservative
	<i>The Sun</i>	5	1 858 067	Conservative
	<i>The Financial Times</i>	2	213 423	
	<i>The Morning Star</i>	1	appr. 10 000	Left

Sources for circulation. France (2015 data; Association pour le Contrôle de la Diffusion des Media; www.ojd.com); the United Kingdom (2015 data; Audit Bureau of Circulation); <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/national-newspaper-abcs-march-2015-sun-sales-decline-unaaffected-second-full-month-without-page-three>

¹⁷ Britain and France are selected as case studies as the media in both countries largely covered the YPJ-related stories. Both countries were involved in supplying military help to the Kurdish Regional Government for its war with the IS and both countries have listed the PKK as a terrorist organization. Other case studies were not included in this paper due to language constraints.

¹⁸ Search words, such as “YPJ”, “Kurdish”, “women” and “female combatant” were employed either individually or combined.

The national data were individually analysed with a frame analysis (Devereux 2007).¹⁹ We distinguished four main frames used in both national presses: 1) *struggle for equality/emancipation/liberation*, 2) *personal/emotional motivations*, 3) *physical appearance*, and 4) *exceptionalism*. The first one framed women combatants' participation as an ideological one, striving for equality, emancipation and national liberation, whereas the second frame was employed to highlight women's personal reasons to engage in the battle (loss of family members, for instance). The third one contained references to women's physical appearances and their feminine features, whereas the fourth one depicted women combatants as extraordinary and tougher-than-men.

We then conducted a comparative analysis to assess whether certain frames were more dominant than others in both data sets. The comparison showed that *equality/emancipation/ideology* frame was more emphasized in the French media, whereas the British press put more emphasis on *personal/emotional motivations* and *exceptionalism* frame, besides *physical appearance*. The *exceptionalism* frame was employed in both media, yet with a slightly different manner. The country-cases are discussed in further detail below.

French coverage

Equality, emancipation and ... exceptionalism

All news articles framed Kurdish female combatants in opposition to their adversary, IS. This was particularly palatable in the reporting on Kobane, with news stories

¹⁹ Journal-specific particularities were not analysed.

highlighting it as the scene of the collision between two competing worldviews. The YPJ combatants' battle against IS was clearly associated with their ideological motivations. The representation of the Kobane siege contained a Disney-like narrative structure, with the dark forces of IS threatening the remnants of civilisation and humanistic values, which became represented by Kurdish women taking arms to defend them. The latter was spoken of in terms of pluralistic values, such as religious and ethnic tolerance, but also of gender equality. Hence, the juxtaposition of the female battalion with IS allowed framing the military battle also as an ideological one. The reasons for women's involvement in war are often sought from personal motivations, for love or family, or from ideological reasons, such as for a political cause (see Nacos 2005). In this case, the latter was clearly emphasized.

News stories, particularly in cases when female combatants were interviewed personally, framed the ideological battle as one of *emancipation*²⁰. It was one that extended beyond the "Kurdishness" of the struggle, and that concerned a more universal battle for women's emancipation in the region. Interview excerpts referred to Öcalan's teachings, and some news articles discussed the link between the ideological tenets of the YPG/YPJ and PKK, referring to the latter as a "rebel group". Within this frame of *equality/emancipation/liberation* frame, the Kurdish combatants' unity became highlighted: it extended from serving as a united front in the frontline all the way to the equality at death (being buried side by side). This frame was reinforced by interview excerpts, in which the female combatants, but also their male counterparts referred to equality as a central part of the Kurdish national liberation struggle, simultaneously reinforcing the image of unity.

²⁰ Grojean (2015) ponders the interconnections between emancipation and women's participation in warfare in the context of the Kurdish female combatants.

Women's involvement in political violence, be it in national armies, liberation movements or in terrorist organisations, is still largely viewed as exceptional (Alison 2009). Similarly, women's role in the military and political positions in Rojava²¹ was framed with undertones of amazement and admiration. Such news stories on women frequently referred to their extraordinary determination, resistance and relentlessness against an outnumbered enemy, known for its brutality. References to violence, either to the presence of it or to its potential threat, were frequent. The imminence of violence was most visible in news stories on the armed battle against IS and references to its combatants' violent actions. The threat or the possibility of violence was to some extent gendered: combatants, who were interviewed for the news stories, mentioned the threat of sexual violence if captured by the IS.²² This meant a refusal to surrender alive, as illustrated in often referred case of Arin Mirkan, who committed a suicide bombing against IS to avoid being captured alive. Women combatants' willingness to sacrifice themselves meant both fighting till death, but at the same time avoiding falling the victim of (sexual) violence in case captured by IS. As Yuval-Davis (1997: 23) suggests, nations are gendered constructions, with women holding particular roles within the nations as 'symbolic border guards and as embodiments of the collectivity'. Women, who take part in armed battles to defend the "homeland" against an external threat, hold great symbolic value that can be strategically employed to legitimize the on-going battle. In the context of an armed conflict, violence (either its threat or actual experience) has a strong symbolic dimension that is gendered.

²¹ The political leaders were also presented in the news stories, as examples of the larger ideological frame in which the Rojava experiment is embedded. Such stories showcases the visit of the co-chair of PYD, Asya Abdullah, with president Hollande in February 2015.

²² "Avec les combatants de Kobané" (with the combatants of Kobane), Le Monde, 5.12.2014: http://www.lemonde.fr/decryptages/article/2014/12/04/avec-les-combattants-de-kobane_4534164_1668393.html

We argue that the representation of Kurdish female combatants in the French media was grounded in *gendered mediation*. This notion refers to the understanding that conventional news frames, particularly concerning topics that are traditionally viewed as male-dominated (military, political violence), treat the male as the normative against which the *exceptionalism* of female is constructed (Ette 2008, 2013). Adding the gender designator (female) when referring to combatants in news story titles is one example of this.²³ Furthermore, in the media representations the constructions of femininity and masculinity are often co-constitutive. In the French media, this was visible in the juxtaposition between the YPJ combatants (and their femininity) with the IS combatants (and their masculinity). The IS combatants' masculinity became undermined and disrupted by female combatants' acts of courage in an all-male arena. On the other hand, the female combatants' agency was underlined against the inability of IS combatants to match them at the frontline or in terms of female combatants' willingness to sacrifice themselves instead of falling into a victimized position.

However, the way of presenting female combatants as particularly exceptional can be interpreted to resonate certain expectations towards women's more traditional roles in the region. Such stories can reinforce the more traditional understandings of war that are based on the idea that "men make war and women make peace", by constructing the Kurdish female combatants in Syria as the "case of difference" and as a singular phenomenon (see Utas 2005, 404). This exceptionalism of women's participation in the war became largely communicated through the construction of the Kurdish female combatant as an archetypical, modern-day Joan of Arc.

²³ "En Syrie, les femmes kurdes combattent les djihadistes" (In Syria, Kurdish women combat jihadists), Le Figaro, 15.9.2014: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/09/14/01003-20140914ARTFIG00156-en-syrie-les-femmes-kurdes-combattent-les-djihadistes.php>
"Asya Abdullah: 'Les femmes kurdes ne se soumettront jamais à Daech' (Kurdish women will never submit themselves to Daesh), Le Figaro, 13.2.2015: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/02/12/01003-20150212ARTFIG00392-asya-abdullah-les-femmes-kurdes-ne-se-soumettront-jamais-a-daech.php>

*The Kurdish Joans of Arc*²⁴

Previous media studies have shown that women are “most newsworthy” when they are acting outside their traditional roles (Braden 1996, Nacos 2005, Yarchi 2014). However, Ette (2008: 197) observes that “...emerging narratives of their [female combatants’] experiences, even when they are considered ‘newsworthy’, tend to trivialise, hype and sensationalise their roles and positions.” This was to some extent visible in the French media. The military behaviour displayed by Kurdish female combatants was often framed in terms of exceptional heroism and depicted with qualities such as “bravery” and “efficiency” comparable to those of their male co-combatants.

There was no great diversity in terms of roles that Kurdish female combatants were assigned to in the French media. Indeed, it can be said that the French media framed the military participation of Kurdish female combatants through a construction of a modern-day “Kurdish Joan or Arc”. This took place through a series of close-up stories of particular female commanders or otherwise heroic figures. The YPJ commander, Narine Afrine, was even referred to as the “Kurds’ Joan of Arc”, and presented as the symbol of freedom and IS’s worst nightmare.²⁵ Arin Mirkan, was referred to as being a symbol of heroism and a “‘sister’ for Kurdish militants²⁶”, whereas the YPJ commander, Nalin Afrin was represented as “the war chief, who

²⁴ Joan of Arc is the heroic French combatant, who lived in the 15th century and who was later canonized as a saint after her execution. She became a popular and legendary woman figure, who is invested with values such as bravery.

²⁵ “Narine Afrin, la ‘Jeanne d’Arc’ des Kurdes” (“Narine Afrin, the Kurds’ ‘Joan of Arc’”), *Le Figaro*, 20.10.2014: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/10/19/01003-20141019ARTFIG00205-narine-afrine-lajeanne-d-arc-des-kurdes.php>

²⁶ “Arim Mirkan, ‘une soeur’ pour les militants kurdes” (Arim Mirkan, a sister for Kurdish combatants), *La Libération*, 6.10.2014: http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2014/10/06/arim-mirkan-une-soeur-pour-les-militants-kurdes_1116223

defies the IS”.²⁷ Persistence, refusal to surrender and willingness to sacrifice oneself were reoccurring characteristics that contributed to the heroism of these figures. Coinciding with increased media attention, in many cases, the siege of Kobane was also represented as the scene where female combatants were proving their worth as seriously-to-be-taken combatants and military leaders.

Besides referrals to heroism, YPJ combatants were at times characterized by adjectives that emphasized their femininity, including “gracious”, “beautiful” and “Amazonian-like” and by references to their physical features (hair²⁸, size, etc.) or other capabilities (such as singing to the troops). However, the visual material (when available) mostly represented them holding arms and taking part in military action in uniforms. The combination of masculine-like participation in military action at the front-line with softer, feminine-like attributes is a powerful way to construct a heroic image of women in war, who step outside their traditional roles when extreme circumstances require so. However, such “gendering” via media framing can contribute to reinforcing the image of women in war as something exceptional, also visible in how they are framed as “heroic”. While female combatants are portrayed as stepping outside their traditional roles, the fact of highlighting their gender and “femininity” at the same time leads to their participation becoming framed as something not only heroic, but as an atypical behaviour for women. Furthermore, the larger media framing of the on-going battle as one for survival against an extraordinary brutal adversary functions as a justifying motive for women to exceptionally step outside their traditional roles and to take up arms.

²⁷ ”Nalin, la chef de guerre qui défie les jihadistes”, 13.10.2014: <http://www.leparisien.fr/espace-premium/actu/nalin-la-chef-de-guerre-qui-defie-les-jihadistes-13-10-2014-4208437.php>

²⁸ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/linah-alsaafin/objectifying-female-fighters>

British coverage

From victims to “badass”²⁹ fighters

The dominant frames detected in British media were *exceptionalism*, *personal/emotional motivations*, *physical appearance* and finally the *struggle for equality and emancipation*. It was evident that especially the tabloid newspapers put emphasis on exceptionalism of women taking up arms and reproduced the traditional gender approach, which considers women more as victims rather than actors in an armed struggle. In most articles, one could notice a fascination with female combatants and the unusualness of their presence in the battlefield. They usually used visual material depicting women with combat clothes either during a training session or taking a break from war-related activities. Photos with women holding Kalashnikovs were extremely popular as they revealed an untraditional way of women participating in war. However, in order to feminize the stories and underline the absurdness of women becoming combatants, in some cases narratives about their hair-do or make-up were also included. For instance, in one article a family member of a deceased combatant mentioned that she used to wear jewellery and full make-up, and her bag was full of cosmetics and perfume. However, now she fills her bag with bombs and bullets. In another article, the reporter wrote about the female combatants’ pink t-shirts or handbags as if they form a controversy between their current role as a combatant and as a woman. In addition to their physical appearance, they were also given nicknames such as “tigress”, “lioness”, “battling beauties” or “pink-socketed warrior girls.”

²⁹ Foreign Policy published an article on the YPJ on September 12th 2014 calling them the “badass women fighting the Islamic State”: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/12/meet-the-badass-women-fighting-the-islamic-state/>

Coulter (2008: 60) found that many women become combatants either for survival or for ideological stances and for emancipation. As she explained, “by becoming a fighter, one also, to some extent, escapes falling a victim to the violence of others.” Alison (2003: 39-40) also argued that the main causes of recruitment of female combatants are suffering and oppression, sexual violence against women and women’s emancipation. One can observe that the British media repeatedly covered the main motivations of female combatants for joining the armed struggle. What was striking was that the victim frame was used in order to depict a background story for women’s motivations to take up arms. Sexual violence including rape, or torture, beheadings or experiences of being sex slaves to IS fighters and other violent occurrences were given as primary motivations of these women to form combating units. However, most articles used these depictions as something that is left behind by becoming fighters- and the current dominant discourse was the heroine frame, where the newspaper articles depicted combatants as stepping out of that zone of victimhood. For instance, one presented an YPJ combatant saying that they are always careful to leave a bullet in their weapons to use it on themselves in case the IS fighters would capture them. According to the narratives, women had no other choice but to join the combat units as they were fighting for their survival, escaping rape and torture. Revenge was also mentioned as one of the most fundamental motives for women to take up arms. Being former sex slaves and as a result of that gradually becoming fierce combatants constituted material for the articles. What were newsworthy were the victim stories, their armed struggle and their epic suicides/deaths at the end, without any reference to the big picture in the Middle East.

Brave women degrading the IS: emasculating the enemy while sexualizing the YPJ

The UK based media framing constantly underlined the adversary that the female combatants were fighting against: the jihadists. This surely has to do with the depiction of IS in international media in general. Combined with an orientalist approach, in the eyes of the Western audiences, they are portraying an unquestionable evilness that is universally accepted. Articles reported the horrible acts committed by this terrorist group and how vulnerable the situation of women was in this region due to genocidal and other brutal acts in the course of the war that also included sexual violence. News stories' tone was not neutral, as in cases on civil wars or rebel groups in other parts of the world. The female combatants contesting the IS were represented as an admirable act worth of attention.

These women are glorified by the international media also because they are contesting the traditional portrayal of Middle Eastern women who is not "emancipated" Therefore by taking up arms, they are creating a controversy both with gender and ethnic stereotypes and this is what makes them newsworthy. Their ideologies, the root causes of their emancipation/liberation struggle do not have a solid coverage in British media. Only an article at the *Morning Star* touches upon the ideological dynamics of the "revolution" and *the Independent* and *the Guardian* cover the Kurdish struggle in general in a few articles. As a matter of fact, only two news articles mentioned the female combatant units' aspirations towards the PKK, which is criminalized and placed on the list of terrorist groups in Europe and in the US. The Kurdish situation in the Middle East in general and independently from the war against IS was rarely mentioned. The participation of Kurdish women in combat units

prior to the IS were subjects that were often omitted.³⁰ Authors such as Dirik (2014) and Cicek (2015) have underlined this point and argued that while reporting about the YPJ, Western media tends to ignore the history behind these women's current resistance and their ideology based on contesting other states/groups in the region, thus leading to depoliticized depictions of their cause and portrayals of it as a clash of civilizations between the radical Islamists and secular women. The narratives, which Dirik (2014) calls "caricaturisations", usually feed into an orientalist perspective, which treats Middle Eastern women as exotic objects to be explored without delving into the heart of the matter, which has to do with their agency in an ideological struggle against the established unjust regimes in the region. Dirik (2014) suggests that "these cheapen a legitimate struggle by projecting bizarre orientalist fantasies on it – and oversimplifying the reasons motivating Kurdish women to join the fight." Media coverage on this matter also leaves out the larger topics such as future scenarios in the Middle East, especially in a dismantling Syria, and women's role in the midst of this political turmoil.

The exceptionalism frame was dominant in every single newspaper except the *Morning Star*. All newspapers repetitively remarked that female combatants were "terrifying" the IS fighters. They mentioned the urban legend that the IS fighters were even more terrified by being killed by female combatants as they believe it will stop them reaching heaven or that they will lose the 72 virgins promised for their martyrdom. Referring to this, the reporters were able to make their narratives more exciting with it being repeated over and over again. The Mirror stated that the "brave all-female fighting force" has become "the worst fear of the murderous fanatics of

³⁰ Kurdish women's armed struggle has gathered significant attention from academics before. For instance see Grojean, Olivier (2015). Kurde et combattante: une emancipation des femmes par la guerre ? *Moyent-Orient*, 26: 61-65.

ISIS” and called the YPJ fighters as the “angels of death.”³¹ By fighting the “savages”, “misogynists” or “blood-thirsty fanatics”, who degrade women; combatants were perceived to demasculinize the jihadists and humiliate them even more. The media narratives employed citations from female combatants in order to show that they are as tough as their male counterparts. For instance sentences like “We fight like men and die like men”³² were common. There were headlines such as “*ISIS are afraid of girls*” or “*What really scares ISIS? GIRLS.*”

Yarchi (2014) suggests that receiving positive media coverage can enable political actors gain public support, which in the end helps them enforce their political goals. The author claims that “when dealing with asymmetric conflict, the media becomes a weapon of modern warfare” and further argues that “the ability to transmit actors’ preferred frames to the foreign press is extremely significant, as information obtained through media is likely to dictate how governments and the public perceive events” (Yarchi 2014: 674). In the case of Kurdish female combatants, one could definitely argue that they received a great public visibility and had a positive reception by the UK media outlets. The Mirror reported that “the Kurdish women’s militias are also admired because they promote equality in a region that has long struggled with women’s rights.”³³ The Independent reported on the female Kurdish fighter, who destroyed a sign put up by IS telling women how to dress and mentioned that this is the lifestyle that the Kurdish women are fighting against.³⁴ Another article mentioned that this is a survivalist and egalitarian coalition between men and women at the fronts against the IS. It is important to remember Cicek’s (2015) article titled “Did the

³¹ “The angels of death: ISIS savages fear Kurd women fighters more than any other foe”, 19 August 2015. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/angels-death-isis-savages-fear-6275913>

³² Ibid.

³³ Op.cit. “The angels of death...”

³⁴ “Female Kurdish fighter destroys an ISIS sign telling women how to dress”, *The Independent*, 5 December 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/female-kurdish-fighter-destroys-an-isis-sign-a6761606.html>

women of the YPJ fall from the sky?” where she reminds us that the IS’s ideology is based on femicide and it is implemented in a systematic manner. The YPJ women were depicted as not solely fighting against jihadists but also as contesting the Islamist ideology. However, there is a whole history behind their armed and unarmed mobilization, which is extremely ideological and still considered as “terrorist” by many but the Western media has omitted referring to this dimension, as, perhaps, this is not the message they want to transmit to Western audiences.

Conclusion

The battle for Kobane became a turning-point in the Kurdish struggle against the IS, not the least in women’s participation and mobilisation. The YPJ has gathered significant media attention not solely from newspapers, but also from women’s magazines during the last couple of years. This article aimed to examine the media portrayals of these female combatants and to understand what aspects of their struggle became the focus of this attention. We looked at how the media in Britain and France framed the female combatants and found that they were portrayed with (gendered) agency. The media often used citations from combatants or visual material depicting them to enforce this impression. The constructions of masculinity and femininity in the media material were co-constituted and represented with the strong juxtaposition between the YPJ and the IS combatants. Female combatants were depicted in frontlines as doing the “men’s job” with the same “toughness” as their male counterparts. This not only emphasized their exceptionalism as *female* combatants, but also functioned to “degrade the IS fighters’ masculinity”.

However, there were also nuances in reporting between the two countries. The British media put emphasis on the evolution from a victim position to the becoming a “heroic” actor in the war, whereas in the French media, the struggle was represented in terms of equality, emancipation and unity, to some extent echoing the French motto for “liberty, equality, fraternity” (*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*). The motivations of Kurdish women to take part in an armed conflict were represented as both personal (losing family members, survival, revenge, escaping rape and sexual abuse) as well as ideological (women’s rights, the liberation struggle). News articles that focused on individual stories not only represented the interconnectedness of these personal and political goals (and experiences), but also employed close-up stories of individual combatants to give the conflict a human face. This was particularly the case of the French media, where the construction of the modern-day Joan of Arc allowed representing the YPJ combatants with familiar references.

Although the Kurdish political activism (particularly in relation to the PKK) is criminalized in both countries, the on-going conflict was to some extent depoliticized in news reporting. The terminology used to refer to Kurdish female combatants included terms such as “guerrillas” or “rebels”. In no occasion was the YPJ combatants referred to as “terrorists”, although a few number of news stories raised the issue of PYD’s alleged connections with the PKK and of the latter’s presence on the list of terrorist organisations. The frames that the media used to narrate Kurdish female fighters made their stories palatable for the French and British audiences by omitting certain aspects that might come across as controversial. In both materials, the struggle of YPJ combatants can be said to entail a certain level of glorification (and in the British case combined with the sexualisation of the combatants). This is not surprising as such, since the YPJ combatants were portrayed as fighting against the

universally accepted “evil”, the Islamic state. Their struggle became all the more newsworthy for the Western media because these women were contesting Orientalist stereotypes on women in Middle East, particularly those based on gender, religion and ethnicity.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Academy of Finland, University of Turku and the Center for Peace, Trust and Social Relations for their funding that enabled the finalization of this study.

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