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Gender in the Representations of an Armed Conflict

*Female Kurdish Combatants in French and British Media**

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Abstract

The Syrian civil war has been, without doubt, the war most widely covered by international media in this millennium. Having engaged in an armed combat against the Islamic State (IS), Kurdish military troops, especially the female battalion, have received considerable international media attention. This study examines the gender dimension of national media representations of female Kurdish 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 and 2015, and is analyzed with frame analysis. The results show that the juxtaposition of female combatants with IS fighters allows the depiction of 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 ongoing conflict is represented in the British and French media through the construction of sexualized and modern-day heroine figures that are largely glorified.

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Kurdish – media – gender – framing – female combatant – Islamic state

Introduction

The Syrian civil war has been, without doubt, the war most widely covered by the international media in this millennium. While the gruesome acts committed by the 'Islamic state' (IS/ISIS) attract considerable media coverage, there has been a simultaneously sharp increase in interest in the Kurdish combatants[1] and their armed battle. The representation of the battle between these oppositional forces, often portrayed as one between civilization and barbarism, involves one particularly interesting dimension—that of gender. Since 2013, Kurdish military troops, namely the People's Protections Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), have engaged in armed battle against IS on the outskirts of the de facto autonomous region of Rojava in northern Syria (see Jongerden and Akkaya 2013). The Kurdish military unit includes a female battalion called the Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ) that has also taken part in the armed conflict. Not surprisingly, the YPJ has enjoyed remarkable media visibility, particularly since the siege of Kobane. Numerous international media outlets, including the BBC, NBC News and CNN,[2] as well as social media platforms have provided a close-up perspective of 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 women's magazine, *Marie Claire* in September 2014 at the outset of Kobane siege (Griffin 2014). It featured a series of photographs of female Kurdish combatants posing in their military uniforms with 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' (Trieb 2014). This time photographs portrayed female combatants in military-related action, loading their weapons, burying fallen combatants

1 We 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 The Women of the Year, together, for instance, with the Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai and the actress Emma Watson (*CNN* 2014).

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. Over the last two years 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. Several have explicitly highlighted the participation of female combatants in the armed conflict and accompanied them with visual illustrations or with interviews with combatants.

This study examines the media representations of female Kurdish 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, analyzed with a frame analysis, includes news articles published in French and British journals that deal with female Kurdish combatants in Syria. This comparative study contributes to the existing research literature on the media representations of women in war through an empirical study on the gendered representations of female Kurdish combatants in two national media. We first provide contextualization of the ongoing armed conflict in northern Syria, currently controlled by the YPG and YPJ, and of the largely mediatized siege of Kobane. This is followed by a theoretical and methodological discussion, then a presentation of 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 Syrian government forces in 2012, the PYD filled the power vacuum and declared three Kurdish cantons (Efrin, Ciziri and Kobani) located in the region of Rojava, autonomous. The People's Protection Units have operated as the security forces of Rojava since 2012. The YPG is affiliated with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK), although this relationship is often contested since the latter is on the list of terrorist organizations of the European Union and United States (BBC 2016). For instance, after attacks on Kobane following the call by the jailed Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, the YPG received combatants from the ranks of the PKK, in spite of the attempts of Turkish border control authorities to block their access to northern Syria (*Rudaw* 2014).

There is a historical background for female combatants in Kurdish forces (van Bruinessen 2001), namely in the ranks of the PKK; they have 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 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). In 1995 the PKK created military units for women and Öcalan's doctrine of a 'free woman' emphasized the role women play in the Kurdish liberation movement, in various sectors of society, including policymaking and the military.[3]

Currently, YPG troops include an estimated 30,000 to 35,000 combatants, of whom approximately 20 to 40 percent belong to the female battalion, the YPJ.[4] The YPG and YPJ combatants are trained according to the ideological tenets of Öcalan's writings, including his doctrine of the 'free woman' in the military academy located in Qamishli. In a presentation given in January 2016, the YPJ commander Nessrin Abdullah highlighted not only the international dimension of YPJ's struggle, but she also emphasized that Kurdish women were engaged in two simultaneous battles. The first is the national struggle for the liberation of the Kurdish people, and the second is a struggle for women's rights, which they engage in by raising awareness of the significance of women's emancipation and self-determination.[5] The equal representation of men and women is also reflected in the composition of Rojava's central administrative bodies—it is one of their central organizing principles. This also applies to the military organization.

The Kobane Momentum

The cruelties committed by IS in the region (Roth 2015), which have been extensively mediatized by leading news outlets in Europe and North America, and the siege of Kobane threw the Kurdish combatants in northern Syria into the international spotlight.[6] Located on the Turkish-Syrian border in northern Syria, IS laid siege to the city in September 2014; it was subsequently liberated

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

4 See Globalsecurity.org n.d. These numbers can be compared to the few hundred female combatants in the ranks of the Kurdish peshmerga troops in Iraqi Kurdistan, out of approximately 200,000 combatants (estimates by Grojean 2015).

5 These remarks are based on a speech by Nessrin Abdullah (January 2016, Paris).

6 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).

by the Kurdish Protection Units in the spring of 2015. Previously unknown, during its siege the city was featured almost daily in the headlines of prominent newspapers. Seminars on the situation of the Kurds were organized at the European Parliament, and TV channels allocated a significant amount of time to interviewing experts and discussing Kobane. The BBC even released a news story, titled 'The Kurdish Female Fighters Bringing the Fight to IS' (Gatehouse 2014), accompanied by a short video documentary that was viewed nearly 1.3 million times on YouTube (*BBC News*/YouTube 2014).

Since one of the main groups fighting IS in Kobane was the PKK, political powers (namely the United States) and the media initially avoided associating the latter with the YPG. Since the 1990s, the PKK has been criminalized in Europe and the United States; this made a sudden shift in the discourse quite improbable. With the increased media visibility, the questions of the criminalization of certain Kurdish movements in Europe arose. Though 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 IS attacks in the region, particularly after the massive breakdown of the Iraqi army and the flight of its soldiers left a sizeable arsenal of weaponry in the hands of the advancing IS. Whereas pro-Kurdish media outlets have long emphasized female combatants of the PKK, more recently they have been the focus of close-up and mostly positive attention by the international media.

The Kurdish actors have taken advantage of online forums and channels to increase the visibility of their cause. The news story of the 'the angel of Kobane', Rehana, referred to as the 'poster girl' of YPJ, spread widely across social media sites, and was even picked up by mainstream media outlets (Varghese 2015), before the BBC published a news story setting the record straight (*BBC News* 2014). Rehana was constructed as the heroic incarnation of a female combatant. She allegedly took part in the battle against IS by killing one hundred combatants. She was supposedly beheaded by the organization, but then made an appearance in Kobane. On the other hand, more recently Western media have focused on the case of "Angelina Jolie of Kurdistan", a 19-year old fallen combatant Asia Ramazan Antar, whose media portrayals were denounced as sexists by other combatants (*BBC News* 2016b). Overall, it can be said 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.

Women and Their Media Representation in Armed Conflicts

Traditional views presume that the participation in armed conflicts and warfare remains largely the responsibility of men. Historically the military and war have been and continue to be spheres strongly associated with masculinity. Women's role in warfare is often perceived as being more passive; women are caregivers to family members, mourners of fallen combatants and/or the potential victims of sexual violence (de Pauw 1998; Utas 2005; Coulter 2008; Coulter et al. 2008; Cohen 2013). Female combatants are more often framed as victims, as targets of abduction, as subjects of physical or sexual abuse and forced labor, rather than as combatants with agency (Utas 2005). In analyses of the participation of women in war, the victim frame has long dominated over other alternative frames (Coulter 2008: 55).

However, as Coulter observes, 'the presence and participation of women in war is neither unusual nor new' (Coulter 2008: 56). 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 case studies 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 on the role of women as combatants or perpetrators of violence have long been overlooked by academics and practitioners. This has had significant 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; ultimately, this has rendered them more or less invisible (Coulter et al. 2008).

Feminist studies focus on the construction of masculinities and femininities in the context of armed conflicts by attempting to deconstruct women's role as victims or alternatively as perpetrators of violence (Goldstein 2001; Alison 2009; Kronsell and 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 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 by others as 'unusual', 'unnatural', 'deviant' or 'incomprehensible' (Coulter 2008: 62; Coulter et al. 2008: 8). This echoes Braden's (1996) observation that women tend to become newsworthy when they act in an unladylike manner. We agree

with Zarkov, 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' (Zarkov 2006: 227).

Newspapers frame stories that 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.[7] The frames can be employed to 'justify' or to 'explain' behavior that is deemed as out-of-character for women. For instance, Nacos (2005: 463) established six dominant frames that were employed in media portrayals concerning female terrorists: 1) physical appearance, 2) family connection, 3) terrorist for 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 in conflict with their feminine identity.

Highlighting women combatants' 'fashionable attire', feminine traits such as hair styles, make-up and clothes, can lead to the reproduction and reinforcement of the dominant narratives of traditional gender roles by employing frames that fetishize women's participation in armed conflict. One such case was that of Colonel Black Diamond, the head of the women's auxiliary corps in Liberia who became a controversial figure in western media in 2003 (Carroll 2003). A *BBC* article depicted Black Diamond and her fellow combatants as 'sexy ghetto chicks', wearing tube tops and fingernail polish, thus reflecting Coulter's observation that 'there is decidedly a sexualized language in Western media descriptions of West African female fighters' (Coulter 2008: 64). According to Utas, the media represented Black Diamond and her co-combatants in a way that challenged the dominant gendered discourse of women as victims of war. However, he observes that many narratives also reinforce a dominant media frame that established Liberia 'as a case of difference—of the "African Other"' (Utas 2005: 404). Media studies on women as legitimate political actors also show that the media not only report more on women's physical appearance, while male politicians receive more issue-oriented coverage,

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

but also that women's participation in politics is emphasized as being singular (Braden 1996; Nacos 2005; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen 2012;).

Media Framing of Female Kurdish Combatants

Methodology and the Material

The material for this study consists of online news articles from selected national presses in France and the United Kingdom[8] (see table 1). The national data include articles that deal with female Kurdish combatants in northern Syria,[9] published in right and left-leaning newspapers between January 2014 and December 2015.

The national data were individually analyzed by frame analysis (Devereux 2007).[10] 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 frames women combatants' participation as ideological; they are striving for equality, emancipation and national liberation, whereas the second frame was employed to highlight women's personal reasons for engaging in the battle (loss of family members, for instance). The third frame involves references to women's physical appearances and their feminine features, whereas the fourth depicts women combatants as extraordinary and tougher-than-men.

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

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8 Britain and France were selected as the media for case studies because of their coverage of YPJ-related stories. Both countries were involved in supplying military aid to the Kurdish Regional Government for its war with the IS and both countries list the PKK as a terrorist organization. Other case studies were not included in this paper due to language constraints.

9 Search words, such as 'YPJ', 'Kurdish', 'women' and 'female combatant' were employed either individually or in combination.

10 Journal specific particularities were not analyzed.

TABLE 1 *Analysed newspapers, their circulation and political stance*

Country	Newspaper	Number of articles	Circulation	Political stance
France (52)	Le Figaro	19	311737	Centre-right
	Le Monde	10	267897	Centre-left
	L'Humanité	10	36931	Communist
	Libération	8	88401	Left
	Le Parisien	3	215006	Neutral
	L'Express	2	423309	Right
UK (56)	The Daily Mail	13	1626322	Right
	The Guardian	11	174941	Centre-left
	The Independent	7	58751	Liberal
	The Daily Star	6	424453	Populist
	The Daily Mirror	6	897786	Labour
	The Daily Telegraph	5	479290	Center-right conservative
	The Sun	5	1858067	Conservative
	The Financial Times	2	213423	
	The Morning Star	1	appr. 10000	Left

Sources for circulation. France (Association pour le Contrôle de la Diffusion des Media 2015); the United Kingdom (Audit Bureau of Circulation 2015); (*Press Gazette* 2015).

French Coverage

Equality, Emancipation and ... Exceptionalism

All news articles framed female Kurdish combatants in opposition to their adversary, IS. This was particularly noteworthy in the reporting on Kobane, where news stories highlighted it as the scene of a collision between two competing worldviews. The YPJ combatants' battle against IS was clearly associated with ideological motivations. The representation of the Kobane siege contained a Disney-like narrative structure, with the dark forces of IS threatening the remnants of civilization and humanistic values, which were represented by Kurdish women taking arms to defend them. The latter were spoken of in terms of pluralistic values, such as religious and ethnic tolerance, but also in terms of gender equality. Hence the juxtaposition of the female battalion and

IS allowed the media to frame the military battle as an ideological one. The reasons for women's involvement in war are often sought in personal motivations, for love or family, or for 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.[11] 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 equality/emancipation/liberation* frame, the Kurdish combatants' unity was highlighted: this unity extended from their united front all the way to their equality at death (being buried side by side). This frame was re-enforced 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, one that simultaneously reinforced the image of unity.

Women's involvement in political violence, be it in national armies, liberation movements or in terrorist organizations, is still largely viewed as exceptional (Alison 2009). Similarly, women's roles in the military and political positions in Rojava[12] were framed with undertones of amazement and admiration. Such news stories on women frequently referred to their extraordinary determination, resistance and relentlessness against enemy that outnumbers them and is known for its brutality. References to violence, either to its presence or to its potential threat, were frequent. The imminence of violence was most visible in news stories on the armed battle against IS and in references to its combatants' violent actions. The threat or the possibility of violence was to some extent gendered: combatants interviewed for the news stories mentioned the threat of sexual violence if captured by the IS (*LeMonde* 2014). This meant a refusal to surrender alive, as illustrated in the often referenced case of Arin Mirkan, who committed a suicide bombing against IS to avoid being captured alive. Women combatants' willingness to sacrifice themselves meant fighting till death, but also avoiding falling victim to (sexual) violence in case they

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

12 Political leaders were presented in the news stories, as examples of the larger ideological frame in which the Rojava experiment was embedded. Such stories showcase the visit of the co-chair of PYD, Asya Abdullah, with president Hollande in February 2015.

were captured by IS. As Yuval-Davis suggests, nations are gendered constructions, with women holding particular roles within nations as 'symbolic border guards and as embodiments of the collectivity' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 23). 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 ongoing battle. In the context of an armed conflict, violence (either its threat or actual experience) has a strong symbolic (and gendered) dimension.

We argue that the representation of female Kurdish 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 the female is constructed (Ette 2008; 2013). Adding the gender designator (female) when referring to combatants in news story titles is one example of this (*Le Figaro* 2014a; Connan 2015). Furthermore, in media representations the constructions of femininity and masculinity are often co-constitutive. In the French media, this was visible in the juxtaposition of the YPJ combatants (and their femininity) with the IS combatants (and their masculinity). The IS combatants' masculinity was undermined and disrupted by acts of courage by female combatants 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 the willingness of female combatants to sacrifice themselves to avoid becoming victims.

However, the presentation of female combatants as particularly exceptional can be interpreted to resonate with certain expectations toward 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 female Kurdish 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 was largely communicated through the construction of the female Kurdish combatant as an archetypal, modern-day Joan of Arc.

The Kurdish Joans of Arc[13]

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 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' (Ette 2008: 197). This was, to some extent, visible in the French media. The military behavior displayed by female Kurdish 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 the roles that female Kurdish combatants were assigned to in the French media. Indeed, it can be said that the French media framed the military participation of female Kurdish 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 (*Le Figaro* 2014b). Arin Mirkan was referred to as a symbol of heroism and a 'sister' for Kurdish militants (Duran 2014), whereas the YPJ commander, Nalin Afrin was represented as 'the war chief, who defies the IS' (*Le Parisien* 2014). Persistence, refusal to surrender and willingness to sacrifice oneself were reoccurring characteristics that contributed to the heroism of these figures. Coinciding as it did with increased media attention, in many cases the siege of Kobane was also represented as the scene where female combatants proved their worth as combatants and military leaders to be taken seriously.

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 (hair, size, etc.) (Alsaafin 2014) or other capabilities (such as singing to the troops). However, the visual material (when available) mostly represented them in uniforms with weapons taking part in military action. The combination of masculine-like participation in military action at the frontline 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 it. However, such 'gendering' via media framing can reinforce the image of

13 Joan of Arc was a fifteenth-century heroic French combatant, who was canonized as a saint (after her execution). She became a popular and legendary woman figure and is invested with values such as bravery.

women in war as something exceptional; this is also visible in how they are framed as 'heroic'. While female combatants are portrayed as stepping outside their traditional roles, the fact that their gender and 'femininity' are highlighted at the same time leads the audience to see their participation as something not only heroic, but as atypical behavior for women. Furthermore, the media framing of the ongoing battle as an ideological one for survival and "humanity" operates as a larger frame to justify the exceptionality of women's participation in combat.

British Coverage

From Victims to Glorified Combatants

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 the tabloid newspapers put ever more emphasis on the exceptionalism of women taking up arms and reproduced the traditional gender approach that considers women more as victims rather than actors in an armed struggle. In most articles, one could see a fascination with female combatants and the uniqueness of their presence on the battlefield. They usually used visual material, depicting women in combat clothes either during a training session or taking breaks from war-related activities. Photos with women holding Kalashnikovs were extremely popular as they revealed women's participation in war as non-traditional. However, in order to feminize the stories and emphasize the absurdity of women becoming combatants, in some cases narratives about their hairstyles or make-up were also included. For instance, in one article a family member of a deceased combatant mentioned that she used to wear jewelry 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 to present a conflict between their current role as a combatant and as a woman. In addition to their physical appearances, they were also given nicknames such as 'tigress', 'lioness', 'battling beauties' or 'pink-socked warrior girls.'

Coulter found that many women became combatants either to survive or for ideological reasons or in order to emancipate themselves. She explains, 'by becoming a fighter, one also, to some extent, escapes falling a victim to the violence of others' (Coulter 2008: 60). Alison (2003: 39–40) also argues that the main factors in the recruitment of female combatants are the desire to escape suffering and oppression, sexual violence against women and the

desire for women's emancipation. The British media repeatedly covered the main motivations of female combatants for joining the armed struggle. It was striking 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 the primary motivations that drove these women to join combat units. However, most articles presented these depictions as something the women left behind when they became fighters—and the current dominant discourse was the heroine frame, in which the newspaper articles depicted combatants as stepping out of that zone of victimhood. For instance, one presented an YPJ combatant as saying that she is always careful to leave one bullet in her weapon to use it on herself if she is captured by IS fighters. According to the narratives, women had no choice but to join the combat units because 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. Material for the articles was constituted around women as former sex slaves who became fierce combatants. The victim stories were newsworthy, as was their armed struggle and their epic suicides/deaths, without reference to the larger context of 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 relates to the depiction of IS in international media in general. Combined with an Orientalist approach, in the eyes of western audiences, they are portraying an unquestionable evil that is universally accepted. Articles reported the horrible acts committed by IS and the vulnerable situation of women in this region as a result of the genocidal and brutal acts (including sexual violence) that have taken place in the course of the war. The tone of news stories was not neutral, as in cases of civil wars or rebel groups in other parts of the world. The female combatants fighting the IS were represented as admirable people worthy of attention.

These women are also 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. Their ideologies, the main motivations for their emancipation/liberation struggle did not receive solid coverage in British media. Only an article in the *Morning Star* touched upon the ideological dynamics of the 'revolution' and the *Independent* and

the *Guardian* covered the Kurdish struggle more generally in a few articles. As a matter of fact, only two news articles mentioned the female combatant units' aspirations in the PKK, which is criminalized and listed as a terrorist organization in Europe and in the United States. The Kurdish situation in the Middle East in general and independently of the war against IS was rarely mentioned. The participation of Kurdish women in combat units prior to IS were subjects that were often omitted.[14] Authors such as Dirik (2014) and Cicek (2015) have emphasized this point and argued that while reporting about the YPJ, western media tend to ignore the history behind these women's current resistance and their ideology that is based on contesting other states/groups in the region; this leads to a depoliticized depiction of their cause and a portrayal of it as a clash of civilizations between radical Islamists and secular women. The narratives, which Dirik (2014) calls 'caricaturizations', usually feed into an Orientalist perspective that treats Middle Eastern women as exotic objects to be explored without delving into the heart of the matter, which is their agency in an ideological struggle against the unjust but well-established regimes in the region. Dirik suggests that 'these [portrayals] cheapen a legitimate struggle by projecting bizarre orientalist fantasies on it—and oversimplifying the reasons motivating Kurdish women to join the fight' (Dirik 2014). Media coverage on this matter also leaves out the larger topics, such as future scenarios in the Middle East, especially in the face of a disintegrating Syria, and women's role in the midst of this political turmoil.

The exceptionalism frame was dominant in every newspaper except the *Morning Star*. All the newspapers repeatedly remarked that female combatants were 'terrifying' the IS fighters. They mentioned the urban legend that IS fighters were even 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 for their martyrdom. Referring to this, the reporters made their narratives more exciting by repeating it over and over again. The *Mirror* stated that the 'brave all-female fighting force' has become 'the worst fear of the murderous fanatics of ISIS' and called the YPJ fighters the 'angels of death' (Webb 2015). By fighting the 'savages', 'misogynists' or 'blood-thirsty fanatics', who degrade women; female combatants were perceived to have the power to emasculate the jihadists and humiliate them even more. The media narratives employed citations from female combatants to show that they are as tough as their male counterparts. Sentences like 'We fight like men and die like men'

14 Kurdish women's armed struggle has gathered some attention from academics. For instance, see Grojean (2015).

(Webb 2015) were common, as were the headlines such as 'ISIS are afraid of girls' or 'What really scares ISIS? GIRLS'.

Yarchi (2014) suggests that receiving positive media coverage gains public support for political actors, which helps them bring about 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 female Kurdish combatants, one could certainly argue that they received extensive public visibility and were positively received by 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' (Webb 2015). The *Independent* reported on a female Kurdish fighter who destroyed a sign put up by IS telling women how to dress and stated that this is the lifestyle that the Kurdish women are fighting against (Henderson 2015). Another article noted that this is a survivalist and egalitarian coalition between men and women at the front against the IS. It is important to remember Cicek's (2015) article titled 'Did the women of the YPJ fall from the sky?' where she reminds us that the IS's ideology is based on femicide that is implemented in a systematic manner. The YPJ women were depicted as not fighting solely against jihadists but also as contesting the Islamist ideology. The history behind the Kurdish mobilization, both armed and unarmed, is ideological; they are still considered 'terrorists' by many, though the western media has not referred to this dimension because 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 mobilization. Over the last couple of years the YPJ has gathered significant media attention not only from newspapers, but also from women's magazines. This article aimed to examine the media portrayals of these female combatants and to understand what aspects of their struggle were 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 a strong juxtaposition between the YPJ

and the IS combatants. Female combatants were depicted in the 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 emphasized their evolution from victims to that of 'heroic' actors 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 (loss of family members, survival, revenge, escape from 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, personal stories of individual combatants, in order 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 them to represent the YPJ combatants with familiar references.

Although Kurdish political activism (particularly in relation to the PKK) is criminalized in both Great Britain and France, the ongoing conflict was, to some extent, depoliticized in news reporting. The terminology used to refer to female Kurdish combatants included terms such as 'guerrillas' or 'rebels'. On no occasion were the YPJ combatants referred to as 'terrorists', although a few news stories raised the issue of PYD's alleged connection to the PKK and the latter's presence on the EU list of terrorist organizations. The frames that the media used to narrate female Kurdish fighters made their stories palatable for French and British audiences by omitting certain aspects that might come across as controversial. In both materials, the struggle of YPJ combatants could be said to entail a certain level of glorification (in the British case this was combined with the sexualization of the combatants). This is not surprising, since YPJ combatants were portrayed as fighting against the commonly accepted 'evil' Islamic state. 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.

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