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# **VICTIMS, EXOTIC WARRIORS OR HEROINES?**

Framing the motivations of Kurdish female fighters in the war against Islamic State

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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on investigating how the three British newspapers, The Guardian, The Telegraph and the BBC News, frame the motivations of the Kurdish female fighters joining armed forces in the war against Islamic State. It also explores, what are the reasons behind these portrayals and in what ways Kurdish female fighters challenge the existing discourse of Middle Eastern women.

In order to accomplish this, a framing analysis with a qualitative content analysis approach was employed to explore the thematic and visual units in the collected 34 articles. Later, the data was analysed using postcolonial theories such as orientalism and standpoint theory, as well as mediatisation, which plays an important role in creating the frames and the stereotypes which influence how Middle Eastern or Muslim women are portrayed and perceived.

This research shows that, representation of Kurdish female fighters is still very much homogenised and simplified in the media. The analysis reveals that although the Kurdish female fighters are presented as brave and logical fighters, they are constantly framed through their physical appearances and family connections, thus taking the focus away from the fighters' ideological and political motivations.

**Keywords:** *Kurdish female fighters, YPG, YPJ, PKK, Peshmerga, Media, Motivation, Framing, Orientalism, Women, Middle East, Political violence, Islamic State*

*Thank you to everyone who guided and supported me through this unforgettable journey.*

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## **List of Abbreviations and Kurdish forces**

**ISIS / IS** - Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham / Islamic State

### **IRAQ**

**KRG** Hikûmetî Herêmî Kurdistan - Kurdish Regional Government

**KDP** Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê - Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq

**PESHMERGA** Armed forces of KRG

### **SYRIA**

**ROJAVA** Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, de facto Autonomous Region

**ASAYISH** Police force of Rojava

**SDF** Syrian Democratic Forces, U.S.-backed Arab-Kurdish coalition

**PYD** Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat - Democratic Union Party, Kurdish political party in Syria

**YPG** Yekîneyên Parastina Gel - People's Protection Units, military arm of the PYD

**YPJ** Yekîneyên Parastina Jin - Women's Protection Units, military arm of to the PYD

### **TURKEY**

**PKK** Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê - Kurdistan Workers' Party, listed as a terrorist organisation by several countries

## 1.0 Introduction

In August 2014, The Islamic State (IS) attacked Kurdish Yazidi minority villages in the Sinjar region of Iraq and drove the locals into the mountains. IS captured and enslaved thousands of Yazidi women and slaughtered large numbers of civilians. The rescue operation of the captured and the trapped Yazidis from Mountain Sinjar (The Guardian, 2015) and later in the same year, the siege and liberation of strategic city of Kobane on the Syrian-Turkish border by the Kurdish forces, after 4 months of bloody war against IS (Aljazeera, 2014; Daily mail, 2015) brought international reactions and significant media coverage to the Kurdish female fighters, especially to the women of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). About 35% of YPG's forces are women and it has an all-women unit, Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), which is calculated to have approximately 20 000 fighters along with 7,500 uniformed fighters (Ghitis, 2014). Women fighting side by side with the men, was seen as an extraordinary phenomenon in the patriarchal societies of Middle East. These two incidents kicked off the media fascination of the Kurdish female fighters.

According to Flyvbjerg (2011) valuable phronetic knowledge is built on the power of the context based case study which produces a deep understanding on a concrete example, which is possible to generalise into practical knowledge. For examples, articles such as “Meet the Badass women fighting the Islamic state” by American news publication Foreign Policy from 2014 and “Poster girl killed fighting ISIS: Beautiful female fighter dubbed the Angelina Jolie of Kurdistan dies while battling ISIS in Syria” by British tabloid paper, The Sun, from 2016 to exemplify the issue. There is a large scale of examples of the objectification in media coverage of the Kurdish female fighters. These two articles are just to demonstrate as good examples of media fascination and the narrative of the heroines and the villains. The articles are clearly on the “side” of the Kurdish female fighters which can be seen through their choice of words and visual content. The articles highlight the biased Western media representation. They also point out that women engaging in the Kurdish armed movement started off recently in response to Islamic State’s acts, although it’s an incorrect information.

There are evidence of Kurdish female fighters joining battles already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century within the Ottoman Empire (Dirik, 2014). Which, again, raises questions about vested interests and grouping people to “us” and the “others”, where Kurds are seen as allies of the West and IS as the blood thirsty savages. These examples also underline how the Western mainstream media

sensationalises and objectifies the Kurdish female fighters, focusing too much on the fighters' physical appearance rather than their motives, ideologies and political aims.

At the same time, some critics have been brought up towards the Kurdish forces, for potentially using the female fighters for PR purposes to influence the public opinion of the Westerners, to look good in their eyes. Once again, this assumption is taking the agency from the female fighters itself. These previously mentioned two articles demonstrate how the Western media started romanticizing the Kurdish female fighters for their fight against IS, their common enemy, although before the IS crisis, some of these Kurdish forces (e.g. PKK) were listed as a terrorist group. As Dilar Dirik (2014) states, these faux representations ignore the reality of the guerrilla women's fight and their ideologies but also the women have become objects rather than subjects. Eventually, by looking into the case study of the Kurdish female fighters, we might be 'searching for the Great within the Small' as Foucault would say (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 134).

## **1.2 Aims and objectives**

The aim of this thesis is to investigate and analyse how three British mainstream media, *The BBC*, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, are portraying the motivations of the Kurdish female fighters in the war against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, and what are the reasons behind these portrayals. In order to accomplish this, a framing analysis with a qualitative content analysis approach will be employed to examine the thematic and visual units in the collected data. Later, the data will be analysed using postcolonial theories such as orientalism and standpoint theory, as well as mediatization, which effects creation of the frames and the stereotypes and influences how, for instance, Middle Eastern or Muslim women are portrayed and perceived.

According to terrorism scholar Birgitte Nacos (2005) society resort to gender stereotypes when they attempt to understand women who are acting in traditionally masculine roles, which in this case is women joining armed groups to fight. Women taking part in violence acts are seen traditionally as something extraordinary (ibid). The western mainstream media are fascinated by women engaging in different military or terrorist organisations, especially in the Middle East. Various scholars have emphasized that there are differences between how male and female fighters are portrayed or described in the media (Nacos, 2005; Thickner, 1992). Especially, if the women are from the Middle East or other patriarchal societies, media pays a great interest

but also fell into stereotyping and simplifying women's motives. In various cases, Middle Eastern women are lumped into one monolithic group, and framed as oppressed and poor victims that need to be saved (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2001; Mohanty, 1986). Many scholars have highlighted the importance of the context and contextualisation while reporting on the Middle Eastern women stating that religion is not the only actor affecting women's life but the social-cultural-economic factors in the society should be taken into consideration as well (ibid; Dirik, 2014; Moghadam, 2003).

The media coverage of female fighters plays an important role in how the image of them is constructed. Many researches have addressed that the media is a powerful discursive actor in forming and affecting public opinion on political discourses (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010; van Dijk, 1988). Due to biased representation of the Middle Eastern women in the Western mainstream media, (Dirik, 2014; Lughod, 2002) the perception of them is very homogenised and simplified. Taking this into consideration, it is important to underline that this research does not claim that Kurdish women stand in as a representative for all the Middle Eastern women. The portrayal and agency of women varies widely also within the Middle East. To gain a better understanding on how and why the female fighters are portrayed, romanticized and politicized differently, as well as the construction of their agency, it is important to investigate further the motivation of the women joining Kurdish forces.

Thus, the aim of this research is to provide an understanding how are the Kurdish female fighters' motivation to become a fighter represented within the British mainstream media in the war against IS through the Western hegemonic media discourses on female fighters. Also, what are the political, cultural and economic reasons behind these portrayals, and in what ways Kurdish female fighters challenge the existing discourse of Middle Eastern women. This paper also discusses briefly what the discourse surrounding Kurdish female fighters reveals about how Middle Eastern women are viewed and discussed in the media. Thus, the research questions are the following:

- 1) How are the motivations of the Kurdish female fighters portrayed in the British newspapers *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *The BBC online news* in the war against Islamic State?
- 2) What are the reasons behind these portrayals?



## 2.0 Theoretical framework and literature review

This chapter will present the theoretical foundation for this thesis. It will also present shortly the previous scholarship and research on how the Middle Eastern women and women committing acts of political violence are portrayed. Due to the subject, the theory part of the study will focus on postcolonial discourse theories, mediatization and framing.

Mediatization concept (Couldry and Hepp, 2016) is particularly important for this case study, because it can provide answers on, how reality is constructed by media and how audience experience reality through the media. In other words, media has an impact on political discourses and the society in which the discourses appear. If it wasn't for the media, the existence of the Kurdish female fighters might have not reach or occur to the public so widely. Also, through that we can understand how the "heroic" images of the Kurdish fighters are shaped by the Western media, and how the people perceive these constructed images. In addition, Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory (1993) which states that media spreads certain morals and views which conveys specific ways of defining individuals or groups supports this claim. According to him, the personal ideals and views of the receiver affect how the encoded meanings of a message are decoded, and therefore there can be misrepresentation or different understandings (ibid: 91).

Taking the mediatization into account, it is important to go deeper into these women's identity and political aims to break the stereotypes. The main perspective used for the study analysis will be *Orientalism* by Edward Said, and Lila Abu-Lughod's approach on the Western narratives on Muslim and Middle Eastern women. This critical approach of the Orient can describe the dominant Western prejudiced stereotypes of Eastern part of the world, which are result of Western imperialism in the 18-19th centuries (Said, 1997). This perspective reveals the stereotypes of women in Muslim countries and the representation of "uncivilised" Muslim societies. Orientalism can help us to understand the Western media images of glorification of Kurdish female fighters and victimisation of IS women as well as analysing the power relation between the West and the East.

Furthermore, Sandra Harding's standpoint theory (2008) will give an insight into specific perspectives of oppressed or marginalised population (in this case Kurds) which can help to create less biased statements, but to get an even deeper understanding on the women in Middle East or so called third world countries, also Chandra Mohanty's (1986) critical approach on

feminism will be employed. Mohanty argues that Western Feminism are falling into the same patterns they are fighting against; mainstream Western feminists have created a monolith of women in the third world countries ignoring intersectionality which underlines the complex and interlinked forms of oppression which the women from the non-average white Western middle-class face (Lutz, Herrera Vivar and Supik, 2011). This goes hand in hand with the other theories which will be applied to the case study. As more and more visuals are included in the newspapers, it is crucial to also briefly look into the visual presentations of Kurdish fighters in the media, to see if the images in the contents give a certain perception to the text, and whether the contents and visuals are related to each other (Altheide, 1996:13), since images have a great impact in reflecting a message. David Altheide (1996) states that “Because visuals contribute to the meaning and “look” of information and content, it is important to have a strategy for analysing photos and other visuals qualitatively.” Altheide highlights the importance of getting familiar with the context and understanding the data, therefore it is important to go back to data throughout the process and constantly reflect on it in order to gain a deeper understanding on the content and the relations between different units. Therefore, his qualitative content analysis approach will be used to analyse the visuals. As it is noted, theory triangulation is a must to achieve in-depth analysis of the case study.

## **2.1 Women and act of political violence**

Women taking part in political violence acts are seen traditionally as something rare and extraordinary, although this is nothing new and has existed throughout the history (Nacos, 2005; Del Re, 2015). There are evidence of Kurdish female fighters joining armed battles already in the 19th century within the Ottoman Empire and later within the Kurdish Political parties in Iraq and Iran (Dirik, 2014; van Bruinessen, 2001). Also women in other parts of Middle East such as in Palestine, have been taking part in violent political acts, for instance, one of the most famous Palestinian woman engaged in terrorism Leila Khaled, who became a poster child for Palestinian militancy in the 1970s, after she engaged in several hijackings against Israeli targets for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Nacos, 2005; The Guardian, 2001; Bloom, 2017).

When it comes to the word “war” and the image of it, it generally connotes masculinity, man and dominance, a place where women don’t belong to unless they are in the role of the victims

or mourners. Megan MacKenzie (2009) states that even in the studies of female fighters, scholars tend to assume that women don't get involved in act of violence or they are talked about generally in assisting role of the male fighters, followers or dependents. Whilst, men are seen as fighters or soldiers (MacKenzie, 2009:241-261). Female fighters are framed as victims, rather than fighters with agency (Utas, 2005). Coulter (2008) claims that the victim portrayal has been a dominating discourse of women's participation in the war for quite a long time (Coulter, 2008:55). Following up Coulter's claims, Anne Thickner stresses that gender biases are most apparent in the field of international politics (Thickner, 1992:9), as the war(s) in the Middle East, and especially the battle between Islamic State (IS) and Kurdish female fighters in the western media shows.

When dealing with feminist literature concerning the issue of international relations or politics, and female violence, it becomes obvious that there are diverse portrayals of women constructed in connection to the dominant international relation discourse. As previously mentioned female fighters are perceived in different ways and there are great hierarchies not only between men and women but also within the female fighters' group itself. Laura Sjoberg, Grace D. Cooke and Stacy Reiter Neal have observed similar portrayals. They state that women's engagement in violent acts are generally simplified and portrayed as different from the regular terrorists or criminals, thus they are left without an agency creating a misrepresentation of them (Sjoberg, Cooke & Reiter Neal, 2011: 2). This raises a question about stereotypes and representation of women and female fighters.

## **2.2 The good, the bad and the victim**

The western mainstream media are fascinated by women engaging in different military or terrorist organisations, especially in the Middle East (Dirik, 2014; Mustafah Raber, 2014; Del Re 2015). However, there are significant differences in how these women are described in mainstream media. While the females who are joining The Islamic State (IS) are seen as naive brainwashed victims of men, the Kurdish female fighters are perceived as brave and beautiful heroines. According to terrorism scholar Brigitte L. Nacos (2005) society resort to gender stereotypes when they attempt to understand women who are acting in traditionally masculine roles. Based on her argument, one can question how the Western media uses gender stereotypes

in news coverages of Kurdish female fighters or female fighters generally. Nacos has developed a framework concerning gender stereotypes and frames in the media regarding female terrorists.

Nacos states that there are differences between the elements media focuses on when they present and explain female and male actors in political and violent acts. She argues that the media coverage on women is often putting particular attention on the women's physical appearance and looks. While men are described through their physical strength and motivations. As the number of women in male-dominant spheres are growing continually, it is affecting the traditional cultural norms and attitudes which are traditionally seen to be connected to men (ibid 2005: 437).

Although, this study is not investigating female terrorists particularly, it finds Nacos' framework as a valuable tool when locating and analysing frames in the articles covering Kurdish female fighters in the war against IS, as actors in political violence. Nacos' research on female terrorists resulted six frames and stereotypes. These frames will be used later to examine and analyse the data, but also a qualitative content analysis will be conducted in order to find more and alternative frames with stereotypes which will be discussed in the methods' section. These six developed frames are following:

**1. The physical appearance frame:** women are described through their physical appearance. Attention is on their looks, figure, style and the way they carry themselves. Physical attributes are almost always present in a way or another. In most of the cases women are described as beautiful. According to Naco, this frame takes away the focus from the women's ideas, motivations and positions and also they are treated differently comparing to the male counterparts (ibid: 438).

**2. The family connection frame:** female actors are often described through their family status. According to Nacos, the media often refers to female terrorists' background, their marital status, whether they are married or single, in their news coverage. This is also common with other types of female actors which get involved in a so called male-dominant sphere. This frame is more common for female actors than male actors (ibid: 439-440).

**3. Terrorist for the sake of love/the love connection:** describes the female actors' relationships or the lack of them. It states that women are drawn to violent political groups by the man they love. According to Nacos presenting stereotype of women who engage in political

violence because of their personal tragedies and disappointments, gives a negative impact on the female actor's agency. This frame is connected closely to the family connection and it is applicable to all the female actors in different contexts (ibid: 440-442).

**4. The women's liberation/equality frame:** "Although this was very common in the past, the contemporary news still explains the motives of female terrorists as the expression of gender equality or the struggle to achieve gender equality quite frequently" (ibid: 442). According to Nacos, media tends to focus on female actors' engagement in political violence, especially in traditionally patriarchal societies and region (ibid: 444).

**5. The as-tough-as-males/tougher-then-men frame:** women that are successful in traditionally male-dominated sphere are often described as tough females. For instance, Nacos points out the British Prime Minister Thatcher that had the nickname "the Iron Lady". Additionally, "...there is the mass-mediated notion of the female terrorist who, in order to prove that she belongs, tends to be more fanatical, more cruel, more deadly" (ibid: 444). This way they want to prove their "worth". But when doing this, women are no longer seen as feminine. They are not seen any longer as real women, because they have chosen to participate in political violence instead of their family and children (ibid: 445).

**6. The bored, naive, out-of-touch-with-reality frame:** describes and frames women as being, as the frame is called, bored, naïve, and out of touch with reality. In other words, the women don't have clear motivations behind their involvement in political violence, and they don't comprehend what they are actually involved with, or what are the goals or motivations of the organisations they have joined in (ibid: 446).

### **2.3 "The oppressed Middle Eastern women"**

In addition to gender stereotypes, there are cultural and oriental clichés which are reinforced by the media and politics. Feminist and post-colonial researchers criticise the Western politics for twisting events for the aims of their countries and the political leaders (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Dirik, 2014).

As previously mentioned, media plays a crucial role when it comes to the female fighters' agency and the motives behind joining the armed conflicts. Dilar Dirik criticises the western media for ignoring the Kurdish female fighters' agency and oversimplifying the reasons motivating them because there is a Western fascination with "badass" Kurdish women (Dirik,

2014), which according to Dirik is coming from an odd orientalist perspective. In addition to the fighters' agency, Nacos (2005) states that there are no evidence of major differences between male and female terrorists in terms of their recruitment, motivation, ideological vehemence, and brutality, yet, the media portrays the female terrorists with societal gender stereotypes and gender biases in the news coverage (Nacos, 2005:436). "The fascination with the physical aspects of Kurdish women combatants parallels Nacos's research on how the media frames female Palestinian terrorists", says Pinar Tank (2017), in her research paper *Kurdish Women in Rojava: From Resistance to Reconstruction*. Tank points out how Nacos' previously mentioned six identified frames are commonly used in the coverage of women terrorists, but none of the frames reflected women's agency from political or ideological point of view (Tank, 2017).

Many scholars such as Sandra Harding (2008) and Chandra Mohanty (1986) believe that if the group in power produces information, this only leads to legitimization and affirmation of their own views and positions. Looking at examples of Western representation of Middle Eastern women it is noticeable that Orientalism plays an important role in constructing of images, giving different notions of agency to different groups, thus creating a great division between the emancipated or victimised women. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) states that Europeans invented the term "Orient" to define the "Occident" referring to the Orient as the "Other" (Said, 1978:1-2). And the reason for this is, because West wants to dominate, reconstruct and have power over the Orient (ibid). In addition, postcolonial scholarship put emphasis on how the knowledge produced in some Western scholarship portrays Middle Easterners as barbaric and uncivilised to legitimise Western foreign policies, such as colonialism and imperialism, at the same time putting the blames on the locals for the problems and the consequences of the Western actions. According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) in this way West can justify its policies in the Middle East.

In addition, Abu-Lughod (ibid) also argues that Muslim women do not need saving in her discussion on the "War on Terrorism." By this, Abu-Lughod refers to the Orientalist notion that Middle Eastern women are perceived as victims and passive, as well as oppressed therefore they need to be saved by white men from brown men. She continues by saying that "When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something, You are also saving her to something, what violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which are you saving to?" (Abu-Lughod, 2002:788-89). Toivanen and Baser (2015) argue that Kurdish female fighters are "...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." (Toivanen and Baser, 2015:307).

Scholar Valentina M. Moghadam (2003) states that when looking into the women in the Middle East, instead of focusing primarily in Islam, it is important to acknowledge and take into account class, the gender system, economic development, and state policies, which explain Muslim women's status better. Also, Afaf Lutfi al- Sayyid Marsot (1996) takes a similar view on the role of Islam in the suppression of women, and claims that its role is exaggerated. According to her, religion was not the only effecting factor on attitudes towards women but also economic situations and the ruling regime's decisions on women's status.

Leila Ahmed (1992) on the other hand gives examples regarding how Islamic societies are portrayed inherently oppressive to women by demonstrating the historical evolution of women's status in the Middle East. She points out that British colony used oppressed women discourse to claim cultural superiority and moral justification for its control over the Egyptian population (Ahmed, 1992). Abu-Lughod goes on the same lines about the importance contextualisation and the need to know the region, the women of the area and their practices, but also about the political and historical explanations of the development of repressive regimes in the region, their connection with the US and the rest of the world (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 784).

For example, Dilar Dirik (2014), who criticises the Western media for objectification of Kurdish female fighters, just like Abu-Lughod (2002) and Moghadam (2003), points out that, "Kurdish women face several layers of oppression as members of a stateless nation in a largely patriarchal feudal-Islamic context, and hence struggle on multiple fronts. While the four different states over which Kurdistan is divided display strong patriarchal characteristics, which oppress all women in their respective populations, Kurdish women are further ethnically discriminated against as Kurds and are usually members of the lowest socioeconomic class." Dirik (2014) argues that these faux representations ignore the reality of the guerrilla women's fight and their ideologies but also the women have become objects rather than subjects.

The concept of 'agency' has been dealt a lot in academia. Saba Mahmood challenges it by following Foucault footsteps, and argues that human cannot possess power, on the contrary, everybody practices and articulates power: "it is diffused in the society". Therefore, agency is more than just resistance as it is thought in the West. Affected by Judith Butler, to Mahmood agency is the capacity to take an action (ibid, 2001: 210; 2005:157).

There is some literature discussing Muslim women in war and visual representation of war agents but because the battle against IS is still somewhat new, there is a lack of research on these specific narratives and their representation. The aim of this research is to identify certain notions and to define the process of what ideas and images are projected and how they changed. This discussed literature can support my analysis on the way Kurdish women's representation in war. Thus, in this research, I want to examine in which ways the "heroic" Kurdish fighters' agency is represented as Middle Eastern women.

#### **1.4 Justification of research area**

This research topic is relevant as there is still a strong orientalist stereotype of the Middle Eastern women in the western mainstream media and the public sphere. The Middle Eastern women are seen either as uncivilised creatures or they are victimised (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty 1986). They are seen as to be saved from their patriarchal societies by adopting the Western norms and lifestyle. The Kurdish female fighters challenge this stereotype as they fight not only for their own rights as women, but also for their nation and their ideologies. Regardless, Kurdish female fighters are also objectified and their motivations to join the armed forces are portrayed through other factors and ways which will be discussed in the analysis.

As Harding (2008) says, if the group in power produces information, these only leads to legitimization and affirmation of their own views and positions. To see and hear other point of views, point of views of the margins, it is needed to investigate the Kurdish female fighters for it can have significant political consequences and outcomes. Context-dependent work is needed because only then effective results can be achieved (Mohanty, 1986). In order to achieve "good science" and produce a multifaceted view on the Kurdish female fighters and the Middle Eastern Women, it is crucial to gain understanding on their complexity.

Western mainstream media has victimised and grouped the Middle Eastern women in a simple unified category according to the Western norms. These women are portrayed as powerless victims of systems, which again shows how Middle Eastern Women are seen as objects rather than subjects. This type of representation causes "othering" and creates the "us" (the westerns) and the "others" (non-westerns) positioning (Dirik, 2014; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Said, 1978; Yegenoglu, 1998). A deeper understanding on the Kurdish female fighters is needed to improve gender equality and feminism in total but also to deconstruct these orientalist stereotypes.



Research on the Kurdish female fighters within the British mainstream media, can eventually produce more in-depth information about the essence of Western power politics which can be valuable but also by understanding the reasons behind their involvement in these armed organisations, women's radicalization can become more comprehended and the possible prevention strategies can be investigated.

Following the introduction, the thesis is divided into four major sections with the overall aim of answering the research questions. It begun by outlining the theoretical framework and perspectives, including the previous research done on the female fighters and Middle Eastern women. Then, methods section presents how the research was conducted, the data collected as well as which publications were identified to be examined and analysed. Finally, the analysis focuses on the findings based on the studied publications and tries to connect the theoretical perspectives with them. Lastly, the conclusion will sum up the most prominent findings and results of the thesis, and reflection on the main findings and their relation with the research questions.

### **3.0 Methods and Methodology**

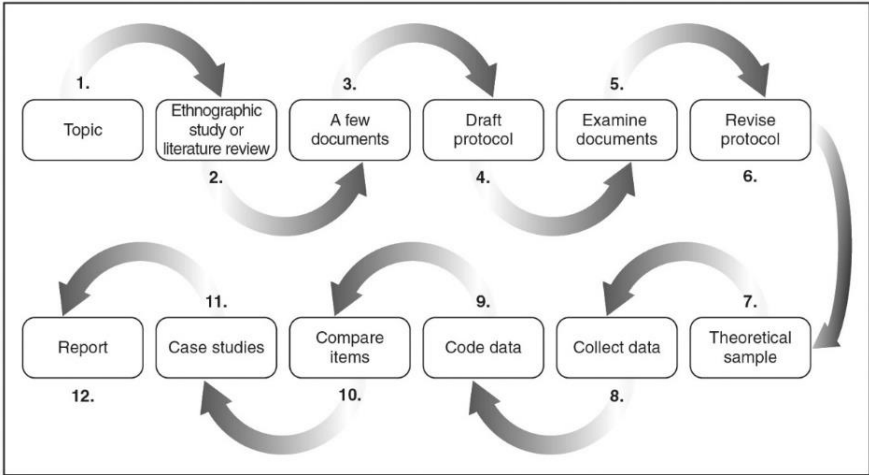
#### **3.1 Framing and qualitative content analysis**

In exploring the portrayal of Kurdish female fighters' motivations in the British mainstream media, the research conducts a mixed-methodology approach of frame analysis. This research will include a qualitative content analysis which is aimed at providing a systematic means for quantifying textual and thematic features across a large number of texts (Hansen et al, 1998).

Robert Entman's theory (1993) about framing supports previously discussed notion of media's role in shaping our perception. Entman (2004) defines framing as: "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution." (2004:5). This means basically that every decision of the reporters, editors, producers and other media content makers effects the news starting for example, from choice of topics, sources, language, and photographs. According to Entman, "a frame operates to select and highlight some features of reality and obscure others in a way that tells a consistent story about problems, their causes, moral implications, and

remedies” (Entman, 1996: 77-78). Framing theory can assist in understanding how and why frames work generally, but also the reasons behind producing them. This research will build on Brigitte Nacos’ framework (2005) which provides a model to locate and search for frames within the context. This notion highlights the importance of some framing patterns regarding the representation of the Kurdish female fighters, Middle East, and women in general, because they have a notable impact on the perceptions and reaction of the audiences and the public.

Qualitative content analysis was originally developed in the 1920s as a result of the increase in propaganda activities during the First World War which had boosted the importance of quantitative techniques. Early communication scholars such as Lasswell, Lazarsfeld and Berelson, believed that the media was affecting political behaviour and therefore devised a method to provide ways of analysing large amounts of media content (Hansen et al, 1998). The starting point of content analysis is collecting data which is quite time consuming and repetitive (Krippendorff, 1980:53). Although content analysis can be used to analyse large numbers of texts and documents, it is often not possible to cover every piece of content relevant to the study aims. Therefore, it is important to have a strategy about sampling. Using David Altheide’s thorough method (2013) of 12 research steps, which can be seen from *Image 1* below, he used for studying new reports on fear, clear instructions were provided on how to start, collect and proceed with the collected data.



**Image 1.** Flow Chart for Qualitative Document Analysis by David Altheide (2013).

## 3.2 Sampling

In analysing the coverage of Kurdish female fighters in the British mainstream media, the following news sources were chosen: *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *the BBC*. It was considered important to choose three “quality” news sources due to the large number of news providers and their various political views in the UK. The Guardian and The Telegraph are both large daily newspapers with different political stances. The Guardian is seen as a center-left newspaper with a strong online news reporting. Whereas, The Telegraph is politically conservative right-wing broadsheet, which also has a large online presence. On the other hand, the BBC represents the public service broadcasting. These media outlets are considered as “quality” news sources based on Mediabias/Fact Check website, which looks into the media outlets’ biased wording/headlines, their use of loaded words and whether the headlines match with the story. Also, the website reviews the media outlets’ factual/sourcing in reports and their story choices with the coverage of all involved parts. In addition, it checks their political affiliation as well in order to see how strongly the news outlets endorse a particular political ideology (Mediabias/Fact Check, 2018).

The time frame, from 2009 to 2018, an 9-year period, was established to account for and include event based peak times in the media coverage documented on the beginning, mid and present situation of the Syrian war, that might fall between the events such as Rojava revolution (Syria 2012), Siege of Kobane (Syria 2014), Yazidi massacre in Sinjar (Iraq 2014), and the latest event of Turkey’s attack to city of Afrin (Syria 2018).

A preliminary search of the Lexis/Nexis Academic database for articles between January 1, 2009, and March 15, 2018, was conducted using the term “Kurdish female fighters” in order to identify news articles on about the topic from the three British newspapers, The Guardian, The Telegraph and The BBC, selected to sample. Lexis/Nexis was chosen because “For content analysis, Lexis/Nexis is probably the most important source of textual data” (Krippendorff, 2003). Although, due to limited access to the database content through Lund university’s account, the researcher decided to use ProQuest Academic database instead, because of having access to it, with the same approach.

As an example, a quick ProQuest search on the terms “Kurdish female fighters” for 2 years before the start of the Syrian civil war, 15th march 2011 until 31st December 2013, yields 595 hits. The same ProQuest search conducted from 1 January 2014 to 31st December 2015, results

in 2713 hits. Despite a rising interest in Kurdish female fighters, few reports in English language mainstream media investigate these fighters' political agency. The search engine results are here to demonstrate and also support that there has been an increasing interest in the subject. The news coverage has quadrupled in 9 years.

### **3.3 Choice of articles**

Having selected the newspapers to retrieve data from, the next step was to collect a sample of articles to investigate in a content analysis. By firstly choosing the newspaper from which articles are to be found, and then applying search term into the search engine ProQuest, a sample of relevant articles regarding Kurdish female fighters could be collected. The search terms were decided based on the words related to the topic and all the groups involved in the IS crisis. The search terms used for each newspaper were the same so as to not interfere with the results. As an outcome, the following "search strings" were decided to use for the first search (See Table 1, p.21).

#### **Terms for the first search**

Kurdish female fighters, Kurdish female militant, Kurdish women fighters, Kurdish female terrorists, Kurdish women, Peshmerga (Peshmarga), Female Peshmerga, Kurdish fighters, Syria War AND Kurds, PKK, Kurdish women AND PKK, PYD, YPG, YPJ, Kurdish, Kurds.

#### **Date range for the first search**

1 January 2009 - 1 January 2011 (Before the Syrian Civil War)

1 January 2011 - 1 January 2013 (After the start of the Syrian Civil war)

1 January 2013 - 1 January 2015 (Iraqi civil war, Yazidi massacre, Kobane)

1 January 2015 - 15.3.2018 (Afrin)

When collecting articles from the chosen newspapers with the broad search strings presented above, and adding the date range 1.1.2009-15.3.2018 in the search, it led to a rather broad sample of articles which results can be seen from *Table 1*.

**Table 1.** Search engine ProQuest's results on topic related new coverage throughout years.

<b>Search Terms</b>	<b>1.1.2009- 1.1.2011</b>	<b>1.1.2011- 1.1.2013</b>	<b>1.1.2013- 1.1.2015</b>	<b>1.1.2015- 15.3.2018</b>
Kurdish female fighters	13	58	90	143
Kurdish women fighters	36	174	366	512
Kurdish female militants	5	20	65	86
Kurdish Female terrorists	0	0	0	0
Kurdish Women	492	913	1164	1354
Peshmarga	13	22	57	22
Peshmerga	2		6	7
Kurdish fighters	170	581	2221	3178
Syria War AND Kurds AND PKK	31	339	607	1041
Kurdish women AND PKK	123	402	394	397
PKK	993	3781	4178	6811
Kurds	2506	3567	5853	11907
Kurdish	4142	7194	10030	13380
YPG	-	6	544	2359
YPJ	-	-	15	117
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8526</b>	<b>17057</b>	<b>25560</b>	<b>41314</b>

To create a feasible sample, having retrieved a large number of stories using the broad search strings presented above to capture all possible news stories, a manual filtering of the retrieved sample was then conducted to eliminate irrelevant results; as the sample gained using the above search terms provided a rather wide range of results, irrelevant articles such as just briefly mentioning the female fighters or articles shorter than few paragraphs, as well as duplications had to be excluded manually. The publications identified through the database were included

in the research only if they focused on issues relating to Kurdish female fighters, or dedicated a section to them, or looked more in depth into them, specifically during the IS crisis. The collected sample included news stories, editorials, opinions as well as short videos on the newspapers’ websites. Moreover, to ensure the sample is relevant to Kurdish female fighters today, the search is limited to published news within the past 4 years, also because for instance in 2014, the number of the terrorist attacks increased by third comparing to the previous year (BBC News, 2015) and media covered the events actively.

After a thorough research on media coverage across the three newspapers from 2009 to 2018, few events seemed to be represented more than the others. These events were the Siege of Kobane in Syria in 2014, the massacre of the Kurdish Yazidi minority in Iraq during the same year, with the battle for Afrin in Syria from this year, 2018. Therefore, it seemed logical to conduct an event based sampling consisting of these previously mentioned events during the peak times.

The date range was narrowed down starting from January 2014 until March 2018 in order to focus on the news around these events, and the search terms were reduced down by leaving out the “general” search terms such as for instance *Kurdish* or *Kurds* or *Peshmerga* (see Table 2, 3, and 4), as well as to only focus on the Kurdish female fighters around these three events. Regardless of a four-year period, some search results remained small, therefore, it was decided to census all the news articles from the initial sample (e.g. “Kurdish female fighters” AND Kobane or “Kurdish women fighters AND Kobane) ending up with a result of 34 articles in total of the three newspapers (see Table 5).

**Table 2.** *Siege of Kobane related articles*

<b>1.1.2014 - 15.3.2018</b>	<b>The BBC</b>	<b>The Guardian</b>	<b>The Telegraph</b>
Kurdish female fighters	19	4	23
Kurdish women fighters	82	19	79
Kurdish female militants	10	0	0
Kurdish female terrorists	7	0	0
Kurdish women terrorists	47	2	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>93</b>

**Table 3. Yazidi Massacre related articles**

<b>1.1.2014 - 15.3.2018</b>	<b>The BBC</b>	<b>The Guardian</b>	<b>The Telegraph</b>
Kurdish female fighters	11	8	31
Kurdish women fighters	69	34	129
Kurdish female militants	1	1	0
Kurdish female terrorists	0	0	0
Kurdish women terrorists	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>160</b>

**Table 4. Battle for Afrin related articles**

<b>1.1.2014 - 15.3.2018</b>	<b>The BBC</b>	<b>The Guardian</b>	<b>The Telegraph</b>
Kurdish female fighters	14	17	5
Kurdish women fighters	51	7	4
Kurdish female militants	0	0	0
Kurdish female terrorists	0	0	0
Kurdish women terrorists	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>9</b>

**Table 5. Specifically topic related publications**

	<b>Battle for Kobane</b>	<b>Yazidi Massacre</b>	<b>Battle for Afrin</b>	<b>Other <sup>1</sup></b>
<b>The BBC</b>	6	1	1	2
<b>The Guardian</b>	2	2	2	5
<b>The Telegraph</b>	4	4	0	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>34</b>			

<sup>1</sup> Articles which were related to the events, but did not directly report about the Kurdish female fighters, instead about e.g. foreign fighters within the forces.

In order to get a better image of how well the three chosen events: siege of Kobane, Yazidi massacre and the battle of Afrin, were presented in the news coverage of the three news British newspapers, each event was individually searched through the ProQuest search engine by adding the event's name in the search terms. Thus focusing primarily on the year when the event started until March 15<sup>th</sup>, the last day of the search (See Table 2, 3 and 4, p.22-23). According to the search engine results, female fighters were covered during the battle for Kobane and battle for Afrin the most by BBC, and the least by The Telegraph. On the other hand, The Telegraph had a wider media coverage of the female fighters during the Yazidi massacre than The BBC and The Guardian. This may be explained by resources and media ownership, which will be discussed more in the analysis.

It was also taken into consideration that few of the terms such as "Kobane" and "Peshmerga" were written in two different ways depending on the media outlet or reporter. First Kobane related news started off from June 2014, describing the IS advance in Syria, before the actual siege started in September 2014. The peak time of the media coverage was from August 2014 until February 2015 when IS was fully driven out of the town by the Kurdish fighters. During the peak time some of the news were only a paragraph or two. Some of the articles were covering these three events from other angles such as from foreign fighters' point of view or an overall review of the Kurdish question in the area.

### **3.4 Background of the events**

In order to contextualise the female fighters' motives to join Kurdish armed forces, it is important to understand the background of the conflicts and their complexity in relation with female fighters. Therefore, a short overview will be presented on the PKK and its ideology, with summaries of the Siege of Kobane, Yazidi massacre and the battle for Afrin, the three events which were chosen to be analysed based on the media coverage they received in the past four years.

#### ***The Kurds***

There are around 25-35 million Kurds living in a region straddling the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Armenia. Kurds are world's largest nation without an independent state (BBC



News, 2017). Only in Turkey, there are 14.5 million Kurds, which is almost 20% of the Turkey's population. The figures are estimations as reporting bias by the authorities and the Kurds may occur (Tank, 2017).

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Kurds started considering of building an independent state. After World War one and the dissolution of Ottoman Empire, promises of recognition of new independent states were made. Although, three years later, the Allies and signed *Treaty of Lausanne* with the former Ottoman Empire, which recognised Turkey as an independent state, but the demands for Kurdish state were dropped, and the Kurdish region was divided between several countries giving them the minority status in these countries (ibid). Since then, the Kurds have been struggling for equal right and an independent state which have been crushed brutally (ibid). For instance, until the 1990s, Turkey had denied the basic rights of the Kurds by systematically assimilate the Kurdish identity by banning the use of Kurdish language and culture, names in public and private life, as well as denying their existence by referring to them as "Mountain Turks". Similar assimilation process occurred also in Syria (McDowall, 1992; 2004).

### ***The Kurdistan Workers' Party***

The PKK, Kurdistan Workers' Party was founded in 1978, by Abdullah Öcalan and a group of students. PKK has been fighting for three decades in Turkey aiming to build an independent state for the 14 million Kurds living within Turkey (Enzinna, 2015), which later changed to demanding equal rights. Due to the bloody armed clashes in the 1990s between the PKK forces and Turkish government, 40 000 people were killed, including thousands of civilians, displaced and villages burned down (McDowall, 2004). The conflict led to the arrest of Öcalan and labelling PKK a terrorist organisation in 1997 by The American State Department (ibid). It is claimed that having failed in Turkey, the PKK was trying to create a Kurdish homeland amid the disruption of war in northern Syria through its' sister organisation Democratic Union Party (PYD).

PKK's political ideology is originated in Marxism-Leninism, radical left, but after the imprisonment of Öcalan, an ideological shift occurred which moved the organisation from Marxism-Leninism to *Democratic Confederalism*, which puts the emphasis on building an autonomous state rather than an independent country (McDowall, 2004: 419). The conflict

between Turkey and the Kurds drove PKK fighters to Syria, which led to creation of the sister organisations (ibid).

When it comes to Kurdish question in Turkey and Syria, Kurds on the both sides of the borders have been very sympathetic towards each other, comparing with the Kurds in Iraq or Iran, not only because of the struggle but also because they speak the same Kurdish dialect (Kurmanji) and they have been part of the same towns and villages until they were artificially divided by the borders which were determined in 1921 by the founder of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Aljazeera, 2014). The Kurds from Syria have been a large part of PKK movement since its establishment. According to Al Jazeera (2014), “Out of the 40,000 or so PKK fighters who have been killed since 1984, about 5,000 of them are from Syria”. Furthermore, although the YPG forces are perceived as forerunner in inclusion of female fighters, some have estimated that already in the 1990s, third out of the 17 000 fighters of PKK were female, actively participating in the organisations activities and battles (Özcan, 2007). Thus, the Turkish government’s concern on connections between the PKK and the PYD/YPG are not fully empty grounded.

### ***The Democratic Confederalism***

Democratic Federation of Northern Syria’s political system is built based on the ideology of democratic confederalism, which is a libertarian socialist and direct-democratic political system developed by imprisoned Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan, and it is based on the Communalist philosophies of Murray Bookchin. It is presented as an alternative to the traditional nation state. Öcalan describes the ideology to be open and tolerant towards other political groups and thoughts, as well as to gender revolution and multiculturalism. The system emphasizes the importance of bottom-up or the grass roots participation in the society where decision making process lies in the communities and local municipal citizen’s assemblies (Öcalan, 2013:30).

According to Öcalan democratic confederalism is a pro-feminist and anti-capitalist system, because “Capitalism and nation-state denote the most institutionalised dominant male. More boldly and openly spoken: capitalism and nation-state are the monopolism of the despotic and exploitative male” (ibid: 18). Therefore, democratic confederalism sees women’s liberations as one of its core pillars (Öcalan, 2017:38). Thus, Öcalan states that the democratization of women plays a significant role in democratization of the society and the nation, therefore women’s

participation and engagement should be ensured on every level of the society by, for instance, establishing their own political parties and institutions in order to secure their freedom and full participation (Öcalan, 2017: 94-96). It also “aims at realising the right of self-defence of peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning existing political borders. Its goal is not the foundation of a Kurdish nation state. The movement intends to establish federal structures in Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq that are open to all Kurds and at the same time form an umbrella confederation for all four parts of Kurdistan.” (Öcalan, 2013:31).

As previously mentioned, this principle differs significantly from PKK’s earlier goal of fighting for an independent country, which is still Turkey’s biggest concern. There are some scholars claiming that IS is doing Turkey’s dirty work by trying to stop any attempts of Kurds in Syria to gain any sort of autonomy in the region, because Turkey is itself struggling with a Kurdish movement in eastern part of the country (Goudsouzian, 2014; The Guardian, 2015).

## **Fight against Islamic State**

### ***Siege of Kobane***

In 2012, during the Syrian Civil war, Syrian military forces withdrew from three Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria, which gave an opportunity to local political parties such as People’s Protection Party (PYD) with few other Kurdish groups to unit and take control over the area. They also established an armed military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), to protect the inhabitants in the region. The area which is commonly known as *Rojava*, a de facto autonomous region, which political system has been inspired by democratic confederalism (Enzinna, 2015).

Kobane has been a battleground between Islamic State (IS) militants and Kurdish fighters since September 2014 as IS launched repeated attacks to Kobane Canton, in order to capture Kobane, a Kurdish city with a population of 55 000 people, located on the of Syrian-Turkish border. Within a short period of time, IS advanced quickly and took over dozens of towns in the canton, causing almost all the civilians to flee into Turkey (BBC News, 2015). Soon after, IS militants surrounded the city making it difficult for the civilians remained behind to receive any type of

aid or rescue. People in the city were suffering from a serious lack of water and food shortage as well as medical aid, which turned the situation into a catastrophe.

With the help of the international air strikes led by the US, the Kurdish fighters of the Kurdish Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) and People's Protection Unit (YPG) from the armed branches of a Kurdish coalition in northern Syria, regained control over the city after four months of bloody fight.

Neighbouring country Turkey was criticized for watching from aside while civilians were killed. Turkey's stance towards the YPG/YPJ forces made it almost impossible for the civilians and the Kurdish fighters to receive aid across the border. Turkey considers the groups as terrorist organisations with ties to banned Kurdistan Worker's party PKK (Aljazeera, 2018), which has been fighting for the Kurdish rights for almost three decades in Turkey.

There are evidences of Turkey supporting IS militants by allowing them to cross the border and getting supplies for their troops (The Guardian, 2015), but Turkey would not allow the Kurdish fighters to receive any help or do the same. After a pressure from the international coalition and public, Turkey allowed Peshmerga forces from Kurdistan regional government in Iraq crossing from Turkey into Syria and join the fight against IS with the other Kurdish allies. An IS advance in northern Iraq during the same year, led into drawing Iraq's Kurdish Peshmerga forces into the conflict (BBC News, 2017).

Battle for Kobane is considered to be a turning point in the war against IS, a symbolic defeat to IS, but also a symbol of the Kurdish resistance, not only in Syria but in the whole Middle East. It was also the only town in Syria which stood against IS so long without falling, while other towns fall into IS hands without any resistance. This battle also redraw the map of the region, as IS was pushed back out the territory, the Kurds started to retake the lost areas. Kurdish forces in collaboration with other ethnic communities, successfully recaptured the villages and towns in the region, which led to the establishment of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) in 2016, which Rojava is part of.

### *Yazidi massacre*

In August 2014, Islamic State targeted the Yazidi minority by attacking the region around Mountain Sinjar near to country's Syrian border, abducting and enslaving hundreds of Yazidi women and girls as sex slaves, whereas slaughtering the men. Tens of thousands of Yazidis fled

the IS advance to Mount Sinjar, where they were trapped for days without food and water, causing death and a humanitarian crisis (The Guardian, 2015; 2017). The evacuation operation started jointly with the collaboration of PKK, YPG/YPJ and Peshmerga forces by opening a safe corridor for the trapped Yazidis to flee through Syria into the Kurdistan region of Iraq. US supported the operation by bombing IS positions (ibid; Foreign Affairs, 2017).

The Kurdish female fighters played a crucial role in rescuing the Yazidis from Mount Sinjar, therefore many Yazidis joined Kurdish forces after the incident, which led to establishment of first all-female brigade of Yazidi fighters by the help of YPG (ibid).

Yazidis are primarily ethnically Kurdish minority who worship a fallen angel, Melek Tawus, or Peacock Angel, which is one of the seven angels that are the core of the belief. According to Yazidis, Melek Tawus was forgiven by God, therefore had given the right to return to heaven. The importance of Melek Tawus has often given a wrong reputation for Yazidis being devil worshippers, because they deny the existence of evil and reject sin, devil and hell. That has been also the main reason for the attacks against them by IS (The Guardian, 2014). Before the IS attacks, Sinjar region in Iraq was home for 500 000 Yazidis.

### ***Battle for Afrin***

In January 2018, news about US was helping the Kurds and their allies to build an army of 30 000 personnel to secure the borders to prevent IS pass through the borders. This infuriated Turkey which called it “Terror army” and announced destroying the “Nest of terror”, referring to the Kurdish forces, in Syria (BBC News, 2018). Turkey started a massive military assault, *Operation Olive Branch*, on Kurdish-controlled enclave of Afrin in northern Syria (Aljazeera, 2018). Turkey had been threatening the Kurdish forces throughout their advance and liberation of areas from IS in northern Syria, because for Turkey, Kobane and Afrin are “PKK issues”. Turkey does not see a difference between the two organisations, therefore considers the US-backed Kurdish forces a terrorist group which is an extension of the PKK. The YPG has denied the claims of direct organisational links to the PKK and stated only sharing the aspiration to create an autonomous democratic confederation (BBC News, 2016; 2018). This has created a complicated situation in which the Kurds are in a direct contact with Russian-supported Syrian government forces and Turkish-backed rebels. Turkey as an ally of NATO is bombing a group that US has supported and embraced in the war against the Islamic State.

Some have accused Turkey of recruiting ex-IS militants and extreme Islamists, which have publicly threatened to cut off the heads of Kurds which they consider as “infidels”. Cases of human rights abuses and mistreatment by these rebels, for instance mutilating a Kurdish female’s body and filming it, have caused outrage within the Kurds. Also, many Kurds feel used and betrayed by the US and International coalition for allowing Turkey to bombard them (The Guardian, 2018; BBC News, 2018; The Independent, 218). Afrin fell only in two days after withdrawing of the Kurdish forces. It seemed like it was a calculated move to prevent more civil casualties, but also fighting alone against a powerful state army with modern armament would have been fatal (The Guardian, 2018).

Battle for Afrin is important because it represents how the “gains” of the Kurdish fighters, (especially female fighters) had been forgotten by the western allies and the media. The media covered the female fighters during the Yazidi massacre and siege of Kobane frequently, but the media coverage of them had decreased during the battle for Afrin. One can make assumptions on the reasons such as drop of interest, or the shift of the fighting opponent, which changed from IS to Turkey.

### **3.5 Coding**

Coding was used to illustrate the arguments in the news articles to get an understanding on the Kurdish female fighters’ motivation(s) to join the Kurdish armed groups and how they are portrayed according to these news coverings. Karen Jacques’ and Paul Taylor’ (2009) research on female terrorists was helpful when looking into the motivation. Jacques and Taylor examined 54 academic publications which they identified and grouped into five main categories of motivation: 1) Social, 2) Personal, 3) Idealistic, 4) Key Event, and 5) Revenge, then noting the frequency with which they are mentioned in the literature (2009:15). During the coding process the same approach was taken using their categories and categories which were found while coding, to see the frequency with the Kurdish female fighters’ motivation in the news articles. As a result, sixth motivation category was discovered, and named “*Humanitarian*”, as it includes the fighters’ urge and need to help and promote people’s welfare.

Nacos’ (2005) six frames on female terrorists, which were presented in the theoretical section, also had a key role in the coding process, but at the same time keeping an open mind for other

alternative findings and frames while examining the articles. Furthermore, the inductive research resulted four alternative themes and frames, which were central when analysing the articles. These four frames were 1) protectors, 2) heroines, 3) logical, and 4) innocent. Majority of the articles mentioned how the fighters wanted to protect their people and their land against the enemy, therefore they had joined the Kurdish armed forces. Fighters were framed as they were doing their duty. On the other hand, heroine frame, has a nuance of sensationalism, because of emphasis is on the women's courage and exceptional achievements.

Determination and premeditated motivation was another portrayal which kept repeating in the contents, this framed the fighters as logical and smart individuals. "Logical" frame is opposite to Nacos' "The Bored, Naïve, Out-of-touch-with-reality frame", which did not appear in any of the examined articles. The fourth found alternative frame was related to the fighters' innocence. That theme came out through description of the fighters' life before and after joining the battle. The fighters were portrayed as people with a good heart and down to earth, as they were satisfied with their lives regardless of the harsh lifestyle in the mountains.

The process of coding was a combination of deductive and inductive approach, which started off based on predetermined codes of previously mentioned scholars Karen Jacques' & Paul Taylor's (2009) and Nacos' (2005) research on female terrorists.

Knowing some of the themes in advance aided a smoother process for putting together and developing new frames throughout the analysing process. The coded data is presented in a descriptive coding book in which all the 34 articles have been coded chronically event by event, from each media outlet, also divided into different colour (Appendix 1) based on Altheide's qualitative content analysis method.

## 4.0 Analysis

This analysis presents the findings on representation of female fighters' motivations to join the Kurdish armed forces based on the 34 articles.

### 4.1 Motivation

When looking into the detailed information on the female fighters' motivation to join the Kurdish armed forces, based on Karen Jacques' and Paul Taylor's (2009) five main categories of motivation: (1) Social, (2) Personal, (3) Idealistic, (4) Key Event, and (5) Revenge, then noting the frequency with which they are mentioned in the literature (2009:15), one more category was discovered from the data. Many of the fighters, especially the foreign fighters explained their involvement by the urge to help. Therefore, the sixth motivation category was named "*Humanitarian*".

These six main forms of motivation were identified from 34 examined articles (see table 6, p.33). Out of the six categories, "*Idealistic motivations*" were mentioned more frequently than any other form of motivation, with a total of 38 times (frequency of mentions counted together), "*commitment to cause*" being the most frequented reason within the category with 20 mentions. This means that out of the 34 examined articles, 20 articles expressed that the fighters' motivation to join the armed forces was their commitment to the Kurdish cause.

"*Social motivations*" were second most common category right after the "*Idealistic motivations*" with 37 times, and finally "*Revenge*" category with a frequency of 28 times, as the third most identified reasons to join the Kurdish forces. Some of the articles included more than one motivation for the involvement, therefore the numbers of frequency are higher than the amount of the articles. In the next chapter, these motivation categories will be discussed and analysed.

Although Jacques and Taylor (2009) separated the *Idealistic* and *Social* motivations into two different categories, in this case, it seems that combining these categories would be more suitable in this case, because the data shows that the motivations are overlapping and very much interconnected. For instance, Idealistic motivations are very similar to Social motivations, because they are unselfish motivations of pursuing equality and positive changes, such as ending repression and humiliation in the whole society. Furthermore, a good example of



interconnection of motivations is, “*commitment to a cause*”, mentioned 20 times out 34 articles, is categorised by the researchers (ibid) as an Idealistic motivation, although in the data, some fighters explained that they joined YPG/YPJ forces because of the organisation’s anti-capitalist and feminist ideology (gender equality) which fights against inequality and repression they experience as Kurds (nationalism).

**Table 6.** *Kurdish female fighters’ motivations and their frequency within the data.*

MOTIVATIONAL CATEGORY	MOTIVATION	FREQUENCY OF MENTIONS
SOCIAL	Gender equality	19
	Educational/career needs	2
	Humiliation & repression	13
	Family problems	3
	<b>Total 37</b>	
PERSONAL	Personal distress	3
	Monetary worries	2
	Social outsider	0
	<b>Total 5</b>	
IDEALISTIC	Religion	2
	Nationalism	16
	Commitment to a cause	20
	Wish for martyrdom	0
	<b>Total 38</b>	
KEY EVENT	Loss of loved one	10
	Specific humiliating instances	5
	Displacement	1
	Other negative uncontrollable event	5
	<b>Total 21</b>	
REVENGE	Vengeance	13
	Anger	15
	<b>Total 28</b>	
HUMANITARIAN	Helping and reducing suffering	4
	<b>Total 4</b>	

#### 4.1.1 Idealistic and Social motivations

Data collection showed that for many of the fighters, the level of commitment to the cause was very high. They felt that they had joined a revolutionary movement which is fighting for changing the patriarchal and repressive societies where they had lived in before. For them it was important to be seen as an equal and strong fighter just like any other fighters. In a report on the news coverage of the female fighters on BBC, a fighter describes the importance of the ideology of the YPJ forces:

*"The entire philosophy of YPJ is to fight sexism and prevent using women as a sexual object. We want to give women their rightful place in society and for them to own their own destinies. Viyan died for these ideals. In the media, no-one talked about the ideals for which she gave her life, nor what Viyan achieved for women in Rojava in the past four years." (Choman Kanaani, YPG, BBC 2016a)*

The comment above brings up the connection between the social conditions of women in the society and the political ideology of the YPJ forces, which focuses on women's liberation and gender equality. Just like Abu-Lughod (2002), this fighter emphasises the importance of contextualisation and criticises the media for not looking into the reasons why these women fight, but rather media focusing on objectifying them. Although, on the other hand, it also frames the female fighters as devoted and as tough as a male (Nacos, 2005). Idealistic motivations generally show women as actors with agency, who choose and act to have an impact and can change the undesired negative situation in the society, as these female fighters emphasise:

*"The regional military are fighting IS because they're being paid to. We are all volunteers. Volunteers force thinks about the future and is willing to make sacrifices to improve it." (Narin Jamshid, PKK, BBC 2015a)*

*"We can say that the Kobani resistance is in particular a women's resistance...In order to enter Kobani the ISIS gangs will have to pass over our corpses." (Mayssa Abdo, YPJ, The Telegraph 2014c)*

Nisrin Abdulla, an YPJ commander, expressed her ideological and social motivations through the repression she had experienced because of her Kurdish ethnicity but also because of her gender:

*“During the Assad regime we couldn’t speak our language. We were not allowed to celebrate Newroz (Kurdish New Year). We had no rights at all. As a woman, it was even more difficult because you were discriminated against twice.”*

*“The idea that women were inferior started at school. I had classes on how to please a husband, how to look beautiful, the proper way to comb my hair,’ she explained, adding to the list sewing and cooking courses. ‘Assad was telling us that the only future we could hope for was to get married and have children.”*  
(Nisrin Abdulla, YPJ, *The Telegraph* 2016b)

Dirik (2014) supports this statement by pointing out that Kurdish women face repression from multiple fronts, because of lacking an independent state and living in mainly patriarchal and conservative feudal-Islamic context, where all the women are oppressed, but Kurdish women get discriminated also because of their ethnicity and generally their position as the members of the lowest socioeconomic class.

Ideological and nationalistic motivations were found across the data collection, for instance nationalism was mentioned 16 times out of 34 articles, but especially among the news coverage on siege of Kobane. This might be explained through Kurds uniting against their common enemy (IS) and sense of togetherness as well as rise of nationalism within the Kurds. When looking through the lens of gender, the conflict between the Kurdish female fighters and IS has been framed as a battle between advancement and backwardness, in which the women were framed as heroines resisting the religious conservative norms of IS. Siege of Kobane and its’ liberation also brought up and reinforced the Kurdish question in the eyes of international public, but within a context which Western countries also approved, because IS was seen as a threat internationally across the world, unlike for instance with the fight of PKK against Turkey, which is seen as a Western ally.

As in the methodology section was explained, in many cases the news framed the female fighters as *protectors* who were fighting for freedom, and saving their land and people. Heroines and protectors frames are closely connected, with a different tone to them. For the writer of this paper, *Heroine* has more a sensationalistic and romanticised connotation, as the word’s origin

by Oxford dictionary (2018) describes it as well: “In mythology and folklore, a woman of superhuman qualities and often semi-divine origin, in particular one whose deeds were the subject of ancient Greek myths”. This can be seen as a negative portrayal comparing to *protector*, which has a positive tone to it, and could be seen as related to altruism, safety and defence:

*“The most important thing for us is to live with honour and resistance. It is better to die than to live with no honour or resistance for your people. I don’t see this as a danger on my life, I see it as a woman being proud of what she’s doing for her country.” (Aitan Farhad, Asayish, The Telegraph 2015d)*

*“We fight first to defend our country, and secondly to defend women, because in Mosul ISIS attacked a lot of women”(Nahida Rashid Ahmed, Peshemerga, BBC 2014b)*

In some cases of the Yazidi fighters, Yazidism played an important role, as their belief is a core key to their identity, and the IS attacks against the Yazidis motivated them even more. In addition, many of them wanted to fight to prevent similar events from happening again and expressed their strong commitment to protect their land (Kurdistan) as well:

*“I joined the Sinjar Resistance Units to protect my land, to protect my religion and to take back my family’s rights,” she says. “Especially the women, who are now in the hands of IS”. Despite her small frame and childlike mannerisms, she shows no fear: “I am not afraid to go to the mountains. I need to clear our land [of IS]. We will go back to my land and we will live there again under my religion.” (Gemed Serham Morad, YPG, The Telegraph 2014e)*

*“If I haven’t a land, I haven’t a religion.” (Nerges Omer Saleh, YPG, The Telegraph 2014e)*

Framing the fighters as *protectors* indicates how the women are presented as equally capable fighters as men, because they have put aside everything and are ready to give their lives for the cause. Similar observations were made with the framing and motivation of the foreign fighters. Albeit while presenting, the fighters were still described through their gender-related physical features, as the first quote demonstrates.

Although many countries have warned their citizens against traveling to Iraq and Syria to join the armed groups in the conflict areas, yet hundreds from North America and Europe have joined the Kurdish forces (The Telegraph, 2016). In the case of the foreign fighters who had joined and fought with the Kurdish groups, the motivations were mainly idealistic and humanitarian. Many had joined the Kurdish forces after seeing the Yazidi massacre either through their volunteer work or on media. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) state that "Media enable a perpetual connectivity that appears to be the key modulator of insecurity and security today, amplifying our awareness of distant conflicts or close-to-home threats, yet containing these insecurities in comforting news packages" (2010: 2).

Foreign fighters joining the Kurdish forces demonstrates that media and society have become interdependent. If it was not for the mediatization the Kurdish female fighters and their struggle would not have been known. News coverage of IS attacks and Kurds fighting against them, created sense of sympathy and connectivity towards them.

*"It's for the whole world, for humanity and all oppressed people, everywhere. It's not just [Isis's] killing and raping. It's its systematic mental and physical torture on a scale we can't imagine",* said Kimberley Taylor, 27, who left the UK to join the YPJ in Syrian Kurdistan, in 2016. In another interview, Taylor said she was inspired by the Kurdish people's fight for democracy and believed that her female Kurdish comrades are setting an example to help to solve the problems within Syria, but also considered that YPG/YPJ's approach to direct democracy and feminism could be applied in Europe as well:

*"There's an obsession with minor issues like terminology, rather than realising the whole system is patriarchal. Sure, women have personal freedoms, but western society is not free."* (Taylor, YPG, *The Guardian* 2017c)

According to the data, gender equality was most common social motivation for the fighters to join the Kurdish armed groups, with 19 times out of 34 articles. Many of the interviewed women were not only dissatisfied with gender inequality and the patriarchal system in the countries, but also with the oppression they experienced as Kurds, which was also the case with the idealistic motivations.

*"I was not happy with my life, because I felt like that the chance to have a proper life was not given to us. I rather live a short life than 100 years and be humiliated."*(Mitra, PKK, *BBC* 2014a)

Some of the younger females, such as Rojda, 16, expressed their impatience and frustration with the constant conflicts and discrimination by the Turkish government. Some described being inspired by the strong and brave PKK and YPJ female fighters who fight side by side with their male comrades for freedom and equal rights of everyone in already very complicated societal and political environment.

*“I know that girls my age in western Turkey admire actors and singers. The girls here admire the guerrilla fighters instead. With them around I feel safe. I feel protected. Especially for the women and girls here, the guerrillas mean a lot. We cannot go to the police or the army if anything happens to us. They don’t help us. But the guerrillas will.”*

*“Sometimes I almost wish that there was this civil war that people now talk about, that we would have this all-out uprising. I am so tired of always having to be scared and waiting. I am tired of being put upon only because I am Kurdish.”(Rojda, civilian, The Guardian 2015c)*

For many, the Kurdish female fighter represent women’s liberation, a female revolution. Especially fighters who fought in Kobane believe that it was a fight between two systems, a democratic gender equal system against undemocratic repressive patriarchal system and mentality.

*“The fight for freedom is not only mens duty. Women need to fight harder than men. Mentality of our male dominant society doesn’t look at women as human beings, they look at us as slaves, sex objects but PKK is changing this mentality. (Bese Howat, PKK, BBC 2014a)*

*“IS see women as sex objects. And yes, this does motivate me when I fight against them. This is why I know IS is scared of us women in the YPJ. They know how they treat women, and they know we are aware of what they do and can feel our resentment and hatred of them. This is what makes us such big enemies.”(Bejan Ciyayi, YPJ, The Telegraph 2014c)*

Gender equality as a motivation and Women’s liberation frame was used throughout the data collection the most. Gender equality was highlighted to be important for the Kurdish and foreign female fighters, regardless of their origin. Women’s liberation frame is strongly connected to motivations such as gender equality, experiencing humiliation/repression,

nationalism, commitment to a cause and anger. For instance, in the case of another foreign female fighter, Hanna Tiger Böhman, a Canadian former model demonstrates that a strong and independent female westerner wants to help in the fight against IS, but also fight for gender equality to to liberate all the women in the Middle East:

*"It was like a pain in my gut, like I had to go and do it. It's not a fight against ISIS. ISIS is inconvenience, but the first and the foremost purpose of the YPJ is to fight for women's right. And they will continue doing that long after ISIS is destroyed. They are tired of being enslaved and forced into marriages, forced to be nothing more than baby machines." (Hanna Tiger Böhman, YPG, BBC 2017b)*

Intentionally or not, Böhman falls into the same pattern of orientalism, in which she stereotypes the “poor and oppressed” Middle Eastern women as passive and victims which need to be saved by a white westerner saviour (Abu-Lughod 2002; Said 1978). This positions her as an emancipated woman freed from repression, because the West has attained gender equality, therefore political feminism struggle in not needed there (Mohanty, 1988). Regardless of this presentation, Böhman describes how she feels objectified by the Western media, for being a previous female model:

*"Even being taken legitimately as an YPJ soldier has been difficult for me in the West, because I keep getting labelled as the former model, which to me is insulting, because it was such a small part of my life. I only dabbled in it, I never made a living at it. I didn't like it because it was going in a direction I didn't like. It was very sexist and stuff." (Hanna Tiger Böhman, YPG, BBC 2017b)*

This is an interesting framing, because here the life of the “emancipated” Böhman is compared to the life of the “oppressed” Kurdish fighters (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Yegenoglu, 1998). This can be interpreted as an attempt to show that these women have something in common regardless of their nationality or ethnicity: struggling against gender based stereotyping and objectification. Although, it seems as Böhman is not very aware of her personal attempt to fight for gender equality and against patriarchy also in the West.

Some frames of Nacos did not come across in the data collection. For instance, *Terrorist for the sake of love frame* was not found at all in the data. That may be explained by the ideology of PKK and YPG/YPJ organisations, which forbids their members from having sex, getting married or having children, in order to prevent distraction, but also to “comfort” those back

home who connote women's purity to family honour (Krajeski, 2013). This restriction is mentioned only once, out of the 34 news items. This raises a question of whether the newspapers have done it unintentionally or they have want to foster the idea of freedom of choice and independency in these Kurdish forces.

Furthermore, *bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality frame* was not found in the data either. On the contrary to this frame, female fighters were portrayed as logical, and smart women, who had clear aims and motivation for joining the forces. Thus, this frame was named "*logical*" as it also framed women as down to earth, because many of them had left everything behind in order to be part of the Kurdish armed forces. Many of the fighters were described as leaving their families and friends behind permanently, living one day at a time in a very challenging environment such as the mountains with restricted facilities and under a constant danger.

Another repetitive frame found in the data was related to the women's *family connection*. The data brought up almost in all of the cases the background of the female fighters, whether they were married, divorced, or had children. According to Nacos, media focuses on the family connection more for female than for male fighters. As one of the motivations category was "key events" such as loss of a loved one motivated some women to join the Kurdish armed forces in order to revenge.

#### **4.1.2 Revenge**

Most of the news coverages were discussing and focusing on the fighters individually, presenting their brief story without putting them into a proper context. This way the main reasons for the problems were ignored or were undermined. Third most common motivation category was Revenge, cited 28 times. Revenge was strongly connected to family connection frame and women's liberation frame. Anger and vengeance were described to be reasons for many women's engagement in the Kurdish armed forces. These motivations are interconnected tightly to the key events happening in the women's lives. Therefore, in some cases, the key events had led to anger and feeling to vengeance. For instance, during the Siege of Kobane or Yazidi massacre some of the fighters' had joined the forces to revenge the loss of their family members or loved ones.



*"IS killed my brother," she explains, with fire behind her eyes. "From that time I've wanted to take up arms and fight them - and now after what has happened in Sinjar..." she trails off, before steeling herself and looking me straight in the eyes. (Nora Qasem Naser, YPJ, The Telegraph 2014a)*

It seemed that some of the articles suggest that some of the women are motivated by things and events which they don't have control of. Few of the women had witnessed or experienced the conflicts personally or they had followed them from the media. For many Siege of Kobane and Yazidi attacks were the last straw. Brother of a fallen YPJ fighter describes his sister's motive:

*"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. "(The Guardian 2015a)*

Some expressed their devotion and obligation as a Peshmerga, official soldier of Kurdistan regional government, to revenge what happened to their people:

*"After what happened to Yazidi women and girls, I decided to stop singing until I take revenge for them," she says. "Maybe I will go back to music, but I think this job as a soldier will be a long one." (Khatun Khider, Peshmerga, The Guardian 2017a)*

Due to the time limitation, there were less than few news articles on the female fighters during the battle for Afrin. The articles focused mainly on Turkey's advance and the reasons behind Turkey's operation.

When the battle for Afrin started, the anger and rage had shifted its course, this time it was not towards Turkey or IS but the international coalition. Many of the Kurdish female fighters felt betrayed or used by the Western countries, after fighting and losing large number of fellow comrades. Hamrin Habash, a 22-year-old English literature graduate who lives in the city of Afrin embodies this:

*"I blame everyone. Nato, Russia and the US. We have fought extremist groups in defence of the whole world. And now look what's happened? They let Turkey attack us for its delusional, expansionist dream." (BBC 2018a)*

Jacques and Taylor's categorizations are convenient as a tool to demonstrate the variations in Kurdish women's motivations. As the data showed, many of the motivations were overlapping and could not have been simplified under one motivational category, as almost all the motivations were linked to each other through the social category, which strengthened all other motivational categories.

#### **4.1.3 Physical appearance**

Physical appearance had a prominent role in framing the Kurdish female fighters. The identification of the frames in the coding process showed how frame of physical appearance occurs on more than several occasions in the news coverage of the Kurdish female fighter during the fight against IS. Throughout the articles, the female fighter have been presented as something unseen and exotic. In 14 of the articles, the reporters describe the female fighters in a way that could be argued to follow what Nacos calls the "physical appearance frame". This way of describing separates the female fighters from their male counterparts.

Furthermore, photographs and images in the articles frame the female fighters in various ways, as well. Making their physical appearance visual can both emphasize the fighters' agency, and help in getting little glimpses of their reality, but also they can reinforce the stereotypical gender-based and the orientalist framing of the victims or exotic heroines. Many of the articles describe in details how the fighters look like, their clothes and the way they carry themselves. Some reporters use words and adjectives related to their appearance to describe the female fighter. The following quotes represent a recurring pattern in the analysed material, in which fighters are framed as tough as a male, but at the same time as beautiful heroines with shiny hair. This breaks the traditional portrayal of the victimised Middle Eastern women who are not "emancipated". The Kurdish fighters challenge the gender and ethnic stereotypes therefore the media finds them newsworthy (Toivanen and Baser, 2015:307).

Female fighters' long hair seemed to be admired and photographed in various articles reporting about the fighters in the battle against the IS. In some of the images women in uniforms were combing or braiding their hair (see *Image 2*). Their hair was in focus even in situation where the fighters were training or were described as leaders:

*“Felat is a petite woman. Her hair is incredibly long and always tied in a braid – ‘I never cut my hair; it used to reach my feet,’ she said with a smile. Her eyes are always vigilant; they have a certain sparkle. She walks and speaks with extreme confidence, and is an intimidating figure – men do not joke around her.”*  
(The Telegraph 2016)



**Image 2.** The Telegraph: *“Ready for action: PKK fighters in northwest Iraq, in pictures.*

Also, following quotes from an article on the battle of Kobane describes mainly the fighters’ through the physical appearance frame:

*“The most senior woman present is Rangeen Yusuf, 25 and already a colonel. Tall, with a spick-and-span uniform and dark hair in a low, neat bun, she has the right cool and remove to command authority.”* (The Guardian 2014d)

*“Awara Hasiv, 23, a strong-willed woman with shiny hair, is being deployed to the front next week, and she is going to buy her eight-year-old daughter some clothes before she goes, as well as, she says, ‘prepare stuff for myself, like an extra uniform, toothbrush and perfume.’”*(The Guardian 2014d)

These superficial physical descriptions are symbols of gender stereotypes. For instance, mentioning the fighters' long shiny dark hair or height, or interest in shopping, is a way to point out the fighters' "femininity", because women's hair is traditionally linked to womanhood and seductive beauty (Dyer, 1982). Also, these features portray the fighters as more relatable and "human", therefore, perhaps in this way the newspaper is trying to gain sympathy from the readers. Or, perhaps to create the feeling of them being as "one of us", because the fighters are framed as emancipated exotic heroines, whereas IS as the opposite of them, as being the "others". Thus, although the intention might have been good, this only reinforces the orientalist images of the Middle Eastern women thus affecting their credibility and agency.

Another described traditional feminine attribute was "girliness". For instance, The Guardian points it out in an article reporting about female fighters who fell in the battle for Kobane. There, a brother remembers his martyred sister. He describes his sister as someone who always used make up and other "feminine" accessories until she became a fighter:

*"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 Guardian 2015a)*

This quote raises another interesting point concerning the characteristics which are traditionally associated with "fighters" and "soldiers". The article portrays the sister as changing from a feminine girl to a masculine fighter, because she stopped using make up and accessories. Again, linking fighting and masculinity together, as previously discusses. In addition, in the article the female fighters were presented through their family members and connections, once again. Although, this could be understood also as "humanising" the fallen female fighters as people with families and friends, and that can make the readers relate to them. In another article on the survivals of the Yazidi attacks by The Guardian, a collection of photographs (see *Image 3*) were included with detailed description of the young girls' appearance and family connection:

*"Even empowered, it's disturbing to see the sheer youth of the fighters. One image shows a uniformed soldier, barely a teenager, visiting her mother and siblings in a refugee camp. Her father was killed, and her mother encouraged her to fight. She wears her fatigues, a denim hoodie, a pink string bracelet and a gun. Nearby, her little sister sits in a bubblegum pink T-shirt and carries a pink handbag."*

*“One such picture is of a 15-year-old called Gulan closing her eyes and covering her face with her hand, her pink nail polish a gut-wrenching sign of ordinary youth in unfathomable circumstances. (The Guardian 2015a)*



▲ Yazidi fighter Mrali, 16, visits her mother and siblings living in a refugee camp in the mountains



**Image 3.** The Guardian 2015: “The women taking on Isis: on the ground with Iraq’s female fighters”

Both previous quotes demonstrate reporter highlighting the use of pink colour, as to make these young girls seem more child-like and “girly”, because pink traditionally associated with femininity and tenderness as well as innocence. This portrayal also points out the harshness of the war and frames them as victims, or innocent “children” or “just girls”, which have ended up there because of the ongoing conflict. In many cases, they also mention the women’s age, especially if it is a young fighter:

*“Shadan Fouad, who has the look of a popular schoolgirl, is also being sent to the front.” (The Telegraph 2014d)*

For instance, according to Dyer (1982) the age might be a way to bring up the young age of the fighters which connotes innocence and inexperienced, but also takes away their credibility as

fighters and shows them as more impulsive and perhaps idealistic. While, older age might symbolise wisdom and balance (Dyer 1982: 96-104). When the horrors of the conflict and the loss of the fighters were described, they also brought up how some of the fighters looked much older than they were because they had suffered a lot. This portrayed the fighters as victims:

*“Like most women here, she wears a scarf wrapped around her head and looks older than her years - the harrowing events of the past weeks having taken their toll. When she speaks to the other women, her eyes glisten with tears. (The Telegraph 2014e)*

As the previous quote already indicated, it's not only the physical attributes which get attention, but also what the fighters wear and how they wear it. In many cases women's floral scarves which they wrapped around their neck or head was used as a feminine contrast to their “masculine” guns. Albeit, these scarves are used by their male fighters as well. Reporter describes how just by wearing a traditional Kurdish fighters' uniform, “Muna” experienced a transition from a shy Muslim woman with a hijab to an emancipated confident woman:

*“A 19-year-old from al-Bab, near Aleppo, was wearing a dark hijab and a golden dress. She was invited in and served tea in a small glass. She smoked cigarettes one after the other. At first, Muna seemed intimidated by the group of uniformed women around her, but as soon as she was given her own uniform, her demeanour changed and she felt empowered.”(The Telegraph 2016b)*

The data collection showed that some articles emphasized the way women carried themselves and used their body language in order to promote their image as confident fighters. The news covers used photos of women posing in a certain way or carrying a gun, as *Images 4* and *5* illustrate (p.47), often taken from an angle which gives a powerful image of the female fighter.



**Image 4.** The BBC online news 2017: *“Syria: Former model turned soldier returns to battle”*



▲ 'We don't really care about our houses and belongings. They aren't worth the life of a single young child': Khider, with other women from her troop, reflects on their motivation. Photograph: Alessandro Rota for the Observer



**Image 5.** The Guardian 2017: *“Women warriors: the extraordinary story of Khatoon Khider and her Daughter of the Sun”*

As the quotes illustrate, the physical appearance of the female fighters is used subtly that some readers may not even pay attention to it. Regardless, these small and subtle portrayals have an

effect on how the Kurdish female fighters are portrayed and perceived by the others. They are seen as young female fighters with long braided hair, smiles and makeup in a context where masculinity is a norm. However, it could also be understood reversely, as a challenge of stereotypes of a fighter, and not a woman or womanhood. Which means that, it is the “fighter” who is seen as something abnormal because makeup and smiling are not generally linked to it.

### *Media bias*

As already noted, media plays an important role in producing and shaping our values and ways of perceiving things, such as our image of the Kurdish female fighters. A long and repetitive way of portraying issues affects public’s attitudes towards them, and it can also reshape the way they discuss and feel about them (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2003:136). Therefore, when analysing the content and the images of the articles it was important to keep in mind the impact of the news outlets’ possible media bias and political stance on the portrayals of the Kurdish female fighters.

As mentioned in the methodology section, The Guardian is a center-left broadsheet newspaper, which based on the data seemed to have a positive stance towards the Kurdish fighters. Data analysis showed that almost in all of the articles, the newspaper presented the Kurdish female fighters in a sympathetic way by bringing up the fighters’ bravery and commitment to fight for gender equality and democracy against “barbaric” Islamic State. They also mainly focused on themes such as resistance and protection, which are both related to fighting for a cause and ideology. The newspaper seemed to take a visible stance for instance when reporting about the battle for Afrin, as one of the reporters criticises Britain’s and other western countries’ lack of support to the Kurds. He also finds the Kurds to be Britain’s help and praises Rojava’s political system as a LGBT-friendly and democratic, therefore it should be protected. The reporter presents strong opinions and uses loaded words such as “revolutionary” and “warriors” which are associated to the fighters’ idealistic and social motivations portrayal. The newspaper portrays the fighters as “logical protectors”. This portrayal may be connected to the newspaper’s center-left political views or the individual view of the journalists.

The Telegraph on the other hand had the tendency of sensationalising the female fighters. It also brought up more often fighters’ family background and highlighted their gender through description of their physical attributes, which may be linked to their conservative background.



Majority of its articles covered individual stories of Kurdish female fighters' loss of someone they loved, or their sacrifice for a greater cause, which was generally freedom and democracy. The newspaper framed the fighters as something extraordinary but fascinating, "badass heroines".

BBC's reporting on the Kurdish female fighters differed from the two other newspapers. BBC covered longer in-depth stories which contextualised and explained the backgrounds of the events which the two other newspaper seemed to often lack. It may be related to BBC's role as a public broadcaster, which attempts to cover topics which are not otherwise provided by the other commercial broadcasters, and it supports multiculturalism which enables using journalists with different cultural backgrounds. For instance, few of the reports were produced by a Kurdish backgrounded journalist, Jiyar Gol, who got to interview the female fighters in Kurdish in their hidden training camps in the mountains of Iraq. His reports focused more on the ideological and personal motivations of the fighters. He also criticized other western media for "objectifying" the Kurdish female fighters, therefore devaluating them and their aims (e.g. see article *The Kurdish "Angelina Jolie" devalued by media hype*). Although BBC attempts to stay "neutral" in reporting, it framed the Kurdish female fighters as western allies and protectors of the innocents.

To sum up, there were no major differences between the three newspapers' portrayal of the female fighters. Although, it seemed that The Guardian focused more in covering the ideological motivations, and paid an effort in the visual content of the articles online, as well. While, The Telegraph focused on catchy titles and photographs, the BBC took the "traditional" public broadcaster's role which attempts to provide as accurate and "neutral" information as possible. In addition, besides the political stance of the news outlets, the economic gain plays an important role on why and how the Kurdish female fighters are represented. As many media outlets struggle financially to secure their work and existence, majority of them are heavily dependent on advertising and funds (Levy and Nielsen, 2010). By romanticizing and sensationalising the fighters through certain kinds of language and layout, as well as headlines and eye-catching photos, the media outlets may attempt to attract viewers and readers for financial gains and advertising revenue (Wiltenburg, 2004). Out of the three news outlets, only BBC is financially independent due to the compulsory television licence fee (The Guardian, 2016).

## 5.0 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate and analyse how three British newspapers, The Guardian, The Telegraph and The BBC, portrayed the motivations of the Kurdish female fighters during the war against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, and also, to explore the cultural, political and economic reasons behind these portrayals. In order to accomplish this, framing analysis with a qualitative content analysis approach was employed to examine the thematic and visual units in the collected data. Later, the data was analysed using postcolonial theories such as orientalism and standpoint theory, as well as mediatisation.

Analysing the data included categorising and finding themes in order to get a better overall picture of the data collection. During the process it was important to return to the original articles to make sure that interpretations were made based on the context, and to pay attention to the repetitive discourses in the data while writing short summaries of the categories in order to detect themes and frames. Finally, the findings were integrated with interpretations and the key concepts (Altheide, 1996:43).

Theoretical framework and literature review section discussed the previous research done on the subject of representation of women engaging in political armed conflicts, and their portrayal in the media. Various authors emphasized that there were differences between how male and female fighters were portrayed or described in the media. Some stated that female fighters are generally framed as victims, rather than fighters with agency (Utas, 2009; Nacos 2005). Brigitte Nacos (2005) pointed out that media focuses more on the physical appearance of the female fighter than their motives, which takes away their agency. She also claimed that gender stereotypes are often used when society attempts to understand women who are acting in traditionally masculine roles. Anne Thickner stressed that gender biases are most apparent in the field of international politics (Thickner 1992:9), such as in the case of IS conflict, where Kurdish fighters are presented as beautiful heroines, whereas women joining IS are seen as victims or brain washed by men.

In addition to gender stereotypes, the cultural and oriental clichés, which are reinforced by the media and politics, were discussed. Some claimed that western mainstream media is fascinated by women engaging in political violence especially in the Middle East (Dirik, 2014; Mustafah Raber, 2014; Del Re, 2015). Moreover, literature often found that Middle Eastern women are framed as oppressed and poor victims that need to be saved (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood,

2001; Dirik, 2014). Many of the scholars highlighted the importance of context and contextualisation while reporting on Middle Eastern women, stating that religion is not the only factor affecting women's lives but that the social-cultural-economic factors in the society should be taken into consideration as well (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2008; Mohanty, 1986; Dirik, 2014; Moghadam, 2003). To sum up, according to the previous research, women taking part in political violence are still seen as something rare due to violence being traditionally associated with men. Media treats and portrays women differently than men through the use of gender stereotypes. Additionally, the framing of the Middle Eastern women is still very much orientalist, because of their one-sided representation in the western mainstream media.

The methods section, discussed the steps taken to collect the data. After conducting an in-depth media coverage research on ProQuest academic search engine, using subject related search terms within few years before and after the IS crisis, it was found that there were peak times in news coverage of Kurdish female fighters. These peak times indicated that three events had been covered the most in the past four years: the siege of city of Kobane, the attacks against the Yazidi minority, and finally the latest event from 2018, the battle for city of Afrin. The peak times in the media reporting led to event-based sampling, therefore, the search range was narrowed down to the past four years, from 1st January 2014 to 15<sup>th</sup> March 2018. After manually filtering and going through all the event-related articles, the irrelevant articles which did not specifically discuss the female fighters were dropped, leaving 34 articles in total.

Next, David Altheide's (1996) qualitative content analysis approach of coding and finding themes was used (see Appendix 1). Some of the codes were deductively chosen in advance, but only to build on them and search for additional frames and stereotypes. In order to do so, terrorism scholar Brigitte Nacos' framework on portrayal of female terrorists in the media, along with scholars Karen Jacques' and Paul Taylor's work on female terrorists' motivations was employed as a base to conduct the inductive research.

In her work, Nacos (2005) investigated the portrayal of female terrorists in the media and found similar framing patterns in the news coverage of women in politics and in terrorism. As a result, she identified six frames: 1) physical appearance, 2) family connection, 3) terrorist for the sake of love/the love connection, 4) women's liberation/equality, 5) as-tough-as-males/tougher-than-men, and 6) the bored, naive, out-of-touch-with-reality frame. Sadly, none of Nacos' frames reflected women's motivation and agency from political or ideological point of view.

After coding 34 articles, four alternative frames were found from the data. These were “*Protectors*”, “*Heroines*”, “*Logical*” and “*Innocent*”. These frames were identified based on content and visual analysis of the data collection, as many of the articles framed the Kurdish female fighters as brave defenders of their people and land, motivated by democratic ideologies and values to join the Kurdish armed forces of People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Peshmerga.

Inspired by Jacques and Taylor’s (2009) method of finding motivation by noting the frequency with which they are mentioned in the data collection, it assisted the researcher to find an additional motivation category, which was named “*Humanitarian*”. This motivation category included helping and reducing suffering of the people. Rest of the identified categories were 1) *Social*, (2) *Personal*, (3) *Idealistic*, (4) *Key Event*, and (5) *Revenge*, which were found by Jacques and Taylor (2009:15). All these six main forms of motivation were also identified from the articles with variable frequencies. Out of the six categories, “*Idealistic motivations*” were mentioned more frequently than any other form of motivation, “*commitment to a cause*” being the most frequented motivation within the category, with 20 mentions out of 34 articles. This showed that majority of the females were portrayed joining the Kurdish armed forces, because they were commitment to the Kurdish cause and YPG movement. Fighters expressed their admiration towards the YPG’s libertarian anti-capitalist and pro-feminist ideology, which was inspired by *Democratic Confederalism* system, developed by Abdullah Öcalan, leader of Kurdistan Worker’s Party (See 3.4).

This leads to the second most mentioned category, “*social motivations*”, in which “*gender equality*” was found to be the main motivation to join the Kurdish forces. As YPG sees women’s liberations as one of its core pillars, stating that the democratization of women has a key role in democratization of the society and the nation (Öcalan, 2017:38). The system also emphasizes the importance of bottom-up participation in the society (ibid), which was seen as significant, as majority of the Kurds don’t have access or experience of such participation due to the systematic assimilation and repression they face by the regimes of the countries they live in (Tank, 2017; McDowall, 1992; 2004). However, in the case of the Kurdish women, they are discriminated not only because of their gender in a patriarchal and feudal-Islamic context, but also because of their ethnicity, putting them in the lowest socio-economic class (Dirik, 2014).

Gender equality as a motivation and Women’s liberation frame was used throughout the data collection most frequently. Gender equality was portrayed to be important for all of the Kurdish fighters, regardless of their origin or religion. Women’s liberation frame was strongly

connected to motivations such as gender equality, experiencing humiliation/repression, nationalism, commitment to a cause and anger. Third most common motivation category to join the Kurdish armed forces was “*Revenge*”. This included loss of a loved one, a family member or a friend/s. Revenge of anger as a motivation were strongly linked to family connection frame and women’s liberation frame. As, these motivations are interconnected tightly to fighters’ personal life and the key event happening in their lives, leading to anger and feeling of vengeance. For instance, during the Siege of Kobane and Yazidi massacre some of the women had joined the armed forces to revenge the loss of their family members and the committed violent acts towards their community.

The analysis also showed that, some of Nacos’ frames were not found in the framing of the Kurdish female fighters. For example, the frames, “*bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality*” and “*Terrorist for sake of love*”, were not found in any of the articles. This means that the Kurdish female fighters are presented as logical and smart, on the contrary to Nacos’ terrorist fighters. Also, due to YPG’s rules, the fighters are not allowed to have intimate relationships or get married, which excludes “*Terrorist for sake of love*” frame. This is an important finding, because the majority of the articles did not mention such a rule. The motivation behind omitting this fact could be pure ignorance or leaving it out in purpose to promote the image of emancipated women who have freedom of choice within the Kurdish forces.

As previously noted, there was a strong interconnection and complexity between the motivations, but in many cases the newspapers failed to address them. Instead, fighters’ motivations were mainly presented through a simplified frame. For instance, when covering a fighter who fought for gender equality, the connection between their ideology and the repression they experienced as a woman and as a Kurd was ignored. In addition, the role of the Kurdish identity was underrated, whereas their gender emphasised, leading to an adequate representation of the female fighters.

Overemphasising the female fighters’ personal experiences and sufferings leads to their ideological and political agency being ignored. This results in reinforcing of the gender stereotypes and reconstructing the orientalist “save the poor and passive Middle Eastern women” discourse all over again. As many postcolonial scholars have emphasised, contextualising is very crucial as the reasons behind the fighters’ engagement are far more complex than the media portrays.

The analysed articles had given a lot of room to the female fighters, and many of the articles consisted of statements and ‘direct speech’ that could be seen as a way of giving the female fighters the possibility to explain why they are engaging in political violence. Although the analysis showed that the Kurdish female fighters were portrayed as brave and logical fighters, who fought for democracy and gender equality through their engagement in the armed conflict, their gender was in constant focus. They were framed as good fighters because they were women. Physical appearance of the women was highlighted in many cases. Their hair, smile and “girly-like” features were brought up on various occasions, sometimes not related to context itself. These visual and textual portrayals create a romanticised image of the fighters as exotic warriors with shiny long hair, who are framed only through the war against Islamic State. This again can contribute to ignoring the fighters’ agency thus reinforcing the orientalist stereotypes of oppressed Middle Eastern women, who need saving.

In order to understand the reasons behind these portrayals, it was crucial to also look into the media bias of the newspapers, which leads to the second research question. Although, all three newspapers have very different political backgrounds, they still seem to portray the Kurdish female fighters in a positive light, as the “good guys” and western allies, who fought against our common enemy. By doing so, they frame them (Kurds) as one of “us” and IS as the “other”. The Guardian showed a more indirect support to the Kurdish forces in general, which can be linked to their leftist political stance. The Telegraph on the other hand had the tendency to sensationalise the Kurdish female fighters through their personal stories and beautiful visual images. The Telegraph also seems to frame the women mostly through the physical appearance frame and family connection. This can be linked to the newspapers conservative or very traditional image of women. In Contrast, the BBC news attempted to give a more in depth reporting about the fighters and their fight, for instance through short video reportages in the training camps of the fighters, thus showing them in the context and the “reality” there. As more and more media outlets are facing financial challenges and are dependent on advertisements, the news outlets’ tendency of sensationalising and romanticizing the Kurdish female fighters may also be explained through their urge to attract more readers and viewers, to sell and make financial profit. As beautiful “badass female warriors” attract more attention and sell better than “another” news coverage of the conflict in the Middle East.

As noted, the media coverage of Kurdish female fighters plays an important role in how the image of them is constructed. As media is a powerful discursive actor in shaping and affecting public opinion on ongoing political discourses. (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2010; van Dijk, 1988).

If it was not for the western media's interest, the Kurdish female fighters may not have received as much attention as they did during the IS crisis and now. Regardless, the fighters should not be praised only to achieve economic gains or in the fight against IS but throughout their political and social struggle.

### ***Future research recommendation***

Naturally, there is still much to explore when it comes to framing women and their involvement in political violent acts and media's role in producing these portrayals. Due to length and time limitation political power relations with feministic perspectives were not included. Thus for further research, one could look at the Kurdish female fighters from a feminist perspective. What are the actual impacts of the YPG's ideology in their respective countries, outside of the IS crisis? In the analysed data, there were no mentions on how men were influenced by this "feminist revolution". Also, how has the movement influenced other women in the Middle East?

Another possible research could be exploring how the audience perceive the Kurdish female fighters through these media portrayals. Moreover, it could be interesting to look into representation of the Kurdish female fighters in the Middle Eastern mainstream media in comparison to western mainstream media. Are there similarities or differences between the portrayals? Some have criticised Kurdish forces using the female fighters as PR. Therefore, a future research could conduct an in depth visual analysis on YPG's social media accounts to find out, how they portray the female fighters. Finally, conducting interviews with journalists on their framing of Kurdish female fighters, which can provide interesting insights into the reasons behind these portrayals and representations.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Sample of the coding book

A	K	L	M	N	O
SOURCE	THEMES	PHYSICAL APPEARANCE	FAMILY CONNECTION	WOMEN'S LIBERATION/ EQUALITY	TOUGH AS A MALE
1 <b>The Guardian</b> 2015b Yazidi 1	Bravery, freedom, independence, gender equality, peace, minority rights, economical interests, physical attributes	*One such picture is of a 15-year-old called Gulan closing her eyes and covering her face with her hand, her pink nail polish a gut-wrenching sign of ordinary youth in unflinching circumstances. *Pictures of their training camp are empowered and confident. One image shows a woman looking at her reflection in an uneven shard of mirror, adjusting her headscarf. Her gaze is firm, determined, clear-eyed. *Even empowered, it's disturbing to see the sheer youth of the fighters. One image shows a uniformed	"Their decisions are in their hands, no longer in the hands of their families or their brothers," says Yaghobzadeh. "Her father was killed, and her mother encouraged her to fight."	"Their decisions are in their hands, no longer in the hands of their families or their brothers," says Yaghobzadeh. *His recent reportage 'Yazidi Women: Their Bodies at Battlefield' shows how gender roles are shifting in the face of fundamentalism.	**"There is nobody else like them," he says. "They are fighting for their families. Even America, I'm sorry, is bullshitting – is going to and throwing three bombs: poor." (Yaghobzadeh)
15 <b>The Guardian</b> 2017a Yazidi 2	Revenge, freedom, commitment, love for the country/land, physical attributes	*Khider, whose chin and cheeks are marked with the tiny dark-blue tattoos distinctive to the region, was born into Iraq's Yazidim minority. *Khider makes an unlikely soldier in many ways, quick to smile, a little dreamy and perhaps less lean than most commanding officers. "I haven't had breakfast, I want to lose some weight," she tells me with a smile, soon after supervising a dawn drill.	"Several are married to Peshmerga soldiers themselves. They wake at 6am and exercise, drill with weapons and then clean them. They take guard shifts with the men, and mostly wait for orders to fight."	"Actually when I decided to be a singer, it was like going to the frontline and fighting the enemy, it was very difficult to choose this profession as a woman," Khider remembers with a smile. Perhaps it was no coincidence that the song which sealed her fame, and foreshadowed her future, was the story of a woman who went to war.	**"I told Baba Sheikh I want to fight Isis and he warned me it was very dangerous for you as a woman, you may get caught she remembers. "I replied that Isis had already taken out women from Kocho and Sinjar and other places, I am not afraid of them." And so he gave her his approval. (Khider) **"It was just for money, I wouldn't leave Basheha and Barzan, my precious home villages, to come and fight with Isis." Khider says, reciting from memory, to a new generation of Yazidis hungry for vengeance. "I am coming to take revenge for my brothers, I will kill you and rip out your heart and I am coming for you."
16 <b>The Telegraph</b> 2014e Yazidi 1	Resistance, freedom, commitment, determination, protection, bravery, love for the country/land, love for the religion, revenge	*There, crouched in front of a light support weapon, is a young Iraqi woman, her hair in a long plait tied with a silver butterfly clip, hanging over her shoulder. Two Syrian Kurdish soldiers instruct her on how to aim and shoot, while a row of women dressed in camouflage sit behind her on a mound of sand, looking on. And awaiting their turn. *Like most women here, she wears a scarf wrapped around her head and looks older than her years - the harrowing events of the past weeks having taken their toll. When she sneaks to the other women, her	"When Isis took over, Resho had recently separated from her husband, leaving him with their two children. She has had no news from any of them since she fled Iraq."	**"I joined the Sinjar Resistance Units to protect my land, to protect my religion and to take back my family's rights," she says. "Especially the women, who are now in the hands of Isis." (Gemend Serham Morad, 18)	