

Feminists, Freedom Fighters and Daughters

- A Discourse Analysis of the United States Media's Portrayal of
the Kurdish Female Fighters in Syria



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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how the US media has portrayed the Kurdish female fighters in Syria. Since the battle of Kobane the fighters of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) have been sensationalised and received immense attention in western news media. Previous research has shown that female combatants are portrayed differently than their male counterparts, and this assumption is the foundation for the research on the representations of the YPJ. Thirteen articles from ten different newspapers in the United States were analysed through a Critical Discourse Analysis which was complemented by a framework developed by Brigitte L. Nacos. The research shows that the Female Kurdish fighters are depicted through gendered stereotypes and that there are similarities in their portrayal and depiction of illegitimate political actors. The female fighters are presented as feminists, brave, and rational while framed through their physical appearances and family connections. The analysis also reveals that there is a particular focus on the YPJ members age as well as a recurring theme in US media of trying to separate the Kurdish female fighters from the traditional western image of a Muslim woman.

Keywords: *Discourse analysis, Gender, Islamic State, Kurdish female fighters, Media framing, Syria, YPJ*

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Literature

List of abbreviations:

ISIS: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

Daesh: The Arabic acronym for ISIS. The terms Daesh and ISIS are interchangeable in this thesis.

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*)

PYD: Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*)

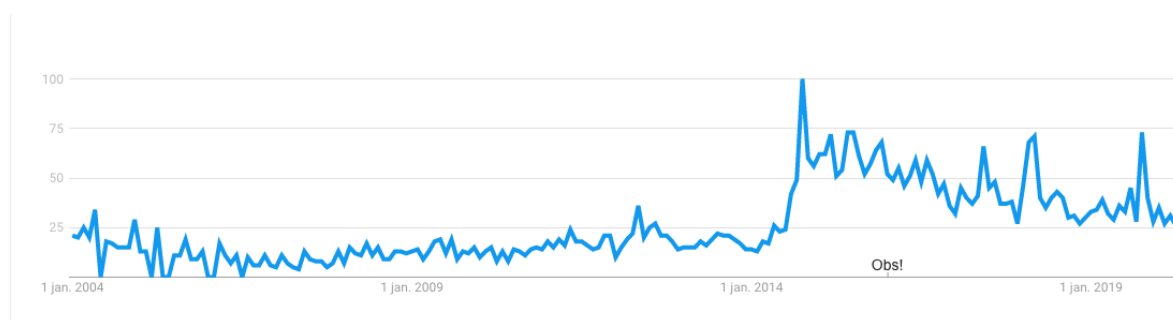
SDF: Syrian Democratic forces (*Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk*)

YPG: People's Protection Units / People's Defense Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)

YPJ: Women's Protection Units / Women's Defense Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*)

1. Introduction

The region of northern Syria has been heavily medialisised by news outlets in the western world due to the conflict in Syria and the atrocities committed by Daesh during the civil war. The Women's Protection Units or YPJ, began getting international attention and global support in September 2014 with the six-month siege of Kobane. During this time the female battalion fought against Daesh together with The People's Protection Unit or YPG, and eventually liberated the city in the spring of 2015 (Toivanen & Baser 2016, p. 297) (Del Re 2015, p. 84) 4 (Bengio 2016, p. 39). The upsurge in global attention is evident in the web searches for the YPJ and the Women's Protection Units which increased massively during this period (Tank 2007, p.406).



Interest over time YPJ: web searches (Google Trends 1, 2020)



Interest over time Women's Protection Units: web searches (Google Trends 2, 2020)

Women engaged in political violence is not a new or unusual phenomenon; throughout history, women have played a crucial role in conflicts and wars (Shekhawat 2015, p.2) (Coulter 2008, p.56). There are plenty of examples where female soldiers and combatants have been active agents in militant groups like in the Soviet Union (Sturfelt 2005), Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka (Allison 2004) and Sierra Leone (Coulter 2008). Despite this, wars continue to be perceived as a male sphere. Women have, both in general and in most peace and conflict studies, been viewed as victims in conflicts while men have been portrayed as the protectors and fighters. (Shekhawat 2015, p.2) (Coulter 2008, p.55). The discourses

surrounding men have portrayed them as naturally connected to conflict while women have been constructed as inherently peaceful. The image of women resisting war has, for many years, been a part of the western public image (Yuval-Davis 2004, p.170) (Coulter 2008, p.55). Miranda Allison writes that the fact that there is a need to specify “female combatants” signifies that women in war are viewed as a “historical rarity” and that they have a “symbolic position as unconventional figures” (ibid 2004, p. 447). Recent studies show that women today are becoming more active in political violence and the recruitment of women has increased both in states national armies as well as in non-state armed groups (Shekhawat 2015, p.4). However, even if women are participating in areas traditionally reserved for men to a greater extent, the stereotypes surrounding women does not seem to be disappearing (Sjoberg & Gentry 2008, p.6)

1.1 Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to examine how US media has portrayed the Kurdish female fighters in Syria. This will be examined through the research question:

- *How has the U.S. media portrayed the female Kurdish soldiers in the YPJ fighting Daesh in Syria?*

The research question is pertinent to Peace and Conflict studies since the magnitude of the recent media attention directed at YPJ gives it a real-world relevance. It also has a broader scientific relevance since it gives us insight in how the western world view women who are active participants in war. Women are often portrayed as victims of conflict and by analysing the response that women who step outside the traditional gender roles, we gain knowledge of current views and discourses on gender.

1.2 Background

The following section of the thesis will address the context and background of the study.

1.2.1 YPJ

The Women's Protection Units or YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin) is an all-female Kurdish militia that was established in 2013. (Dean 2019, p.2) (Del Re 2015, p.86). The Kurdish people are the largest population without a state in the world, and their territory is divided between four countries Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria (Dean 2019, p. 2). The countries all have individual Kurdish forces, like the Peshmerga in Iraq, but when comparing the different regions in Kurdistan, Syria had the most significant transformation for women (Bengio 2016, p.37). That is why this thesis will be focusing on the female Kurdish soldiers of the YPJ.

The Kurdish forces have a long history of female combatants (van Bruinessen 2001) (Çağlayan 2012). This is mainly due to the Kurdish Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) or PKK, which has a long tradition of equality within its organisation and since the 1990s has made female liberation a central part of their national struggle. The PKK created military units for women way back in 1995, and the historical background of female combatants in the Kurdish forces is especially evident in the ranks of the PKK today, which consists of 50 per cent women (Del Re 2015, p.86). The PKK has been present in Syria for many years, and they are strongly associated with the YPG/YPJ. (Bengio 2016, p.37). The People's Protection Units ideology and policies have their foundation in the Kurdistan Workers Party, and they recognise Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned founder of the party, as their ideological leader (Dean 2019, p.2).

The YPG got jurisdiction over parts of northern Syria during the Arab spring. After years of disagreement with the Syrian government Kurds from different political and socio-economic background were quick to join together in the uprising against the regime in 2011 (Tank 2007, p.414) (Dean 2019, p.2). When the Syrian government was faced with the possibility of having to fight on several fronts, Assad gave the Kurds citizenships rights and government's armed forces were pulled from northern Syria. The control of the area was handed to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2012, which made the Kurdish militias (YPG) the new security forces of Rojava. In the power-vacuum of the Syrian Government, PYD declared three cantons in Rojava (Efrin, Cizri and Kobane) independent (Tank 2007, p.415).

(Toivanen & Baser 2016, p. 296). The women from the People's Protection Units military wing decided to create an all-female battalion, the Women's Protection Units. The YPJ was established in 2013 as an independent women's militia which fights side by side with the YPG. There is not a definite number, but the Kurdish forces are estimated to have approximately 30 000 -35 000 soldiers in Syria. Of those roughly 20 to 40 per cent are women who are part of the female militias in the YPJ (Bengio 2016, p. 39) (Del Re 2015, p.86-87) (Toivanen & Baser 2016, p. 297).

1.2.2 The US involvement in Syria

The United States has a long and complicated history with Syria. Diplomatic relations were first established in 1944 after Syria's independence from the French-administered mandate. Since then, the relationship between the two states has been unstable with the diplomatic relations being severed and re-established many times (U.S. Department of State 2020). In March 2011 a group of boys were detained by the Syrian Security forces for writing anti-government messages on the wall of a school in the town of Daara. Their arrests led to widespread demonstrations against the Syrian President Bashar Assad, who in turn used excessive violence to suppress the protestors. In August later that year president Barack Obama calls for the resignation of Assad and freezes all of the Syrian government's assets. The U.S. finds evidence of Assad's forces using chemical weapons against the opposition in 2013 and President Obama authorises immediate support for the rebel groups. In September 2014 Obama launched a campaign of airstrikes against ISIS in Syria which by January 2019 had led to air assaults on over 17.000 locations. The first American ground troops arrived in Syria at the end of 2015, and the U.S. military personnel quickly grew from the initial 50 to the current amount of 2000 soldiers (A.P. News 2019). The U.S. has cooperated with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and by working with local partners, like the YPG/YPJ, they achieved their goal in March 2019. The coalition is still active in the area trying to ensure stability in the liberated areas, helping with the return of displaced civilians and dealing with the detained ISIS fighters (U.S. Department of State 2020).

The U.S. involvement in Syria is further complicated by its relationship with Turkey. The United States has been allied with Turkey since World War 1, and the two countries are both members of NATO. For the last four decades Turkey has waged war on the PKK, a Marxist separatist guerrilla group which is deemed to be a terrorist organisation by the United States,

the E.U. and Turkey. The PKK has a close connection with the YPG and its political representative, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Because of the relationship the YPG and PYD have also come under attack from the Turkish government. Despite this, the U.S. has supported the YPG in its battle against ISIS. During the civil war, Turkey demanded that the United States would stop providing financial and military support to the YPG, but the U.S. government did not comply (Gürçay 2020). The U.S. military rebranded their alliance with the Kurdish fighters by referring to them as the Syrian Democratic forces (SDF), an umbrella title which includes the YPG/YPJ but also other non-Kurdish militias. Despite the rebranding, the U.S. cooperation with the Kurds has led to a clash with Turkey (Hale 2019, p. 29).

1.3 Previous Research

In the following section, the current research field is presented, and the study will be positioned in relation to previous research.

Women, war and media

Gender is a key component of any discourse on conflict and peace and proportionally women's violence receives a lot more attention than men's violence (Enloe 1990) (Shekhawat 2015). When portraying events in the news the media relies on stereotypes and cultural myths which contain descriptions of what constitutes "proper" gender behaviour. These narratives help to reinforce the gender roles and norms in society and guide the audience when trying to make sense of the world around them (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007, p. 7). When gender discourses are repeated in the news media the dominant stereotypes, for example women as victims, become fixed and creates a narrow perception of women and their roles (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) argue that historically women who commit violence have not been portrayed as regular combatants because violence is not part of the stereotypical female traits (p.2). In the army women are still expected to comply to gender norms and be feminine even though femininity is perceived to be a weakness. Weakness is seen as a failure in the military and therefore to be a successful soldier one needs to be masculine (Enloe, 1988) (Francke, 1997). This implies that a "good" woman, one who fits the gender norms, cannot be a successful soldier and, if a female soldier appears to be equally successful as her male counterparts, she is not following the gender stereotype of a woman and something must be wrong with her.

While stereotypes are used to reinforce norms, myths are used to explain deviance from the norm. Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) show how female fighters that do not fit the gendered stereotype have been depicted in mythical and fictitious manners which denies women's agency as well as enforces female stereotypes and subordination (ibid, p.4-5). They provide evidence of how contemporary news coverage of women in war uses myths like mothers, monster and whores to explain female presence and behaviour within the military. Examples of this can be found in the representations of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England (Howard III & Prividera, 2008) (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 2015). In another article by Sjoberg (2010), she examines female soldiers in a global context and their gendered experiences. She explores Elshtain's narrative of "Just warrior and beautiful souls" (which she borrowed from

Hegel) that argues that men fight wars to protect women and therefore the women become both the cause and the victims of war (Ehlstain 1982). Sjoberg than uses the narrative to describe the historical relationship between women and war. She concludes that the image of women's inherent innocence and pacifism that the narrative portrays is very different from the real experiences of female combatants.

Muslim women in U.S. media

The Muslim woman has historically been portrayed as oppressed by the western press, and this narrative was enhanced in the United States news media after 9/11 (Abu-Lughod 2002) (Khalid 2014). The western media presented the Afghan women's experiences under the Taliban by creating an image of victimhood and abuse. The discourse of the Afghan women as passive victims, helpless against their violently oppressive men was then used by the United States to justify a military intervention. Abu-Lughod calls this the "western obsession with the plight of Muslim women" (2002, p.783). Maryam Khalid suggests that the narratives of the Bush administration derive from a stereotyped image of "us" and "them" which can be understood through Edward Said's critique on orientalism. Said argued that orientalism established binary oppositions that constructed the "east" as exotic, backwards, irrational and oppressive while the "West" was portrayed as civilized, moral, rational and Christian. These constructs did not only "other" the orient, but they also created the image of the "west" as the opposite of everything the "east" was. This construction of the east was reproduced and created a tradition which Said argued influenced all future knowledge and research about the Orient (Khalid 2014, p.4)

Research on the portrayal of the YPJ

The media portrayal of the YPJ. has been a subject of interest in academia. In Toivanen and Baser's article *Gender in the Representation of an Armed Conflict* (2016), they examine and compare how the female Kurdish soldiers have been portrayed in the British and French media. The purpose of the study was to see how the YPJ has been framed by the western news outlets and to what extent these portrayals coincides with the gendered stereotypes. The results from Toivanen and Baser's research could be considered fascinating since it appears to present a different narrative on the portrayal of female combatants than previous research. The discourses of a competent and tough female fighter are distinct from the earlier portrayals of women as pacifists or victims. The narrative of the YPJ is also a huge contrast

to Sjoberg's (2007) (2015) narrative of women engaged in political violence being depicted as monsters or whores since the Kurdish female fighters are neither presented as mad, bad or sexually deviant. When reading the British and French articles on the female Kurdish militia one might assume that the news media has evolved and developed a more progressive view of women in war. However, Toivanen and Baser conclude that the women of YPJ are still portrayed with gendered agency, and they find four mainframes that Kurdish female fighters are depicted through 1. Struggle for equality/emancipation/liberation, 2. personal/emotional motivations, 3. physical appearance and 4. exceptionalism (Toivanen & Baser 2016, p. 301).

The four frames that Toivanen and Baser (2016) identified in the British and French media's depiction of the YPJ could be considered similar to frames that were identified in a study done by Brigitte L. Nacos back in 2005. In her article, Nacos examines the framing of female politicians and terrorists in the U.S. media and finds that the news tends to resort to societal gender stereotypes and clichés while depicting women in traditionally male-dominated spheres. She argues that the media focuses on different aspects while portraying the motivations and participation in political violence depending on if the subject is female or male. While explaining the frames used by the U.S. news media, Nacos uses numerous examples of female Palestinians who have engaged in political violence. The Palestinian women and the female Kurds share many similarities like region, religion, oppression from the government and affiliations with a terrorist group. Despite this, the YPJ does not get labelled as a terrorist group by U.S. media.

When looking at the similarities between Nacos framework on female terrorists and the media frames that Toivanen and Baser identified in the case of the YPJ, the phrase "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" comes to mind. Because of the similarities between both Toivanen and Baser's frame and Nacos frame, and between the Palestinians and the Kurds, it would, therefore, be of interest to apply Nacos framework to the YPJ. By employing Nacos theory, one could examine if the portrayal of the female combatants shares similarities with how female terrorists are portrayed in the United States Media. The approach has not been found in previous research and therefore could be considered to fill a relevant research gap. The analysis will be centred around Nacos six frames but will also be open for the possibilities of additional discourses, frames and narratives.

2. Theory

The following section will present the theoretical perspective and framework that has been used in the thesis.

2.1 Constructivism

Since Discourse Analysis is used as the primary method of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge the underlying theory of constructivism. Constructivism is a critical theoretical approach which examines how social and political order is created and sustained through language. The theory does not agree with the positivist assumption that reality exists independently of us. Instead, constructivism argues that one cannot make a clear distinction between facts and values and that our reality is socially constructed (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p.55,454). The theory believes that our worldview is created through discursive practices and that how people perceive and talk about the world does not necessarily reflect reality, but rather the success of certain dominant discourses. Because these discourses are perceived as right and truthful, they are not often recognized or questioned (ibid, p. 55). In line with interpretivism, constructivism assumes that all social phenomenon are social constructs. That they are not the result of individual thought or meaning, but rather a product shaped by social values and norms (ibid, p. 46).

2.2 Framing Theory

Framing theory is based on the idea that journalists tend to adopt frames in order to simplify the understanding of reality for the readers, viewers or listeners. What and who makes the news as well as how it/they are being represented is a constant decision in the media. To frame means that media highlights certain aspects of reality, making them more important while other factors are overshadowed, in order to keep a consistency about issues in the news stories (Entman 1993) (Norris, Kern & Just 2003).

2.3 Nacos Framework

The Physical Appearance Frame

The first frame concerns the news particular focus on female appearance. Nacos gives numerous examples of how news outlets pay a great deal of attention to physical attributes in women, especially those who clash with the traditional image of a terrorist. The media dwells

on details in women's figure, clothes and overall look, most often highlighting their beauty. According to Nacos, this frame helps to dramatize the contrast between the woman and her violent engagements. It also moves the spotlight away from women's ideas and motivations. Nacos explain how the physical appearance frame is distinctly different from the media's portrayal of male terrorists. News stories usually only mention details in the men's appearance if it is pertinent to explain a specific element to their actions or to help a police investigation (Nacos 2005, p. 438-439).

The Family Connection Frame

The Family Connection Frame shows how women often are defined in relation to their relatives and family status in media. Considerable attention is paid to a woman's family background, especially compared to a man, and they are generally depicted as wives, mothers and daughters. If single, their relationship status and the fact that they are not married is discussed and questioned in the press. Media emphasises family connections in terms of motivations, and a female terrorist's decision to engage in political violence is usually associated with the influence or death of a close relative. When news outlets depict women they also frequently use information that they've gathered from interviews with family i.e. father describing his daughter or a brother his sister. This frame disregards women's political motives in favour of featuring personal grievances (Nacos 2005, p. 440).

The Terrorist For The Sake Of Love Frame

The third frame is related to the Family Connection frame, and Nacos points to a trend in the media which portrays female terrorists as driven by love and not by firm political beliefs and aspirations. In the western news, and among some scholars, there is a recurring narrative that women's involvement in terrorism is motivated by the love and approval of a man. That women are "lured" into terrorism by men they admire like their fathers, brothers or lovers. There is also a theme of women who join terrorist groups because they've lost someone they love. The media reinforces the idea of the Terrorist for the sake of love frame even though research reveals that there is no gender difference in the recruitment to terrorist organisations. Both men and women are most often influenced by someone they know (Nacos 2005, p. 440-442).

The Women's Lib/Equality Frame

Another theme in the media is The Women's Lib/Equality Frame. This frame explains women's participation in terror organisations as motivated by the struggle for female liberation and gender equality. This narrative was prevalent in the past, and according to Nacos, it is still being emphasised in the media today, especially in traditionally male-dominated and patriarchal societies (Nacos 2005, p. 442- 444).

The Tough-As-Males/Tougher-Than-Men Frame

Nacos' fifth frame refers to how women who are successful in areas that are dominated by men are often described in comparison to their male counterparts. There is a theme in the mass-media of female politicians and terrorist being depicted as equally tough or even tougher than the men. The female terrorist is many times portrayed as wanting to prove herself and therefore being more violent, extremist and deadly. This ultimately results in her being viewed as less of a woman, when choosing to participate in political violence over her "duties" as a daughter or a mother (Nacos 2005, p.444 - 445).

The Bored, Naive, Out-Of-Touch-With-Reality Frame

The final frame is The Bored, Naive, Out-of-touch-with-reality Frame in which Nacos describes as a mass-mediated depiction of female terrorists who participate in political violence simply because they are naive or bored. Women are being portrayed as non-political and clueless of the motives and aspirations of the organisation they are being recruited to. Nacos also writes that there are no similar news stories on men being involved in terrorism because of boredom, making this an exclusively female stereotype (Nacos 2005, p. 445).

Name of frame	Identifiers
The physical appearance frame	Physical attributes, i.e. figure, clothes, hair, mannerism.
The Family Connection Frame	Family background, i.e. portrayed as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters or emphasis on relationship status.
The Terrorist for the sake of love frame	Driven by love, i.e. lured by a man or motivated by the approval from a man/loss of a loved one.
The Women's Lib/Equality Frame	Motivated by female liberation and/or gender equality.
The Tough-as-Males/Tougher-than-Men Frame	Described in comparison to male counterparts, i.e. equally as tough or tougher than men.
The Bored, Naive, Out-of-touch-with-reality Frame	Women as non-political/clueless/naive or bored.

Table 1. In the table the frames and their primary identifiers are summarized.

3. Method and Material

In the following section, the method and material used in the thesis study will be presented and explained.

3.1 Case Study

The method of this thesis is a Single-N case study. George and Bennett define a case as “a phenomenon of scientific interest that an investigator chooses to study with the aim of developing theory (or “generic knowledge”) regarding the causes of similarities or differences among instances of that class of events” (2005, p.17). A good case study should, according to Halperin and Heath, have internal validity, i.e. say something interesting and meaningful about the case that’s being studied. It should also aim to say something more general and engage in broader academic debates, be applicable to other contexts and cases and propose externally valid theories (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 214).

3.2 Discourse Analysis

In their book on political research, Halperin and Heath (2017) describe discourse analysis as the study of text within the social context. It is a qualitative study that is interested in how discourses give legitimacy and meaning in the social world (p. 454). Discourse analysis is both interpretivist, since it is concerned with understanding the meanings attributed to human behaviour and constructivist, seeing that it is also interested with how discursive practices construct meanings through the production, dissemination and consumption of text (Halperin & Heath 2017, p.336-337). There are several different approaches within discourse analysis but according to Bergström and Boréus they all share the belief that the written or spoken language does not simply reflect the reality we live but helps shape it into what it is. (Bergström & Boréus 2012, p. 354). Discourse analysis is based on the fundamental idea that meanings are discursively constructed, and that language is a medium aimed at action and function. This notion is the cornerstone in the Speech Act theory which is the main theory in Discourse Analysis. It argues that we do not just speak (or write) to speak, there is an intention behind it and when we speak/write we can make attitudes, opinions, events, processes and relationships real. Language can be used to create different kinds of social and cultural meaning and by that construct different versions of the social world (Halperin & Heath 2017, p. 337).

When choosing discourse analysis as a method to perform a study one often has to combine it with relevant theories in order to create a wide-ranging framework. The discourse analysis in itself is not a comprehensive approach and needs to be complemented with additional theories and frames (Fairclough 2010). In this thesis, the discourse analysis will be complemented with the Nacos framework.

3.2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

This thesis method is mainly inspired by Norman Fairclough and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse, and it considers language to be a form of social practice. CDA studies the written or spoken word, and its primary aim is to expose the connection between language, power and ideology (Fairclough 2010, p.4). The approach focuses on the pre-existing social structures and power relationships, particularly examining who has control over discourses in society. CDA argues that discursive power is not only an essential factor in social power but also helps reproduce dominance and hegemony. Those who are viewed as authoritative and trustworthy like experts, scholars and the media have a considerable influence over the public discourse since the public generally accepts their beliefs and opinions to be true (Halperin & Heath 2017, p.339).

Van Dijk (2015) explains that CDA is not a particular method of discourse analysis, even though often mistaken for one. In CDA, all methods of discourse studies and appropriate methods of social science and humanities can be used. It is not a direction of research among others within discourse but a critical perspective that can be applied to all areas of discourse studies. He explains the perspective as following “CDA is discourse study with an attitude” (Van Dijk 2015, p. 466),

Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework embodies the overall purpose of the CDA to examine the relations between discourses and social structures. Fairclough assumes that any use of language is a communicative event and that every communicative event consists of three dimensions: a text (spoken or written language), a discourse practice (the production and interpretation of a text, and a social practice (Bergström & Boréus 2012, p. 375-376). In addition to the dimensions, Fairclough developed three corresponding stages that one can use

when examining a social event: description, interpretation and explanation. (Fairclough 1992, Fairclough 2013, p. 94).

The models' first dimension is called **text**. Text can be speech, writing, images or a mix of all three forms of communication, and it is an analysis at the word level. The **description** stage focuses on formal features such as vocabulary, grammar, sentence coherence and syntax, which is what discourses and genres are realised from (Fairclough 1989, p 26). In the first dimension, there are several analytical tools that one can use to examine discourse. One can look at the collection of words that we choose when we speak or write. By choosing certain words, one's attitude towards a subject becomes apparent. For example, the choice to label a person a terrorist or a freedom fighter depends on the senders' view of the event that took place (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 62). Modality is another analytical tool that can be applied, and it is where the researcher examines the authors level of agreement with a statement. Journalists often present their information and material as hard facts instead of interpretations (Bergström & Boréus 2012, p. 376; Fairclough, 2013 s. 267; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000, p. 87-88). Modality can also point to who gets to express themselves in a text. Who is given space by the media and how their views are presented has a significant impact on whose perspective is perceived as legitimate (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000, p. 88).

The second dimension is called **discursive practice**. It concerns the production, distribution and consumption of texts. The discursive practice level is the **interpretation** stage, and it analysis intertextuality, how producers of texts, like authors and journalists, use discourses and genres that already exists to create a text. This thesis will look at the *intertextual chain*, which focuses on the expression of reoccurring themes (Fairclough 1995, p. 202). Discursive practice connects texts and social practice, meaning that it is only through the discursive practice that texts shape and are shaped by social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 61-62).

The third dimension is called **social practice**, and it is concerned with the structures of a society or an organisation, the social, political, economic context. The analysis in this dimension is formed in the **explanation** stage, and it takes place on the norm level. When language creates opinions and characterises our attitudes, it creates social relationships and

practices. Language is associated with power, and it is a huge part of our communication. Communication is a social event, and language forms the context of our social community, it is a part of establishing and creating norms and traditions. (Bergström & Boréus 2012, p. 375).

Fairclough's framework has been criticised by scholars who deem it to be too broad as well as challenging to understand and use. The model is, however, beneficial when one wishes to examine what the sender wants to convey to a recipient, map out recurring discourses and themes, and research how discourses help produce and preserve dominance and hegemony. It is, therefore, relevant and helpful to this thesis. The text and discursive practices will be the main focus of the analysis.

3.3 Material

The material used in the background, theory and method section has been somewhat limited by the current pandemic Covid-19. Due to the restraints of isolation and the governmental travel restriction, certain books and articles, that were not available online, could not be included in the thesis.

The study is focused on US media outlets and the material consists of cultural documents in the form of newspaper articles and editorials on the Kurdish female fighters. The decision to focus on U.S. media is motivated by the U.S. involvement in the conflict, their relationship with Turkey, and how they US media has portrayed the female Palestinian fighters in the past which is highlighted in Nacos research. The Newspapers have been selected to try to represent the U.S. media as a whole. Therefore, they are diverse enough to reflect different political views but also fit the requirements of mainstream media like significant public reach. The 13 articles being used in the study have been selected from 10 of the biggest newspapers in the United States: Christian Post, CNN, Fox News, Houston Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, New York Post, San Francisco Gate, the Walls Street Journal, Washington Post, Washington Times and Time Magazine. Certain newspapers like USA Today and Daily News (USA) could not be included in the study since they are not accessible online in Europe. Other news sources required paid subscriptions to be able to access their material, although some subscriptions were purchased, like the Wall Street

Journal, others were not included in the study due to the financial requirements, for example Bloomberg.

The data has been collected from the American journals/newspapers databases and archives as well as Lexis Nexis database. On Lexis Nexis the following search phrases words were used to retrieve the articles from the database: Kurdish female fighter*, Kurdish female militia, Kurd* AND (female* or women*) AND fighter*, Syria* AND War AND Kurd*, PKK, PYD, YPG, YPJ. However, the Lund university's account only provided limited access to the database content and searching the individual newspapers archives proved to be an easier and less time-consuming process. The original idea was to collect articles from 2014 - 2016 which is when the majority of the conflict occurred. This time frame was, however, proven to be too narrow and the search was extended from 2014- 2019, although the majority of the articles are still written between 2014-2016.

4. Results and Analysis

In the following part of the thesis, the results from the discourse analysis will be presented. Each article was researched separately, but the results have been summarised and categorised by frame due to lack of space and to give the reader a better overview of the analysis. The analysis will focus on the text, discourses and intertextuality in the articles. Because of limited space not all accounts of the analysis will be presented in the results, instead certain examples are chosen to represent recurring themes. The words and sentences that are highlighted in bold in the quotes represent the identified signifiers within the frame.

4.1 The Physical Appearance Frame

In a little more than half of the news articles, there is a particular focus on women's appearance. The physical appearance frame was identified in 7 of the 13 editorials, which all contained details in women's manners, figure, clothes and overall look. In two of the articles, there is only a brief mention of the woman's clothes "*a colourful scarf*" (Tavakolian 2015) or "*Wearing beaded headdresses over military camouflage*" (Ignatius 2016). The other five, however, pay a great deal of attention to physical attributes in women, especially those who clash with the traditional image of a fighter. Out of all the articles Wes Enzinna (2015), for the New York Times, is deemed to be the most descriptive in his portrayals of the Kurdish female fighters. In one of his interviews with a female YPJ commander and he provides, what some might regard as, excessive information regarding the woman's appearance.

*"We met Deniz Derik, a 24-year-old YPJ commander who wore **pink socks** and a **calculator watch**, her **coal-black hair pulled into a ponytail tucked beneath a backward camo cap**..." (Enzinna 2015).*

In the description, one could identify a contrast between the pink socks and a backward camo cap. The pink socks could be an example of an attribute that conflicts with the classic image of a soldier. When mentioned in the same sentence as a more traditional military attire, like a camo cap, the distinction becomes even more apparent. By singling out small details that do not fit the stereotype of a combatant, the author can, ever so subtly, contribute to the sensationalisation of female soldiers. Becatoros' (2015) article contain a similar contrasting image of clothes that do not fit the stereotype of a combatant.

In Los Angeles Times and Trudy Rubin's articles for the San Francisco Gate and Houston Chronicles the sensationalised image of the female soldier is instead expressed by portraying the fighter's physical frames. Their height and the fact that they are petite is emphasised in the descriptions.

*"We don't need outside help," proclaimed Khwezuya Hesret, 30, a commander **barely 5 feet tall**..." Instead, we sent them all off for dinner with the prophet Muhammad!" joked another **petite** fighter"* (Los Angeles Times 2014).

*"A **petite** woman with **uncovered hair**, and wearing a **black pants suit**, **white sweater**, and no **makeup**, Yusuf exuded authority."* (Rubin 2016).

The image of a fighter being small, and dainty is a sharp contrast to the stereotypical portrayal of a soldier, who is usually pictured as big and strong. One can, therefore, argue that the particular choice of words can be perceived as a way to sensationalise the women's participation in combat. On the other hand, this could just be the author describing the woman being interviewed. However, none of the women in the articles is portrayed in a way that would actually fit the traditional image of a soldier, like large or muscular.

When describing the fighters of the YPJ., some authors also use words that one could argue highlights their beauty. The article circulated in San Francisco Gate and the Houston Chronicles, for example, describe the fighters as "*women with long flowing hair*". The journalist of the article, Trudy Rubin, (2016) also takes it one step further where she not only describes the women in a way that can be seen as highlighting their beauty, but she also assesses a woman's appearance and deems her "attractive" in the text.

*"Deniz Sipan, an **attractive** 21-year-old, **dressed in fatigues**, was an architecture student in Damascus when the Arab Spring began in 2011".* (Rubin 2016)

That the woman is attractive is not a relevant context to an underlying story in the text, nor is it something that is referred back to later in the article. It is merely a statement, and therefore one could argue that it sexualises the woman.

One aspect that is important to recognise while analysing the physical appearance frame is that even though some of the articles did not contain the particular discourse, they included several images of the female Kurdish fighters. The two CNN articles by Sarah Lazarus (2019) and Ghazi Balkiz, Angela Dewan (2017) and the article by Ayla Albayrak & Margaret Coker (2014) in the Wall street journal include several portrait photos, close-ups and videos of the women they were interviewing. The article's large number of photos raise the question of whether there still is a particular focus on the women's appearance in those articles but just presented through the visual mediums instead.

4.2 The Family Connection Frame

Out of all of the frames, the one that could be identified the most in U.S. media was the Family Connection Frame. In 11 out of 13 articles, women were defined in relation to their relatives and family status. Considerable attention was paid to the women's family background in the US press and the news outlets frequently used information that they have gathered from interviews with the family to depict the female fighters. In 5 of the articles; Macura (2015), Becatoros (2014), Albayrak & Coker (2014), Los Angeles Times (2014) and Simkin (2014) the female decision to join the YPJ were portrayed as being motivated or influenced by their family. In two of these articles, the primary motivation to engage in political violence can be perceived as associated with the death of a close relative.

“Nineteen-year-old Shida’s father was a fighter before her. After he was killed, she gave up hopes of becoming an artist and decided she must follow in his footsteps to honor his example” (Simkin 2, 2014). “

In this quote, the author describes how Shida chose to join the militia to honour her father, and his death is portrayed as her sole motivation for joining the YPJ. Other articles contain similar discourses where the author appears to be emphasising family connections in terms of motivations and not discussing any other possible reason to engage in political violence. The narrative of the family as the sole motivator is, however, not found in the depiction of men. The men's motivations in the articles are most often portrayed as ideological and political.

The women are portrayed as daughters in 7 of the articles, and it is one of the most apparent themes within the family connection frame. In Becatoros article (2014) that was featured in Fox News, the Kurdish fighter Perwin Dihap is referred to as a daughter five times. The journalist structures the entire article around the family's suffering and how they deal with the loss of a family member. The mother's perspective is the most prominent and Becatoros narrates the mother's reactions during Perwin's funeral.

“I am happy and I am proud of my daughter; she is the martyr of Kurdistan and Kobani,” said Dihap as she prepared to bury her youngest child.” (Becatoros 2014).

The portrayal of the mother's loss could be seen as the ultimate sacrifice for the survival of the nation, and Perwin's mother expressed her willingness to give her daughter to the Kurdish cause throughout the article. Whether the parents support their daughters choice to join the YPJ or not is a recurring theme in the portrayal of the fighters as daughters and can also be seen in Tavakolian (2015), Albayrak & Coker (2014), Lazarus (2019), Rubin (2016), Simkin 1 (2014) and Simkin 2 (2014). The journalists seem to dwell on whether the women joined the militia with or without their parent's permission in the articles. The focus on the parents' approval could imply that there is underlying prejudice amongst the journalists that the Kurdish women are not entirely free to make their own choices. This bias could be derived from orientalism and the stereotype that women of the east are oppressed. However, the emphasis on the parents' support or lack thereof could also be seen as a way to highlight the fact that many women are very young when they join the YPJ.

The family connection frame originally includes female fighters being depicted as wives or mothers. The female fighters are never portrayed in this way throughout the articles. However, this can be explained by the fact that soldiers in the YPJ are not allowed to marry or bear children. The YPJ fighter relationship status is questioned in three of the articles, and the authors discuss the fact that they are single. In Enzinna's (2015) article, he openly states that YPJ fighters are not allowed to marry while Macura (2015) writes that "**women are committed to the cause that they choose not to marry or have kids**". She portrays it as an active choice in a male-dominated society, and so does Rubin (2016).

"Sipan soon realised that in this more conservative area her options were limited to teaching — and getting married... "Kurdish women when they get married, they give up life," she said, making a face, and speaking in the excellent English she learned from watching old American movies. "I didn't like this idea." Rubin (2016).

The interview with Sipan can be seen as describing the Kurdish women's choices as very limited and that if they got married, they would not be in control of their own lives. None of the articles specifies why the no-marriage policy is in place and instead portrays the Kurdish women not being married as something positive and a way to avoid being oppressed. The narrative of marriage in Kurdistan being oppressive towards women could be traced back to orientalism in which men of the "east" are viewed as abusers and the women as victims.

4.3 The Terrorist For The Sake Of Love Frame

The Terrorist for the sake of love frame is, as mentioned earlier, related to the Family Connection Frame. In the previous section, we could see how three of the articles portrayed the female soldiers as driven by the love and approval of a man or motivated by the death of someone they loved. There is only one account in the articles that could be interpreted as a woman being “lured” by a man. In Time Magazine Newsha Tavakolian (2015) interviews as a mom whose daughter joined the YPJ.

*“She met a YPG member [an armed Kurdish force] at her brother’s house, and he started **influencing** her. And before we knew it, she left home and went to Mount Qandil [the PKK’s main base in northern Iraq].*

The article, however, never reveals the nature of the relationship, and one cannot know whether it was romantic or not. Therefore, the frame is not applicable.

4.4 The Women's Lib/Equality Frame

The Women's lib/Equality frame is very apparent in the newspapers and was identified in 10 articles out of 13. The majority of the articles explains women's participation in political violence as motivated by the struggle for female liberation and gender equality. In a couple of the editorials, particularly in Rubin (2016) and Balkiz & Dewan (2017), the frame is interpreted to be the primary focal point of the portrayal of the Kurdish female fighters.

Within the Women's Lib/Equality Frame, certain discourses can be observed in the articles. One narrative that is re-occurring in the news media is how joining the YPJ provided the women with freedom and gender equality.

*“Women soldiers are free and proud...free of all boundaries and cultural restrictions. Women are mostly under a man's power in this part of the world. However as **soldiers we are equal, even in the field,**” said Kobani (Macura 2015).*

In this quote, Macura is interviewing a female Kurdish fighter named Kobani, and her answers seem to be describing how joining the militia has changed her status in society. She portrays her new life as a soldier as freer and less restricted by social norms, an image that is also portrayed in Simkin (2014), Rubin (2016), Lazarus (2019) and Balkiz & Dewan (2017). Despite the horrors of war, the female experience of joining YPJ is on several occasions, portrayed in a positive light. The emphasis on how joining the military has transformed the women's' life and given them more freedom and equality also says something about their life before recruitment. Their traditional lives are by default, portrayed as the opposite of free and equal, another example of a discourse that can be perceived to portray orientalist notions of Kurdish women being oppressed.

The Women's Lib/Equality Frame is also used to depict the Kurdish female fighter's motivation to engage in political violence. In several articles, the interviews express that one of the reasons behind the females' decision to fight for the YPJ is to stop the oppression of women. In Balkiz & Dewan's (2017) article ISIS oppression of the women in Raqqa is portrayed as a part of the YPJ's motivation to engage in battle.

“When asked what motivated them to dive into one of the fiercest battles against the terror group to date, the women said they did it both for the Kurdish cause and to liberate the women of Raqqa.” ...Women were especially oppressed by ISIS in Raqqa. That’s another reason why we fight ISIS -- we wanted to free women from oppression.” ...These people -- ISIS -- see women as sex objects, as sub-human,” she said. “We fight against that.” (Balkiz & Dewan 2017).

These quotes from the CNN-article paints a very black and white picture and portrays ISIS as the sole oppressor of female rights and liberties, a narrative that also can be detected in Coker & Albayrak (2014) and Macura (2015). It does not mention how women are systematically oppressed elsewhere in the world or the lack of equality that has existed within the Kurdish community itself. By using the discourse, the U.S. media seems to simplify the conflict for the audience, providing a clear distinction between who is good and evil, who is the hero and who is the enemy.

Other articles, however, adopts a broader narrative which depicts the Kurdish fighter’s motivation as part of the overall female struggle against a patriarchal society. This discourse can be found in the selected quotes below but also in Rubin (2016).

“Eighteen- year-old fighter Torin Khairegi: “We live in a world where women are dominated by men. We are here to take control of our future” ...” (Tavakolian 2015).

“Diljin told Hamad that she is fighting for women’s rights. According to Hamad, many of the fighters are waging war on the patriarchy -- as well as enemy combatants. They fight for equality by taking on traditionally masculine roles and transforming perceptions (Lazarus 2019).

In the two excerpts, the motivation to fight is not portrayed as directed at the oppression from a particular enemy like the previous narrative. Here the struggle is instead, portrayed as ideological. The feminist notions of freedom and equality are portrayed as the primary reason to engage in battle. In Lazarus (2019) article, one can also argue that the women are portrayed to be under the impression that by joining the militia, they can help transform norms and societal perceptions of gender.

4.5 The Tough-As-Males/Tougher-Than-Men Frame

The Tough as Males/Tougher-than-Men Frame is present in the news articles discourses but not as prevalent as one might assume by looking at the results of the “Women’s Lib/Equality Frame” where the sexes are presented as equal in many depictions. The women are described in comparison to their male counterparts in 7 of the 13 articles. The theme of females being depicted as equally tough or even tougher than the men can be seen in the Washington Post, Fox News, San Francisco Gate/Houston Chronicles and the Wall Street Journal.

In “The new coalition to destroy the Islamic State” David Ignatius (2016) comments on the toughness of the YPJ.

“The Syrian Kurds are ferocious fighters, men and women alike...”

One could interpret that by calling both men and women “ferocious fighters” the author tries to convey them as equally tough in his article. The statement is not claimed by anyone, and it is therefore presented more as a fact rather than an interpretation. Albayrak and Coker’s (2014) article also include what could be understood as a discourse of women being equally as tough as men. The author’s uses a metaphor from an interview with a senior Kurdish leader in the editorial.

“When you fight a lion, it doesn’t matter if it’s a male or female,”

The lion is traditionally used as a symbol for bravery and strength, and here it is chosen to portray the Kurdish fighters. When the Kurdish leader says that in battle, it does not matter if the lion is a male or a female, this could be viewed as a statement that the Kurdish men and women are equally as tough. The fact that it is a senior Kurdish leader who claims the comment is also important, and it could be the journalist way to convey that this is a belief that is shared by the Kurdish community.

In Tavakolian article (2015) in TIME magazine, there are other comparisons of toughness than with the YPJ’s male counterparts. She compares the YPJ to the men of ISIS:

*“It’s fitting that **ISIS will be facing off against female fighters** like 18-year-old Zilan Orkesh...When she killed an ISIS fighter for the first time, she began cheering loudly, hoping the sound would reach the ears of other jihadists. “I wanted to let them know that their worst nightmare had come true,” she says. **“Their friend had been killed by a woman”**”.*

In the portrayal of Zilan’s first kill, one can detect that there is a reference to an underlying context of ISIS suppression and abuse of women. The fact that the journalist mentions that he thinks it is particularly fitting that ISIS is battling female fighters seems to indicate that she believes that ISIS view women as being less capable than men. Therefore, the image of Zilan killing one of the ISIS fighters could be seen as a testament to how ISIS is wrong and that women are just as tough or even tougher than the jihadist men.

Only seven articles have explicit examples of females being compared to men. However, there are several other examples of women being portrayed as tough and fearless in the line of duty. As we established earlier, the traditional image of a fighter is a man and war is viewed as a male sphere. Therefore, one could argue that the portrayal of women as eager to participate in battle is in itself a statement of their toughness being equal to that of a man. An example of this is that the authors repeatedly emphasise that the women do not only act as supporting roles in the conflict but that they are also on the frontlines of battle. This is a prevalent theme in Ignatius (2016), Simkin (2014), Becatoros (2014) and Rubin (2016).

*“On the **front lines** of the battle for Kobani, **Kurdish female fighters have been playing a major role in helping defend the Syrian town from the onslaught by the Islamic State extremist group**” (Simkin 2 2014).*

In this quote, the author emphasises that the women are in the thick of battle by portraying them on the frontline. The fact that their role in defending Kobani is described as “major” could also be interpreted as a way to show that they are not there to assist the men but rather have an active role in combat.

Other discourses that can be seen as testaments to the women's toughness comes from describing their will to keep fighting despite being injured in battle, losing a loved one and being willing to die for their cause.

*"21-year-old Shirin told Hamad that **despite having suffered severe injuries, she wants to remain in the militia after the war**" (Lazarus, 2019).*

*"Instead of sapping her morale, **her friend's death has increased her determination to fight**" (Albayrak & Coker 2014).*

*"U.S. advisers say **the Kurdish women are so tough** they sometimes go into battle with **suicide belts** so they won't be captured by Islamic State fighters who would turn them into sex slaves" (Ignatius, 2016).*

The narrative that these quotes embody can be interpreted as an attempt to convey the Kurdish women's fearlessness and conviction, by overcoming challenges that for other soldiers might be a reason to leave the military. The discourse of fighting despite being injured in battle, losing a loved one or being willing to die for their cause can also be found in Becatoros (2014), Los Angeles Times (2014) and Macura (2015).

The discourse of a female wanting to prove herself and therefore being more violent, extremist and deadly, which is a part of the "The Tough as Males/Tougher-than-Men Frame", was not found in the study. The perception that by choosing to participate in political violence over her "duties" as a daughter or a mother would make her less of a woman was not an apparent theme either. However, some articles did share stories of women who after being part of the YPJ, believed that going back to the traditional gender stereotypes was no longer an option.

*"If she survives the battle for Kobani, **Ms. Kobane said she knows her battlefield experience will alter her life forever. "After this, I can't imagine leading a life of a traditional Kurdish woman, caring for a husband and children at home," she said. "I used to want that before this war."*** (Albayrak & Coker 2014).

The portrayal of the woman's life being changed forever by joining the YPJ and the image of her not wanting to return to the traditional life of a Kurdish woman could be interpreted as choosing political violence over her duties as a daughter or mother. However, the idea that this would make her any less of a woman is not found to be expressed in this segment. The narrative of women choosing the life as a fighter over being married and having kids is repeated in Macura (2015) and Rubin (2016) as well.

If one chose to include the accounts of women being tough without the direct comparison to men, the number of articles that the frame is prevalent in would change. The number would increase from 7 out of 13 to 10 out of 13 articles which would make the "Tough as Males/Tougher-than-Men" frame a far more prevalent discourse in the United States media.

4.6 The Bored, Naive, Out-Of-Touch-With-Reality Frame

The one frame that was never portrayed in the selected articles was the Bored, Naive, Out-of-touch-with reality frame. The narrative that women engage in political violence simply because they are bored or naive was not found in any of the newspapers. The female Kurdish fighters were not depicted as clueless of the motives and goals of the Kurdish militia either, quite the opposite. The women of the YPJ was portrayed as highly political, and there are several examples of their ideological beliefs being highlighted in the newspapers. The Kurdish cause in terms of motivation is discussed in five articles (Simkin 1 2014), (Rubin 2016), (Lazarus, 2019), (Balkiz & Dewan 2017) and (Albayrak & Coker 2014). Female liberation is, as shown in the “Women’s Lib/Equality Frame”, addressed in 10 out of 13 articles. These two motivations are often brought up in reference to the PKK and the ideology of its leader Abdullah Ocalan.

	The Physical Appearance Frame	The Family Connection Frame	The Terrorist for the sake of love frame	The Women’s Lib/Equality Frame	The Tough-as-Males/ Tougher-than -Men Frame	The Bored, Naive, Out-of-touch -with-reality Frame
Christian Post		X		X	X	
CNN 1		X		X	X	
CNN 2				X		
Fox News	X	X			X	
Houston Chronicles	X	X		X	X	
Los Angeles Times	X	X	X		X	
San Francisco Gate	X	X		X	X	
The New York Times	X	X		X		
Time Magazine	X	X		X	X	
Wall Street Journal		X	X	X	X	
Washington Times 1		X		X	X	
Washington Times 2		X	X			
Washington Post	X			X	X	
Total:	7	11	3	10	7 / 10	0

Table 2. This table demonstrates the analysis of each individual article in the study and what frames were found in them. It also summarizes the total amount of articles that each frame was identified in.

4.7 Additional Frames

In this section of the thesis two additional frames that were identified in the articles will be presented and analysed.

4.7.1 The Young-Child-Teenager Frame

One discourse that was repeated throughout the articles but did not completely fit in the frames provided by Nacos was a narrative that in this thesis will be called “The young- child-teenager frame”. In 10 out of 13 articles there was a particular focus on the female Kurdish fighters age. The news media mentions the female fighters ages far more than the male counterparts or the age of other women in the articles. The age of the Kurdish female fighters highlighted in Enzinna (2015), Simkin 1 (2014), Simkin 2 (2014), Albayrak & Coker (2014) and Balkiz & Dewan (2017), (Tavakolian 2015). The author of the article in TIME magazine points out the women’s age on six separate occasions.

Apart from emphasizing the age of the female fighters, the newspapers also use other more descriptive languages to portray their youth. They repeatedly use words like young, child, and teenager when referring to the women of the YPJ. This descriptive language is used in Enzinna (2015), Rubin (2016) and in the citation below from Balkiz & Dewan (2017). By choosing certain words to describe the female fighters, the authors could convey their underlying attitudes. In Tavakolian’s (2015) article for TIME magazine the women are referred to as girls, a word that could easily be replaced by another but when used creates an image that females joining the Kurdish militia are very young. Trudy Rubin (2016) likens some soldiers in a photo with “U.S college students on spring break” and the article in the Wall Street Journal emphasize how a woman was “still in high-school” when she joined the resistance (Albayrak & Coker 2014). These narratives could be seen as a part of the Naive frame, but despite highlighting the women’s young age, their intentions and motivations are not questioned in the articles. Instead, the age can be perceived to sensationalize the fighters further, and only a few of the articles subtly hint at the fact that the underage women are legally still children. The controversy of the Kurdish forces' apparent use of child-soldiers is down-played and not something that the US media dwells on in the newspapers

*“These **young women** are much more mature than their counterparts in Europe, because they have experienced so much already.”* (Lazarus 2019)

The description of the Kurdish women as more mature can be seen as an attempt to rationalize the use of underage women in the military. The lack of criticism against the Kurds implied use of child-soldiers, could be explained by a desire to not divert from the established frames of the Kurds as the “heroes” of the conflict. Like previously mentioned in the theory section to frame means that the media highlights certain aspects of reality, making them more important while other factors are overshadowed. This is done in order to keep a consistency about issues in the news stories.

4.7.2 The “Anti-Oppressed Woman Frame”

Throughout the articles, there is a narrative of trying to separate the Kurdish female fighters from the image of the oppressed Muslim/Arabic woman. This discourse will be called the “Anti-oppressed woman” frame in this thesis.

The Kurds and their female militias are in some articles viewed as an exception in the Arab world. They are sensationalized through their defiance of gender stereotypes, and they are on several occasions compared to the rest of the middle east, which is portrayed as conservative and oppressive towards women. In Macura (2015) the women are portrayed as challenging the gender roles of the Arab world. One can argue that Macura’s depiction of the Kurds creates the image of them as an exception to the other Arab societies. In Rubin’s (2016) and Ignatius (2016) articles the Arab world is perceived to be unwilling to accept these changes to the gender roles.

“I am fighting for society to understand that they have to let women do what they want,” she says. The Rojavan Kurds are trying to promote this message in a resistant Middle East” (Rubin 2016.)

The equality of male-female sacrifice, proclaimed on billboards in Kurdish regions, is a breath of fresh air in a Middle East where women’s rights are suppressed” (Ignatius 2016).

The statements in the quotes above regarding the middle east being resistant to female liberation and rights are not claimed by anyone and therefore portrayed as the objective truth and not the authors’ opinion. The narrative portrayed in these quotes can be seen as built on preconceived notions of the middle east and Arab societies. By presenting the Kurdish struggle for female emancipation as a unique case in the region, one does not only sensationalize the Kurds, but it also demonizes the portrayed image of the middle east attitudes towards women. The statement that the Arab world is unwilling to accept the changes that the Kurdish fighters have made to the gender roles makes it seem like the middle eastern societies are also against the female Kurdish fighters and their cause. This depiction could further the portrayal of the divide between the Kurds and the rest of the Arab world.

The image of women being equally as tough or even tougher than men does not fit the western stereotype of a Muslim woman either. In the New York Times, the women of the YPJ are portrayed as tough in comparison to women in western countries.

*“Are you afraid of dying?” I asked her a few moments later. “Afraid?” she said. “Why should I be afraid? Being a martyr is the best thing possible” ... “Fighting is ugly,” she added. “But fighting for this is beautiful. **Fear is for your Western women in their kitchens.** (Enzinna 2015).*

In this excerpt, the author highlights the fearlessness of the Kurdish women and the Kurdish fighters can be seen as compared to western women. In Enzinna’s interview with a member of the YPJ, the Kurds are portrayed as fighters on the battlefield, while women of western countries are depicted in the domestic scene of a kitchen. By comparing them in this way, the Kurdish women in this statement appear to be not only braver but also more liberated than western women. This clashes against the traditional western view of the middle eastern woman as it can be perceived to portray the western women as more oppressed than the Kurds.

5. Conclusion

The following section will discuss and conclude the study's results and meaning. The conclusion is based on relevant and interesting aspects of the result and is discussed in relation to previous research. Finally, suggestions are made for further research.

Since the battle of Kobane, the fighters of the YPJ have been sensationalised and received immense attention in western news media. Previous research has shown that female combatants are portrayed differently than their male counterparts, and this assumption became the starting point for my research on the representations of the YPJ. The purpose of this study was to examine how US media has portrayed the Kurdish female fighters in Syria. The research question that the thesis intended to answer was "*How has the U.S. media portrayed the female Kurdish soldiers in the YPJ fighting Daesh in Syria?*". Nacos (2005) framework on the media's perception of women in male spheres was used as a theoretical foundation to answer this question, and the portrayal of the YPJ was examined through a Critical Discourse Analysis inspired by Norman Fairclough (2010).

The results from the discourse analysis showed that the portrayal of the YPJ shares several themes with the framework developed by Nacos (2005). Certain frames were more prevalent than others, and the analysis concluded that the most apparent out of Nacos frames were the "Family connection frame" and the "Women's lib/Equality frame". They were identified in almost every article, and the discourses in these frames were also the main focus in some of the journalists' portrayals. The "Bored, Naive, Out-of-touch-with-reality frame" that were used to portray female terrorist in the American news media could, however, not be identified in any of the articles. The YPJ was portrayed as the opposite of naive or bored. They were depicted as highly political in the U.S. media, and there were several examples of their sense of purpose and ideological beliefs being highlighted in the newspapers. When comparing the framing patterns, this thesis reaches the same conclusion as Nacos. That there are entrenched gender stereotypes that are used to portray women in male spheres and that there are similarities in the depiction of political actors deemed legitimate (YPJ) and illegitimate (women in terrorism).

Two new additional frames were identified in the articles, and they were named the "Young-Child- Teenager Frame" and the "Anti-Oppressed Woman Frame". The first frame was as

prevalent as the “Women’s lib/Equality frame” and could be identified in almost every article. “The Young- Child- Teenager Frame” showed that there was a particular focus on the female Kurdish fighters age in the portrayals. The news media mentioned the female fighters ages far more than they did their male counterparts or other women in the articles. Descriptive language to convey the women as young was also used repeatedly by the journalists.

The second additional frame, the “Anti-Oppressed Woman Frame”, was the most prevalent in connection to the “Women’s lib/Equality frame” and the “Tough-as-Males/ Tougher-than-Men Frame”. Throughout the articles, there was a recurring theme of trying to separate the Kurdish female fighters from the traditional western image of a Muslim/Arabic woman. This narrative is particularly interesting in relation to previous research on how the U.S. media has portrayed Muslim women in the past. Based on the analysis, one could argue that the Kurdish female fighter’s obvious defiance of the orientalist stereotype of a Muslim woman create discord within the U.S. media. By highlighting aspects of the Kurds that can be perceived as western ideals and describing them as a unique phenomenon in an oppressive Arab world, the western media can keep consistency in their news stories of the Muslim woman and the Middle East. An observation was made while analysing the articles that did not fit the framework but could be interesting to the “Anti-Oppressed Woman Frame”. Even though the majority of the Kurdish forces adhere to the Islamic faith, their religious beliefs were only mentioned three times throughout all thirteen articles. The word Muslim is also never brought up in direct relation to the YPJ fighters. While other perspectives of their lives and societies are highlighted their religion is overshadowed in the portrayals of the female Kurdish fighters.

5.1 Future Research

The Women’s Protection Unit in Syria and the media portrayals of them is a fascinating research subject. Based on the results of this study and its position in the research field, I propose further comparative research using Nacos framework to examine the portrayal of the YPJ in comparison to women who are perceived to be illegitimate political actors. This study has shown similarities in the depictions of these two groups, which in turn has highlighted a lack of research in what differentiates the portrayals of women in male spheres. Namely, how

the female “freedom” fighter vs the female “terrorist” is portrayed and what the significant difference between the two discourses are.

In addition to that research, I have during this study paid attention to further interesting patterns. Through the “Anti-Oppressed Woman Frame”, a will to separate the image of the Kurdish woman from the traditional western view of a Muslim woman was identified. In the analysis, the U.S. news media showed patterns of wanting to position the Kurds against the rest of the Arab world. It would, therefore, be of interest to study how the Kurdish female fighters have been portrayed in the middle eastern press and if the depictions share any similarities to the image of YPJ in American news.

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