Framing Women in Terrorist Organisations: Female Warriors and Brainwashed Victims

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MA Programme Euroculture Declaration

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Abstract

Media interest for women involved in terrorist organisations has increased in the recent years. While the Syrian conflict has seen a number of Non-State actors fighting against each other, this research, by putting the case-study of ISIS and YPJ women at its core, seeks to analyse the binary narrative of the YPJ portrayed as heroines vs. ISIS women represented as brainwashed victims. By analysing frames found in French and British newspapers about these women, this thesis aims at understanding who is considered a legitimate political agent and who is not and why. Taking a critical standpoint, this research will conclude that the dominant ideological discourse might shape who, in a given context, becomes an agent, arguing that the discourse about women terrorists, more than only a question of gender, requires to consider questions of values and shared interests.

Keywords: women; terrorism; ISIS; YPG; agency
**Table of Contents**

1. General introduction........................................................................................................ 7
   1.1. Introduction................................................................................................................ 7
   2.2. Methods.................................................................................................................... 11

2. General background: Women in terrorist organisations and female violence…15
   2.1. Female violence as taboo....................................................................................... 15
   3.2. Coverage of female terrorists.................................................................................... 19
   3.3. The creation of archetypal myths.............................................................................. 22

3. YPJ women as heroines vs. ISIS women as brainwashed victims: a case-study.29
   3.1. Discourse analysis: ISIS women................................................................................ 29
   3.2. Discourse analysis: YPJ women............................................................................... 37

4. Analysis............................................................................................................................ 45
   4.1. Reducing women to a simple image......................................................................... 45
   4.2. Is agency politicised?............................................................................................... 51

5. Conclusion....................................................................................................................... 56

6. Bibliography.................................................................................................................... 60
Abbreviations

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

OSCE: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

PKK: Kurdistan Workers’ Party

YPG: People’s Protection Units

YPJ: Women’s Protection Units
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This thesis is dedicated to all the women I met in Cambodia, you inspired me to advocate for a world in which women play an active role.
1. General introduction

1.1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war eight years ago, many rebel groups, also called “Violent Non-State Actors” have joined the conflict in Syria and, have sometimes happened to fight each other. Among them we count ISIS, and the YPG. These two groups are an illustration that the Syrian conflict is not only about fighting the regime, but also about other violent actors fighting for their diverging political ideologies. The time period since the 1980s has been called by some scholars the fourth wave terrorism.\(^1\) This fourth wave has been characterised by the important role of religion, as illustrated in the cause of ISIS; by a renewal of nationalist causes, such as in the case of Kurdistan; and by its use of new forms of mass communication.\(^2\) Therefore, the media have become a key element in this new era of terrorism. Moreover, this fourth wave is also characterised by a general resentment of the western influence.\(^3\) In this conflict, media attention has been drawn towards women who ‘fight’ for ISIS and women who fight against it. Although first underestimated by the west, by 2014 ISIS had taken control of a third of Syria and Iraq.\(^4\) Since then, the group have been carrying attacks regionally and internationally. Among them, France as one of the western countries that has counted the most terrorist attacks from ISIS. The western media have reported their attention more on the attacks perpetrated in Paris, in Belgium, or elsewhere in the western world, even though these attacks are only a small percentage of what ISIS is carrying out. Indeed, ISIS is more interested in its neighbouring countries in order to build the Sunni Islamic State and replace the borders created by the Europeans after the first World War. ISIS has used its international network to carry our attacks in the west due to a few military losses in 2015. But these attacks are considered secondary goals.\(^5\) ISIS’ ideology is based of the pursue of Salafism. Contrary to its predecessors, such as Al-Qaida, ISIS has been mastering the new forms of communication to spread its extremist ideology and

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3 Ibid, 34.
5 Ibid, 6.
recruit its numerous foreign fighters. The media have been confused as to whether or not ISIS uses female combatants. What is known is that there are two brigades of women whose role is to discipline other women.6

On the other side of the spectrum, the YPG’s ideology is based on anarchist or marxist ideas. The YPJ are the women’s protection units among the YPG. These women fighters have brought curiosity and sympathy from the western media to the YPG.7 They have gained international attention after the fight in Kobane, which allowed them to gain more recognition as a local actor and they has since then partnered on several occasions with the US which has assisted the YPG with military assistance, airstrikes and training in order to take lands from ISIS. The YPG is now the organisation receiving the most US military assistance.8 This coalition with external powers against the common enemy, ISIS, could mean that the YPG fighters have achieved a certain legitimacy and can be considered as a local actor in the Syrian conflict.9 Although, the PKK, classified as a terrorist organisation by the EU, the USA and Turkey, is the original founder of the YPG, the organisation can be considered a hybrid organisation since it also shows components of an insurgency or a paramilitary force. Their recruits are mostly locals, although since 2014, westerner and asian volunteers have joined them in Syria. Like ISIS, they use the new communication tools to spread their actions and ideas. Present on Twitter and Facebook, their communication does not seem to be as institutionalized as ISIS however. This might be due to the fact that, contrary to ISIS, they do not need an aggressive propaganda in order to find volunteers, mostly thanks to the positive portrayal of women fighters in the Western media.10

In the recent year, women’s participation in terrorist organisations has been a central topic in the European media. Far from being a new thing, the attention on terrorism used to focus on male terrorism, as they are widely considered to be at the heart of

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7 Oktav Ö.Z., Parlar Dal E., Kurşun A.M. Reframing and Reassessing the VNSAs in Syrian Conflict, 15.
9 Oktav Ö.Z., Parlar Dal E., Kurşun A.M. Reframing and Reassessing the VNSAs in Syrian Conflict, 15.
10 Ibid, 15.
the actions and at the heart of political violence. Terrorism and political violence have always been considered the male realm, and even though it is accepted that women have taken part in it, it is assumed that they have been manipulated and constrained to do so. As their actions go against the traditional gender role that tends to describe women as subordinated, weak, and innocent, the controversial image of the female terrorist has been widely used by the western media which have tried to make sense of women terrorists.

Some scholars such as Mia Bloom have often described women’s interests in terrorism as different for men than for women. While men do it for the cause, some have argued that women enrol in terrorism for personal reasons. Jacques and Taylor explain that this is due to the fact that men are considered more likely to feel anger about public topics than women and that therefore they are considered more likely to fight for religious or nationalist causes.

This topic of women and terrorism is important as terrorism has become one of the most salient global issues of the 21st century. The media attention on women’s involvement in terrorism has tremendously increased in the last five years. Therefore, a close look at women terrorists is a topic that deserves to be researched as scholarly exploration on the way in which these women are represented in the media has been underexplored. Women terrorists have been an underexplored topic for three main reasons according to Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham: because research have mainly focus on physical violence for which the principal perpetrators are men; there are usually fewer women in terrorist organisations, making them difficult to study; and finally, because of the lack of consideration of the concept of gender bias in security.

It is often argued that women get involved in terrorism because they have been convinced by a man, which might dismiss these women’s political engagement. According to Jessica Auchter, a professor or international relations, the logic

15 Ibid.
behind these representations of women being coerced by men is that if women had the choice, they would not choose violence. They take part in terrorism, but only as tools.\textsuperscript{17}

This research intends to go beyond the stereotypes reproduced in the Western media in order to take a critical stand about the way in which women terrorists, more particularly those in the Middle East, are represented and constructed in the Western discourse. The thesis seeks to analyse the dichotomy created in the Western discourse that portrays YPJ Kurdish women as heroines versus IS women as brainwashed victims. Feminist scholars particularly, such as Linda Ahall, have highlighted how “we think about the world in dualistic ways and, importantly, that these dualisms are characterised by both hierarchy and opposition.”\textsuperscript{18} The aim of this thesis is to examine why women involved in the Syrian conflict are portrayed in different ways, and if there are dominant geopolitical or ideological interests hidden behind the interest for women terrorists. As France and the United Kingdom, along with the United States, are involved in the Middle East and have set the fight against ISIS as a priority, the media might portray women in a way that brings support against the Islamic terrorist group. In this case, examining the portrayal of YPJ and ISIS women might allow us to explore questions of diverging values, of Us vs. Them. By taking British and French media as case-study, it will be examined how the media myths around these women. Ultimately, this research will attempt to understand why some women are given agency when some are not. In the end, a possible hypothesis of this research is that these women, involved in terrorist organisations, are not regarded as legitimate political actors and as ideologues in their own right.

1.2. Methods

My main method will be to study British and French newspapers and magazines from 2014 until the present day. I chose to start in 2014 as this is in early 2014 that ISIS started to rise globally. As the research intends to study the paradigm between Kurdish women represented as heroines and ISIS women as brainwashed victims. The goal is to examine the way in which the British and French media depict YPJ and ISIS women involved in their organisations by identifying some frames that show differences or similarities in the way that these two groups of women are portrayed. The media use frames in order to dismiss or to emphasise an information, these frames will be examined in an attempt to understand what these portrayals suggest about women involved in conflict in the Middle East. I chose frame analysis as my methods as they are used to placed some events in a field of meaning, which might at the same time ignore or dismiss other bigger interests at stake. Framing is an important theory where the media categories events, which can have a consequent influence on the meaning. Fairhurst and Sarr define framing as “the ability to shape the meaning of a subject, to judge its character and significance. To hold the frame of a subject is to choose one particular meaning (or set of meanings) over another. When we share our frames with others (the process of framing), we manage meaning because we assert that our interpretations should be taken as real over other possible interpretations.” but the authors emphasises that “the ways in which truth and reality, objectivity, and legitimacy claims manifest themselves linguistically and may contribute to mixed messages.” Communication is based on the theory that people share the same knowledge and meanings. Nevertheless, according to Ellis, this does not bring stability, instead communication is based on presupposition.

19 Ibid, 3.
20 Ibid, 168.
Ensik and Sauer define frames as such:

“the term ‘frame’ is, when applied to discourse, a metaphorical term. Basically the term ‘frame’ invokes a spatial concept. A frame gives to an object its place in space of separates it at the same time from its environment. Paradigmatic is the painting in a frame. Everything within the frame is the painting. The frame separates the painting from the environment and is used at the same time to give the painting its place, e.g. by fixing it to the wall. A frame thus gives structure to both an object itself and to the way the object is perceived.”

To illustrate this, the authors mention the study of Bing and Lombardo who examined media coverage on sexual harassment. They demonstrated that sexual harassment was not “an event with fixed properties and with a fixed way of evaluating”, but rather that the way it was painted in one particular media, or depending on the use of frame (such as “judicial frame, victim frame, initiator frame” etc) was crucial to how sexual harassment was evaluated. Which means that the way an event or a subject is presenting, influences how people process the information. Due to that, media are often accused of influencing people’s perceptions. In the end, the media participate in shaping the way in which the audience thinks about an event or a subject. Goffman explains that in our western society in order to understand a particular event, people will use what we call primary frameworks in order to make sense of something that without the frames would be meaningless. We can even conclude that his definition of primary frameworks is close to the meaning of culture:

“taken all together, the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture, especially insofar as understandings emerge concerning principal classes of schemata, the relations of these classes to one another, and the sum total of forces and agents that these interpretive designs acknowledge to be loose in the world. One must try to form an image of a group’s framework of frameworks – its belief system, its cosmology – even though this is a domain that close students of contemporary social life have usually been happy to give over to others”

An important question is that of agency, how much control do we have in our framing? Deetz explains that people cannot create meaning about themselves anymore as the meaning is produced by the different discourses that conflict against one another.

22 T. Ensink and Christoph Sauer, Framing and Perspectivising in Discourse, 2.
23 Ibid, 6.
25 Ibid, 27.
26 Fairhurst, Reframing The Art of Framing, 172.
and that individuals are caught in “the antagonistic tensions of masculinities/feminities, work/family, public/private, class/inequality, ethnicity” etc. These antagonisms are used to portray one subject as desirable compared to the other one.27

Nacos has identified six frames usually used by the media to cover stories on women terrorists. The frames she identifies are as follow: 1. the physical appearance frame; 2. the family connection frame; 3. the ‘terrorist for the sake of love’ frame; 4. the women’s lib/equality frame; 5. the ‘tough-as-males / tougher-than-men’ frame; 6. the ‘bored, naïve, out-of-touch- with-reality’ frame.28 I plan on applying these frames to examine if they match with the articles found about ISIS and YPJ women.

The sources I have gathered in this research only come from Western media. Research have showed in the past that the Western media usually focus more on the personal aspects of women terrorists which as a result might diminish their credibility and their legitimacy as actors.29 For the purpose of this study news online articles from France and the United Kingdom have been selected. These articles come from both right left-leaning newspapers or magazines between January 2014 and March 2018. The search words used were in English: “YPJ”, “Kurdish women”, “female combatants”, “female soldiers”, “ISIS women”, “women terrorists”. The choice of France and the United Kingdom is justified by the fact that the YPJ and the women of ISIS were largely covered in the two countries. In addition to this, France and the U.K. have both supported military the YPG against ISIS.

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In addition, the literature used in this thesis will include feminist, journalistic, and conflict and terrorism literature. In this research I do not intend to give explanations on why these women join one organisation or another. In the end, this thesis might tell us more about the story tellers than about these women themselves. Ultimately, the hypothesis is that these women “terrorists” are considered political agents when it suits best the western narratives.

The structure of this thesis will be organised as follow: first a general introduction will be given on the topic of women involvement in terrorist organisations and how they have been depicted in the past. For this part, the literature available on this topic will be reviewed in order to understand how women terrorists have been represented in the western media and to examine the creation of archetypal myths. In the second part of this thesis, the representations of ISIS women migrants in a first place and YPJ women in a second place will be analysed. These case studies will give a concrete approach to the study of the western representations of women terrorists/fighters in the Middle East/Syria. Finally, the third and final part will analyse the discourse about these women in order to better understand what role their representations play in the perception of the Syrian conflict. The wider perspectives that their fights entail and the notion of agency will be examined in order to apprehend a dominant interest that might be hidden behind these depictions. The frames and the question of whether or not agency is politicised will be discussed and will teach us more about the western world and the reasons behind these narratives.
2. General background

2.1. Female violence as taboo

This part aims at giving a brief introduction about women involved in terrorist organisation or political violence. Female terrorism has become a worldwide phenomenon. Nevertheless, when we think about women in terrorism, we might first think of them as victims subordinated by the men that surround them. Among them are the “Black widows” in Chenchenya, the “Birds of Freedom” in Sri Lanka, the “Army of Roses” in Palestine etc. While female terrorism remains more shocking to the general public, some terrorist organisations such as the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) have had women participating in their activities for decades. Nevertheless, for some it is only recently that light was shed on them.

While women’s participation in terrorism has long been underestimated as political violence is usually seen as a masculine realm, nowadays the presence of women in terrorism has become a reality that cannot be denied anymore. The OSCE has claimed that without taking this gender reality seriously, counter-terrorism policies cannot be fully effective. Indeed, women’s participation in armed conflict is still nowadays considered taboo. This is due to the fact that for centuries the idea of masculinity has been linked to violence and aggression, while the idea of “woman” as been given attributed to “caring”, “mothering”, “peacefulness”. As Carol Mann, a researcher in gender and armed conflicts, explains, women remain less powerful than men in every areas and they are particularly underrepresented in the political sphere. Therefore, the presence of women in terrorist organisation is seen as abnormal as it goes against the very foundation of the patriarchal society.

The fact that women in army, just like women in terrorism, face a lot of difficulties, is an illustration of the previous argument. Particularly in the West and in former Western colonies, there is a reticence to accept these women as equal to men. Interestingly, this reticence was not felt in the communist bloc where women participated in

30 Elizabeth Gardner. "Is There Method to the Madness?" Journalism Studies 8, no. 6 (2007), 909.
32 Ibid, 2.
33 Sjoberg and Gentry, Women, Gender, and Terrorism.
armed conflicts. This might explain the participation of female combatants from the Vietcong and Kurdistan today, areas that have been influenced by the ideology of the USSR.\textsuperscript{35} In France and the U.K., women were first introduced in combat zones during World War I. Although they had been involved in conflict zones, their roles were usually limited to health care or sex providers. Nowadays, even though times have passed, in conservative groups, women are still relegated to subaltern roles, such as comforting men after their battles. Some scholars have argued that women choosing to take part in conflicts face far greater risks than men as they are often more isolated.\textsuperscript{36}

According to Leila Khaled “‘there’s [not] a contradiction between being a female [and] hold[ing] arms’”.\textsuperscript{37} Despite the increasing presence of women in the workforce, as well as in politics or in the military, Gentry and Sjoberg argue that the media still describe women violence according to old stereotypes.\textsuperscript{38} Gender is usually divided between masculinities and femininities.\textsuperscript{39} There are therefore expectations, behaviours and stereotypes associated with each gender.\textsuperscript{40} Although the gender expectations can change over time, gender subordination, that Gentry and Sjoberg describe, as the subordination of femininities to masculinities, does remain grounded in most societies.\textsuperscript{41} The professor of politics, Timothy Kaufman-Osborn, adds that the idea of what it is to be a “woman” usually refers to peacefulness, mothering and emotions, characteristics deemed inferiors to men and masculinity and which argue that women are not supposed to be violence.\textsuperscript{42}

Even today, although women have gained more independence and are allowed to vote in most countries, they are still underrepresented in politics and “women and femininity remain less powerful than men and masculinity in almost every area of global social and political life.”\textsuperscript{43} This makes it difficult to conceive women as violent actors. Indeed, the image of terrorist does not match with the traditional gender roles which at-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Sjoberg and Gentry, \textit{Mothers, Monsters, Whores}, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Timothy Kaufman-Osborn. "Gender Trouble at Abu Ghraib?" \textit{Politics & Gender} 1, no. 4 (2005), 597.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Sjoberg and Gentry, \textit{Women, Gender, and Terrorism}, 3.
\end{itemize}
tribute women to innocence and fragility and men to bravery. Therefore, women terrorists can only be seen as an “exception to the rule”.\footnote{Brigitte Nacos. "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women in Politics and in Terrorism." \textit{Studies in Conflict and Terrorism} 28, no. 5 (2005), 446.}

Authors such as Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, scholars of international relations and international security whose main research area is gender, have noted how women involved in political violence have been depicted as deviant, unstable, an anomaly easy to manipulate. For it to be possible these women must have had to be coerced my men.\footnote{Sjoberg and Gentry, \textit{Women, Gender, and Terrorism}.} News about female terrorists are often sensationalised, making it seem like women political violence is a new thing. Some authors, such as Alison Miranda, note that the sensationalised narratives about these women often refer to a femininity that has been broken and therefore makes it possible for such violence to exist, which differentiates violent women and “real” or “normal” women.\footnote{Alison Miranda. \textit{Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict} (London: routledge, 2008).} In their book “Mothers, Monsters and Whore”, Gentry and Sjoberg explain that “A conservative interpretation of gender sees women as peaceful and apolitical, a liberal view understands women as a pacifying influence on politics, and feminists who study global politics often critique the masculine violence of interstate relations”. Therefore, as these women do not fit into any categories, they are seen as ‘bad women’. Indeed, the association of women and violence goes against the notion of femininity in many cultures.\footnote{Sjoberg and Gentry, \textit{Women, Gender, and Terrorism}, 4.} Scholars have noticed that the concept of femininity is naturally linked to peace. And that for women’s issues to be recognised, peace is necessary.\footnote{Sara Ruddick. "Pacifying the Forces: Drafting Women in the Interests of Peace." \textit{Signs} 8, no. 3 (1983): 471-89.} Linda Forcey adds that “the connection between women and peace is ancient”, explaining how it has become part of the notion of femininity and why violence is usually considered a masculine realm.\footnote{E. Glenn, G. Chang, G. Linda Forcey. \textit{Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency}. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 355.} Carol Mann explains that in the West, in former western colonies, and in muslim countries, the gender divisions are explained biologically describing women as passive and dominated by a masculine figure. She argues that this division is kept strict because of the fear that female violence might
mean the end of the patriarchy. These gender norms allow people to make sense of the world. Some scholars have urgently asked policy makers to go beyond these portrayals in order to understand better female violence.  

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2.2. Coverage of Female Terrorists

Terri Toles-Patkin, a communication professor at Eastern Connecticut State University, has pointed out that women terrorists are described as extremist feminists; coerced by a man; acting only as support to the terrorist organisations; mentally unstable; unfeminine. In addition, there are a few narratives and themes that appear to come back in the discourses: women are mothers, monsters, victims, or whores. These narratives are the illustration that the media construct their stories according to culturally resonant myths that will be familiar to the audience. These myths are described as cultural narratives and shape as “an enduring yet dynamic conception of society, its social institutions, and its values.” They allow to explain the “present and the past as well as the future” of a culture. Myths are also characterised by repetition, “with common central actors and predictable outcomes”. As Nossek and Berkowitz note, journalists use mythical archetypes in order to make sense of events. Lule also adds that common archetypes found in the news include the Hero, the Trickster, and The Good Mother. The professor in journalism and mass communication, Dan Berkowitz, takes the example of Palestinian suicide bomber, to argue that when the media cannot understand the roles of women, and when women do not fit the archetype of a terrorist, the media tend to use dichotomies so that even unusual events are explained in a way that feels familiar to the readership. Dichotomies has been an instrument used by the media and the politics that often puts in opposition two archetypes. In her study about media coverage of sex crimes, Benedict notes the two dichotomies of “the Virgin”, the innocent victim, and “the Vamp” who is responsible for her rape because of her behaviour or looks. Luke explains that “Like myth tellers from every age, journalists can draw from

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the rich treasure trove of archetypal stories and make sense of the world.” In the case of the Palestinian suicide bombers they used the archetype of the female warrior and of the bad mother. Therefore, when women do not fit the traditional cultural norms, the media might tend to use stereotypes to explain their actions.

In addition, when women participate in conflict, their stories are sensationalised and their coverage disproportionate. They are not “terrorists” or “soldiers”, but rather “women terrorists” or “women soldiers”. The emphasis is always put on their gender which reinforces the gender expectations concerning their behaviour as well as differentiate them from male terrorists or soldiers. As Wight and Myers note: “when a woman commits an acts of criminal violence, her sex is the lens through which all of her actions are seen and understood”.

Similarly, Nacos’ comparison of the media representation of female terrorists and female politicians demonstrated that in both cases the media attention is put on their physical appearances, family links, and gender equality. In the same vein, Brunner’s research on the representation of female terrorists in the Israel-Palestine conflict showed that they are always described in relation to their body, their virginity and their motherhood. In addition, Elisabeth Gardner analysed several news articles about terrorists in which she detected several coverage that were only described in the case of women, in a quarter of the stories there was a description on the way the woman terrorist was dressed. The idea of motherhood is also central. Simone De Beauvoir argued that you become a women according to society’s attributions of what a women is. Behind the violence, the media still scrutinise things such as clothes or hair, to emphasise their femininity. Nacos argues that the news focus more of women’s appearances than on men’s appearances, and women are judged more newsworthy when they are doing something

59 Nacos, The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media, 437.
60 Sjoberg and Gentry, Mothers, Monsters, Whores.
62 Nacos, The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media.
64 Gardner, Is There Method to the Madness?, 920.
considered “unladylike”, which includes terrorism and armed conflicts.66

The consequences of these depictions is that women involved in violence, not only Muslim women, are often represented as victims. Deborah L. Rhode, a law professor a Stanford University, claims that this might marginalise women and fail to give them agency without mentioning their relations to the men in their life.67 Moreover, their violence is likely to be described as emotional and irrational, in contrast to men’s violence considered to be the norm.68 These women are also likely to be depicted as bad women in the sense that their so-called “emancipation” is masculinised and their actions judged morally wrong “for a women”, which acts as a warning for other women to not enter the men’s realm.69 Talbot argues that in the media women terrorists are often denied agency as the public sphere remains a male domain, these terrorists therefore are described as the “pawns” of men.70 As Claudia Brunner suggests, this might explain why the media attention and rationalisation of their motivations is put on their private and family life, instead of political engagement.71

66 Nacos, The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media, 437.
2.3. Female terrorists framed as archetypal myths

To illustrate the use of archetypes in the coverage of female terrorists, the next section aims at reviewing the most used ones that are found about women in conflict. The gathering of sources about the depictions of women terrorists has allowed to identify four themes that often come back in the discourse about female terrorists: the mother, the heroine, the monster, and the whore. These four themes were identified by scholars such as Gentry and Sjoberg in their book ‘Mother, Monster and Whore’, they were also found in Edith Mohja Kahf’s research who examined the depiction of ‘Victims, Heroines and Pawns’ in the Syrian conflict. Lule also found that common archetypes found in the media are the Hero, the Trickster and the Good mother.

- The mother

Linda Ahäll’s pointed out that the stories about women in political violence were always linked to the “ideas of motherhood and maternal reproduction as the foundation of sexual difference.” 72 This narrative attempts to explain women violence by associating it with “a need to belong, a need to nurture, and a way of taking care and being loyal to men; it is motherhood gone awry.” 73 The media often explain the behaviour of violent women through their duties as wives and mothers. Women are sometimes seen as even more dangerous than men because of the mothering instinct that is sometimes described as a strong motivation for violence. 74 Instead of acting according to their belief, these women are described in maternal terms and are frequently looking to avenge the death of a loved one or the destruction of their family life. 75 In her study of Mother Teresa’s coverage, Lule noted how she was depicted as the archetype of the Good Mother, associated with qualities such “caring”, “nurturing”, “goodness” and “self-sacrifice”. 76 Much of the attention of the media is focused on the personal lives of these women and it is expected that personal reasons will explain their motivations for engaging in terrorism. The first women Palestinian suicide bomber, Wafa Idris, who blew herself in 2002, was described as a desperate single woman, living with her mother after her divorce caused

73 Ibid, 9.
74 Sjoberg and Gentry, Mothers, Monsters, Whores, 31.
75 Ibid.
76 Lule, Daily News, 104-121.
by her infertility. Sjoberg and Gentry note that divorce of miscarriages are often emphasised in the stories about these women, which gives feminine explanations for their engagement instead of looking at their political beliefs.

- The heroine/The female warrior

Mohja Kahf has divided three categories in which Muslim women, Arab women, or both are viewed by the western readership: they are either victims, escapees, or pawns of the patriarchy. She explains this from the long existing stereotypes about Arab people and Islam in Western societies. While the Sestern media usually reproduces the assumption that Middle eastern women are oppressed, they tend to divide these women between victims and escapees who are glorified because thanks to their heroism they escaped victimhood. A common archetypal myth that can be found in the news is the Woman Warrior, also seen as the Heroine. This archetype is often linked to the image of the Greek goddess of war, peace and wisdom, Athena. These women are described as strong, smart, as defending what they think is right, they are fighting “against an element of society seen as dominant, yet corrupt.” Berkotwitz quoting Kennedy says “The new women warriors are the daughters of television heroes of the 1960s and 1970s”, referring to Wonder Woman and Batgirl for instance. The archetype of the female warrior usually contains “toughness, smartness, beauty, sexuality, and defiance”, which emphasises on the gendered form of their violence.

In some narratives, women become both the cause and the reason for war. Indeed, as Elshtain notes, they often become a justification for war as they need to be saved from the true responsible. Elshtain links this idea to the Hegel’s concept of “beautiful

77 Ahäll, Sexing War, 52.
78 Sjoberg and Gentry, Mothers, Monsters, Whores, 120.
82 Ibid, 609.
83 Ibid, 609.
84 Ibid, 613.
Although “beautiful souls” are against war, they have no choice but to participate in order to protect their purity and their innocence. Elshtain associates this to the “Myth of Protection”, which relates on binary construction, justified by biological reasons, of men and women in war narratives that portray the men as aggressive and strong who must save the women. Noddings adds that women have been described in terms of the stereotypical dichotomy of good and evil, arguing that “as an ‘angel in the house’, woman has been credited with natural goodness, an innate allegiance to “a law of kindness”. But this same description extols her as infantile, weak, and mindless – a creature in constant need of male supervision and protection.” This long-lasting stereotype has been consistent in the stories as it is, according to Sjoberg and Gentry, not completely false since war often leads to gender oppression. Nevertheless, this also leads to think that female terrorists are not a threat for human security.

- The monster / The bad woman

Sjobert and Gentry argue that the narratives about women and political violence deny agency and rationality to these women, as well as category women, involved in proscribed violence, into three paradigms: mother, monster, and whore. This also classifies them as the “other”, contrasting with the idea of the “normal” woman as fragile, pure and innocent. Indeed, women violence is received with more shock than men’s violence, for the reason explained before, that violence is seen as a man’s realm, while women are associated with peacefulness and care. Therefore when a woman commit violence, the community condemns it more morally wrong and these women are see as deviant and perverse. After the Rwandan genocide, the female combatants, although well educated were judged irresponsible for their actions as the judges could only come to the conclusion that these privileged women were not “real” women, but “deviants, sicks monsters”. Some have also argued that women terrorists must suffer from mental

87 Sjoberg and Gentry, Mothers, Monsters, Whores, 4.
88 Elshtain, Women and War.
90 Sjoberg and Gentry, Mothers, Monsters, Whores, 14.
91 Ibid, 14.
93 Ibid, 29.
disorders or trauma or even hormonal imbalance, nevertheless there is so far no evidence that proves it. Women involved in violence that is not publicly supported is seen as having a broken femininity. Some women are characterised by “monsterization” as explained by Belinda Morrissey. As women are deemed impossible of committing violence, those who do are characterised as monsters and inhumane. They are sometimes said to take more pleasure than men in using violence and described as being even more aggressive than men. While men who refuse to fight are seen as cowards and risking consequences, women taking part in war remain something seen as unnatural. Chris Coulter, Head of the Conflict Prevention Program at the Swedish Agency for Peace, Security and Development, claims that this “militarised masculinity” explains the way in which women fighters are represented. Some scholars have argued that because of the patriarchal order, these women have no choice but to be tougher in order to gain recognition and be taken seriously. Others, such as Miranda Alison explains that “because women’s violence’s involvement in violence remains more shocking and disturbing than men’s involvement that women’s violence is represented as more aggressive”, which illustrates “an underlying discomfort with such a challenge to gendered expectations that may be widely cross-cultural.” Nevertheless, this violence also adds to the sexual fantasy that surrounds violent women and which can be found in “culture fetishes monstrous women”. A popular, commonly found in fantasy books example comes from the Greek myth of the Gorgons. Sjoberg and Gentry claim that these women are demonised in order to counter the negative impact that their emancipation from traditional gender norms could have on the dominant patriarchal norms.

97 Åhäll, Sexing war, 9.
98 Chris Coulter. 'Female fighters in the Sierra Leone war: Challenging the assumptions?'. Feminist Review 88 (2008), 63.
99 Åhäll, Sexing war, 9.
101 Ibid.
102 Sjoberg and Gentry, Mothers, Monsters, Whores, 37.
103 Ibid, 37.
In “Mother, Monster, and Whore”, Sjoberg and Gentry add that the link between female violence and sexuality still exists and Gerald De Groot has argued that one “way of discounting the contribution of women to the military and thus limit their empowerment was to present them as dangerous sexual predators”. Violent women have frequently been described as depraved and sexually deviant. Female violence has long been associated to sexuality, as it can be seen as early as in Greek mythology. The myth of Medea who killed her children to get revenge, after her husband cheated on her, has been a common example to illustrate female cruelty and bad motherhood. In the same vein, the female combatants for the Chechen independence movement who have been nicknamed “Black Widows” have been described as grieving wives who want to avenge the death of their husbands killed by Russian soldiers. Not only this nickname refers to their femininity and maternity but it also shows that women can only become terrorists if it is to get revenge, which might prevent us from seeing women terrorists as a security threat. Frequently, as in the case of Muriel Degauque, special attention is put on the sexual behaviour of these women. The media reporting on Degauque described her difficult childhood and the fact that she was more interested in boys than in her studies. Leaving little space to discuss her possible political motivations for becoming a martyr.

Sjoberg and Gentry also refer to the example of the Amazon to demonstrate the sexualisation of violent women. They are said to resemble men: they amputated their right breast for them to be better fighters, they dressed like men, they were not gentle, they carried weapons such as shields, swords, and spears. They were also described as treating men as slaves and using them for sex. Nevertheless, their phys-

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105 Auchter, *Gendering Terror*, 130.
111 Ibid, 6.
ical beauty was still emphasised as demonstrated in the Iliad after Achilles killed Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, he lamented that she died being so young and beautiful, and some have found beauty in their battles. According to Lane and Wurts, the Amazons were used as a representation of women participating in war and ruling. They came in contrast to “normal” or “good” Greek women whose goal was to find a husband and have children under the natural patriarchy. The message of the myth of the amazons is that if women were to step outside of their gender role, the world would become chaos. The amazons are the beautiful and terrifying “others”.

In conclusion, Dichotomies and two-dimensional narratives can be dangerous, in the sense that it stops considering these women as people. The two-dimensional narratives of the heroines and the pawns, or the three-dimensional of the mother, monster, and whore deny women any choice and legitimacy in choosing violence, for the simple reason that it disrupts gender stereotypes. For this reason, their choices are not seen as choices which might marginalise these women in the public sphere and portray them as apolitical. Female violence makes us reflect on what a woman ‘should be’ and how stepping outside of their chosen role might threaten the hegemonic order. The different mythical archetypes from the bad/good mother to the pawns, to the woman warrior, help the media build a context in which female terrorism can be placed. Nevertheless, the risk is to understand other’s cultures in simple terms, leaving out the complexity and the choices of these women.

In this chapter, the four themes that were studied attempted to explore how myths creating around these women fuel the fascination for women involved in terrorism, and how women involved in violence are not all depicted the same way. The media, and numerous scholars, have attributed the enrollement of women in terrorism as a result of personal motivations according to Karen Jacques and Paul Taylor. It will now be studied the frames used in the cases of ISIS and YPJ women. The aim is to understand how these frames are used to attempt to make sense of women involved in terrorist organisations. The frames identified by Nacos will be used, and the four

112 Hamilton, Mythology, 287.
113 Jones, Women Warriors, 6.
115 Jones, Women Warriors, 7-8.
116 Lane and Wurts, In Search of the Woman Warrior, 51.
117 Sjoberg and Gentry, Mothers, Monsters, Whores, 14.
118 Jacques and Taylor, Male and Female Suicide Bombers.
archetypal myths of the mother, the heroine, the monster and the whore will be expected to appear in the frames found.
3. YPJ as heroines vs. ISIS as brainwashed victims: a case-study

3.1. Frame analysis: ISIS women

- Their physical appearance as a metaphor for their transition from good to bad women:

  In her analysis of the frames used for women terrorists and politicians, Nacos concluded that the same frames were used for both. She explained that “when it comes to women, their appearance is deemed more important than their ideas, policies, and positions.”, which she claims is different for men.\(^\text{119}\) In all the articles covering women of ISIS, the physical appearance frame was found. The bodies of the women are depicted as a proof of their transition from an average Western woman to a Muslim, probably manipulated, woman. In addition, their mental instability and identity quest is also explained by their physical appearance, as in this article where Sarah, three years before wearing the veil, is seeking herself, trying the blond and hair extensions.\(^\text{120}\) “At a certain point, she even had red dyed hair! Little by little, she started to cover her head. First with scarves, then came the jilbab, this long dress with a hoodie.”\(^\text{121}\)

  Here, fashion is described as a freedom that is only allowed by the West, it is seen as form of freedom and expression that every young women is supposed to enjoy. This young woman “fashion-obsessed brunette” was still allowed to “continue wearing her trendy dresses, jeans and T-shirts” as the man she had met “wasn’t strict like other Muslim men.”\(^\text{122}\) Moreover, enjoying fashion is seen as something normal for a young woman, and it is more the opposite that should be worrying, as this article says “those who thought that Sarah did not present any danger, because she was pretty, stylish, and match her hijab with her sneakers, will be surprised.”\(^\text{123}\)

\(^{119}\) Ibid, 438.
In addition, they are described as having two different personalities, a normal one in public where the woman can wear “skinny jeans and leaves her long blond hair uncovered”\textsuperscript{124}, and where “the pretty brunette with dark eyes and tan skin did not go unnoticed. One day, we see her wearing tight jeans and a leather jacket.”\textsuperscript{125} and another side of them where they post pictures “fully veiled or with only her blue eyes on display.”\textsuperscript{126} If we examine the articles we can conclude that the smile, the attractiveness, the make up and the stylish clothes mark the person that they were before they were radicalised by ISIS. Pictures are usually what the media describe to illustrate their transition, “On a family picture, Marine, whose Muslim name is Assia, is dressed up, smiling, wearing make up and her hair in a bun. Like every teenagers, the young woman is pouting in front of the camera.”\textsuperscript{127} But that was the past, since Marine has now become like a totally different person, and “it is said that she was smiling and pretty”.\textsuperscript{128}

Some other titles found also emphasise more on their physical appearance than on what they are accused of doing:

“Well-dressed federal government worker, 40, arrested in Sydney's west accused of sending $30,000 to ISIS terrorists”\textsuperscript{129} or “A GLAMOUR model feared to have been groomed by deadly ISIS recruiters has been released without charge”\textsuperscript{130} The emphasis is


“La jolie brune aux yeux noirs et au teint cuivré ne passe pas inaperçue. Un jour, on la croise en jean moulant et Perfecto en cuir.” English translation in the text my own.
\textsuperscript{126} Holly Christodoulou. ‘GLAMOUR GIRL CLEARED’. The Sun.

“Sur une photo de famille, Marine, dont le nom musulman est Assia, est apprêtée, souriante, maquillée, les cheveux remontés en chignon. Comme toutes les adolescentes, la jeune fille fait la moue devant l’objectif”) and “she was wearing normal clothes, was not veiled, always wearing make up.”. “Elle s’habillait normalement, elle n’était pas voilée, toujours maquillée », abonde de son côté une voisine.” English translation in the text my own.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.

“Elle s’appelle Marine, a 18 ans, et vient d’une famille modeste de Carcassonne. On dit d’elle qu’elle était souriante et jolie.”
\textsuperscript{130} Holly Christodoulou. ‘GLAMOUR GIRL CLEARED. Model Feared to Have Been Groomed by ISIS Released without Charge’. The Sun, 28 December 2017. Accessed 11 April 2018.
put on the appearance of the suspect as the “GLAMOUR” in capital letters and “well-dressed” are put at the beginning of the article, making us wonder if this article is really about ISIS in the first place.

- **Influenced by the men who surround them:**

  The family connection frame and the ‘for the sake of love’ frame were used as a justification for their involvement in ISIS. Indeed, these women do not join ISIS to fight but instead to find a husband or join members of their family already there.  

  Many are described as having converted to Islam because of their husband. They are depicted as women seeking for protection in “their Islamist husbands and protectors, whom they seek out in ever greater numbers.” Interestingly, this relates to the myth of protection, mentioned earlier, which is built in the discourse upon the binary constructions that legitimises the segregation of sex according to biology, and in which the men are expected to protect the women in need of saving. This theory argues that genetically men are active subjects and women passive.

  What often comes back in the family connection frame regarding women of ISIS is the idolised father figure who is always missing in these women’s life. “About her father, for a long time she only knew his name, Majid. She idolised this unknown spawner and his muslim roots.” Indeed, abandoned by her dad when she was young,

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136 LEXPRESS.fr. ‘De Forsane Alizza à Daech’ L’Express. 

“Abandonnée par son père gendarme lorsqu'elle était jeune"
she was suffering a lot from the absence of her father. 137 Or in this other article, the death of her father “deeply affected” her. 138 Before described as “a cuddly and gentle kid”, Her mom said “she was my princess.” but “she indeed changed terribly” and “express a growing anger which turned into fierce hate against her missing father.” 139

The family situation is often blamed to explain their decision to join ISIS. Indeed, they all suffered in life, by the loss of a parent, a difficult family situation, or love life. 140 The articles attempt to find explanations in their childhood. 141 Sometimes they are also described as suffering from psychological problems, and as fragile individual, which could explain their transition. 142 When ISIS women are not described as victims, it is rather the monster frame that we find in the discourse. They are described as enjoying violence more than men: ‘I enjoyed torturing women. Especially when their fathers or husbands were there’: Female ISIS torturer describes horrors she inflicted and says British female jihadists were the most brutal. 143 Some are described as “aggressive, scrapper, determined” and “agitator”, adjectives usually attributed to men, but it is because they are “not at ease” with themselves. 144

The men are described as being the ones leading the women to join ISIS, even when their young age cannot be taken as an excuse. Such as this mother who “wanted

139 Ibid.
wanted to support her son and spend time with him in case he met an early death”, “Her youngest son, Tylor Vilus, converted to Islam in 2011, aged 21, and became radicalised, moving to Tunisia to engage with jihadist groups there. Rivière followed him to Tunisia, also converted and adhered to her son’s radicalised views.”145 In this article, once again, it’s a man of her family who led her to join the organisation.

In addition, the ‘terrorist for the sake of love’ frame is a theme that regularly comes back. Usually the story explains how the young woman met a man online and he pushed her to convert and join ISIS. Women of ISIS, nicknamed “Jihadi Brides”, naively fall for the idea of having a loyal husband and going on a romantic adventure.146 This is the case of this woman, “Saida, who quit France to join ISIS, said she was was lured to Syria with the promise of a new life with a devout husband.”147 “She had fallen in love with a Muslim man she met online”, later the article explained that this man manipulated her into joining ISIS.148 Some are seeking real love story and go to Syria to marry their childhood love.149 Some also have been described as being having an obsession with men, they are portrayed as sexually deviant who are attracted to bad men and ‘real men’,150,151 after leaving ISIS this woman “quickly returned to the world of online dating” where she met someone else “within 24 hours on the site.”152

“une jeune femme partie rejoindre en Syrie son amour de jeunesse enrôlé par Daech” English translation my own.
150 Quillet,’Femmes de djihadistes : éternelles naïves ou complices de l’ombre?’ Le Figaro.
“Mais elles voient en ces derniers une espèce d’idéal masculin, un ‘vrai mec’” English translation my own.
- Naive and manipulated young women

This frame can be associated with the ‘bored, naive, out-of-touch-with reality’ identified by Nacos. This frame is common to explain the behaviour of ISIS women. They were naive, lured, and manipulated and did not know what they were doing when they decided to join ISIS. The idea that they joined by ideology is usually not mentioned or dismissed. Only men choose to join for radical Islam, while they might seek revenge – which emphasises on their personal reasons again – they are not described as ideologues.\textsuperscript{153} Instead their radicalisation is due to brainwashing.\textsuperscript{154}

Nevertheless, the depictions of naive women, even lacking intelligence in some way, do not match with the fact that they are also described as educated, good students. Often described as “schoolgirls or “university students”,\textsuperscript{155} some are “promising students”.\textsuperscript{156} Nevertheless, they are described as extremely naivety\textsuperscript{157} and easily impressionable teenagers,\textsuperscript{158} who joined ISIS expecting to find something completely different to what they are said to find according to the media, indeed “the caliphate wasn’t what they thought it would be.”\textsuperscript{159} The article\textsuperscript{160} titled “Black widows, sex slaves and the jealous brides of ISIS: Life as a wife in the terror state” is a good summary of how ISIS women are portrayed in the media:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{153} Duplessy, ‘Emilie König, Portrait d’une Djihadiste Française Arrêtée En Syrie’, \textit{Paris Match}.
\item \textsuperscript{156} Yassin-Kassab, ‘Two Sisters by Åsne Seierstad Review’, \textit{The Guardian}.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Bonte, ‘“Dans La Nuit de Daech”, Le Récit d’une Repentie - Madame Figaro’. \textit{Le Figaro}.
\end{itemize}
“They are lured by a fantasy. It is surprisingly mundane - a big house, nice car, medical care, servants and a devoted husband. But for many ISIS brides the reality is starkly different - with rapes, vicious beatings and watching violent killings a part of their daily lives.”

They are manipulated and “groomed online and shown video ‘which were so rosy – where men and their wives and children wandered together through parks...they baked break together. It was like being in another world’”. One woman explains that what she found when she arrived under the caliphate was completely different and she “was surrounded by fighting, haunted by the jets and drones that flew over the house she shared with other women in Mosul, as forced to carry dead babies.” They are not seen as women anymore, under ISIS they are only here for reproduction, pleasure, and housekeeping. In addition, they are also depicted as shallow women who have complained of the “lack of western shampoo” and about their husbands buying the “best” make-up and clothes for these slaves, apparently creating "tension" between the women - despite the brutality being meted out on their fellow females.” Here the jealousy, a trait often considered female, is emphasised as well.

Their miserable life conditions are highlighted: “to survive, Mina and Yusra only eat pasta and tuna cans, keep the meat for Lila and the son of Yusra”, and they have no “running water, neighbours who regularly threaten them while giving them some rest of their food.” They did not realise how difficult it was to live under ISIS with “the lack of western food or beauty products, the uncertain water and electricity supply, and the dress rules they must follow.” In addition, they suffer from abuse such as this “Austrian teen who fled Europe to join ISIS was used as a sex slave for new fighters, before she was beaten to death when she tried to escape.” After they realise all of this,

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165 Ibid.


After examinations of the news coverage on ISIS women, it could be concluded that the most frequently frames used are (1) the appearance frame, (2) the family connection frame, (3) the terrorist for the sake of love frame; (5) the tougher-than-men frame to some extent; and the (6) ‘bored, naive, out-of-touch-with-reality frame. The frame missing is the “women’s equality frame” that was not found in their coverage. This could be explained by the fact that Islam is not considered a promoter of gender equality. In the case of ISIS, personal reasons are given to explain women’s engagement as the West might not otherwise make sense of the reason for which a woman would willingly join ISIS. What can be concluded is that in general the women of ISIS are portrayed as naive, easily influenced women who are out of touch with the reality which allow the bad men who surround them to manipulate them. They go from ‘normal’ western women interested in fashion and make-up to a monster or a housekeeper, but neither of this is really described as being their fault.
3.3. Frame analysis: the YPJ women

- The freedom fighters

If there is one thing always associated with the YPJ women it is their fight for gender equality. One of the attributes that make YPJ attractive to the Western media is the fact that Middle Eastern women are fighting for their rights and for equality in societies that are often judged very patriarchal. Their vision of gender equality is what attracts foreigners to join them, as explained the father of a British woman who joined the YPJ and died in an attack, “his daughter had dedicated her life to the fight against ‘unjust power and privilege’ and ‘put herself on the line for what she believed in’”.169 Indeed, the YPJ are often praised and represented as brave combatants who fight for what they think is fair, they are one of the secret weapons that can defeat ISIS.170

The YPJ’s motivation is described as the liberation of other women, they fight ISIS in the name of women’s liberation. Depicted as freedom fighters they “will continue to fight to liberate women from the extremists’ brutal rule.”171 and will “free women enslaved by the extremists.”172 Le Figaro adds that many of them choose “war” to “emancipate themselves, avoid the destiny of an arranged marriage with a cousin, a life of housewife surrounded by a swarm of children with unique horizon domestic tasks.”173 This last quote summarises well the often found stereotypes about Middle


“Beaucoup de ces jeunes femmes campagnardes ou citadines ont choisi d'etre en guerre pour s'émanciper, pour échapper au destin d’un mariage arrangé avec un cousin, d'une vie de mère au foyer entourée d'une ribambelle d'enfants avec pour unique horizon les travaux domestiques.” English translation in the text my own.
Eastern women, and shows that the YPJ are finally women who have fought for a different destiny and have instead become the only hope of other women. Their fight is also designed to take revenge for “the women who were kidnapped in Sinjar and sold in markets.”\(^{174}\) Their strength and emancipation are often quite obviously put in comparison to the other women portrayed as victims, often the case of Yazidi women is taken as a counterpoint. The Guardian explains that “For the female warrior like Taylor, the prospect of emancipated such victims is electrifying” and what motivated her was “the thought of liberating abused women”. Another recruit added that they “are not fighting to kill, we are fighting for freedom.” Reinforcing their image of freedom fighters for victim women.\(^{175}\) Nevertheless, their goal is wider than “women fighting”, it is also about involving “women in decision making and policy making”\(^{176}\) as one commander emphasised. They are not portrayed as murderers, rather, they have to kill ISIS fighters to liberate women, and the defeat of ISIS will help change the mentalities about women.\(^{177}\) They are asking for weapons to help them against ISIS but “not for the love of weapons, but for the love of peace”. This interestingly goes back to the link between women and peace.\(^{178}\)

When it comes to European women joining the YPJ, Joanna Palani from Denmark argued that she joined the YPJ and “fought in Iraq and Syria ‘so that everyone in Europe could be safe’.”\(^{179}\) But The Sun titled one article about her as “WARPED JUSTICE Outrage as Danish woman who fought ISIS is held in JAIL while her government


lets returning jihadists go free.”

Considered a terrorist in Denmark, the British media have found it outrageous.

What also makes these women extraordinary according to the media is everything they gave up to join the fight. They have to live in poor conditions with showers being a “luxury”, “stomach gripes” being common, the “toilets are a hole in the desert, loo paper a thing of memory.” Their day starts at 5 am with a breakfast looking like “a curiously colourless substance with the texture of tripe.”

Moreover, as this article in Paris Match explains “Most of them had to give up on contacting their families because of the battles.” While some of them are “married, have children who are waiting for them far away from the battle line.”, most of the time “by joining the YPG, the recruits are condemning themselves to singlehood and often to death.”, others have “given up on their desire to be a mother.”

Thus, one of the characteristics that differentiate tremendously the YPJ and the women of ISIS is the mother frame. Women are easier to depict as heroines when they do not have children and are single. Ahall explains that the idea of the vacant womb “enables a narrative as a heroine” because the tension between “life-giving and life-taking is removed”. They can be described as female heroines and not mothers. In addition, female heroines are often linked to the idea of virginity, as in the case of Joan of Arc. In this sense, Allah argues that “because the subject has not utilised her life-giving capacity, yet, that it/she does not challenge essentialist understandings of gender and as such risk disrupting the normative association between femininity and motherhood.”

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183 Ibid.

184 Oberlé, ‘LCP à La Rencontre de Ces Femmes Qui Combattent Daech’. Le Figaro.

185 Ahall, Sexing war, 84.

186 Ibid, 84.
- Extraordinary and inspirational women

Described as extraordinary, according to the Daily Mail, the YPJ “describes itself on its website as ‘the first women’s army’, fighting for women’s freedom and a democratic Syria.”\(^{187}\) They are described as a new phenomenon, as it is unusual to see women involved in the military in Syria,\(^ {188}\) although traditionally Kurdish women have been fighting for centuries. The emphasis is put on the extraordinary of their situation, which matches with their depiction as heroines. They are an example and a pride for women’s rights.\(^ {189}\) And their “bravery” and combativeness are a “symbol of the egalitarian and tolerant force” of their movement.\(^ {190}\) In an article one combatant is surprised by the fact that it is only recently that the western media have found out about Kurdish female fighters, and that they were only discovered because of the fight against ISIS. She explains that their fight has a wider purpose, but the article does not go further in its explanations.\(^ {191}\)

One frame used to portray the YPJ as detailed by Nacos is the “tougher than males” frame. Indeed, the YPJ women have often been described as being more powerful than ISIS men. Regularly the newspapers reminds the audience that if an ISIS man is killed by a woman, he will not be rewarded with virgins in the afterlife. Which according to the news, give them the advantage of scaring ISIS jihadis men\(^ {192}\) who are described as “ISIS savaged” who “fear Kurdish women fighters more than any other foe.” They are scared of their “bravery” and “skills.”\(^ {193}\) This represents ISIS fighters as fright-
ened men and reinforces the portrayal of YPJ as strong women. This title reinforces this idea with “What really scares ISIS? GIRLS! Jihadists believe that if they are killed by a woman they won’t go to heaven, claim Kurdish fighters”. ISIS fighters are here depicted as weak men who are scared of “girls”. In addition, they are reputed to be very good soldiers able to kill “up to 10 ISIS jihadis a day”, and some “have killed more than 100 Isis fighters.”

Generally, these women are portrayed as inspirational. They are beautiful women who fight for what they believe in. The lexical style always refers to the theme of bravery. They show “fearlessness” against “ISIS’ uncompromising brutality”, they are “courageous women”, “fearless and noble”, “very brave”, “very beautiful”, “idealistic”. This article argues that they support the same values that the west does, while ISIS incarnates barbarism and that the whole western world should feel concern. The Kurds should not be fighting ISIS on their own.

Another aspect of their story that is generally highlighted in a positive way is their physical appearance. As they are usually wearing a military uniform, the media found another way to refer to their femininity by referring often to their hair, which becomes here the symbol of femininity. They are said to wear make-up as they want to look beautiful in case they die. Their heads are sometimes covered by a “keffiyeh” which according to one combatant “help express her femininity”.

Their stories are often romanticised, especially when they are interviewed like in the case of this “warrior”...
who is talking “her hair blowing in the breeze.”

This article in Le Monde titled “Kurdish female soldiers: Be pretty and fight”, is being critical about the news spreading about Kurdish women and claims that:

“often, because they are facing a backward islamism that enslave women, these combatants are showed by the Western media with hair worn loose, eyes made-up under the military cap, or cleaning their weapons with manicured nails. Pershergas but always feminine, sexy under the uniform.”

In addition, although portrayed as soldiers, their military look is quite limited. The article of the Guardian details the outfit of one of the combatants who “looks more like a guerrilla fighter from the Spanish civil war than a combatant at the sharp end of the international coalition to eradicate the world’s arguably most feared terrorist organisation.”, The combatant has “no army boots and instead marches to battle in a pair of size five secondhand Chinese-made trainers, bought for £6,” and has “no body armour or helmet”.

A point often made is that they are surprisingly young and petite. The Guardian found “disturbing to see the sheer youth of the fighters.” They contrast her military fatigues with her hoodie and her pink bracelet. In the same vein, their year of birth is often given in the articles instead of their age such as “Asia Ramazan Antar, a combatant born in 1997”. A way to picture women as victims in conflict in also to infantilise them. Scholars have pointed out that in the public discourses women were associated with children and vulnerable groups. Brunner claimed that in the media male terrorists are usually treated as adults even when they are 16. While as demonstrated in both ISIS and the YPJ, their young age is very often emphasised, which might be associated with

201 Oberlé, ‘LCP à La Rencontre de Ces Femmes Qui Combattent Daech’. Le Figaro.
“Femmes soldats kurdes : sois belle et combats” English translation my own.
203 Ibid.
“Or, souvent, du fait qu’elles affrontent un islamisme rétrograde qui asservit les femmes, ces combattantes sont montrées par les médias occidentaux les cheveux libres, le regard fardé sous la casquette militaire, ou nettoyant leurs armes les ongles faits. Peshmergas certes mais toujours féminines, sexy sous l’uniforme” English translation my own.
207 Brunner, Female Suicide Bombers - Male Suicide Bombing?, 43.
naivety or innocence. In the case of the YPJ it could be concluded that they use this language to illustrate that because of ISIS, even the youngest ones need to participate. Similarly, the petite stature of Rojda Felat, described as one of the main female commanders, is often emphasised in the articles. Maybe to contrast with the widespread idea that authority is often in the hand of men with bigger statures. She is said to have a “soft voice”, described as a “tiny woman” in several articles, she does not look threatening, which is put in opposition with the fact that she is leading combatants who defeated ISIS in Kobane.

Finally, their story has been so sensationalised that Kurdish YPJ women have become fashionable. Indeed, the Swedish brand H&M was accused in 2014 of using the YPJ for marketing purpose as one jumpsuit of their new collection was judged very similar looking to the uniform of the YPJ. After the backlash on social media where internet users accused the brand of capitalising from the YPJ’s fight, H&M apologised and explained that they want “to offer the latest within fashion and trends,”. In the same vein, maybe also in the sight of bringing the YPJ closer to the Western audience and by sensationalising their story, one combatant has been nicknamed by the British media the “Angelina Jolie’ of Kurdistan”. Asia Ramazan Antar who died “while battling ISIS” has become a poster girl for resembling the actress. Because of her “teenage pout” and “brown eyes”, her death becomes even more tragic.


209 Ibid.


- **YPJ: terrorists?**

One characteristic that stays very vague regarding the YPJ women are whether or not they should be labelled as terrorists. While never labelled as such in the media, the YPJ is nevertheless sometimes associated with the PKK as in this article which explains that these women “belong to the PKK”, that “they are all member of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party, an organization that has been fighting the Turkish government for decades and is classified as a terrorist organization by the US, NATO and Turkey.”\(^{214}\) This article is less confident and claims that it is Turkey who claims that the YPG/YPJ are “linked to the outlawed Workers’ Party.”\(^{215}\) The Guardian explains that the YPG are a terrorist group in Turkey, and that the YPG/YPJ are both associated with the PKK.\(^{216}\) In another article the YPJ are “regarded variously as freedom fighters or terrorists, Assad-backers or anti-Isis guerrillas”.\(^{217}\) Judging the YPJ as terrorists has even been found outrageous in some British media.\(^{218}\) In this article by the DailyMail, the PKK is even depicting as a saviour who is “helping to create and train Sinjar Protection Units that are made up of both male and female volunteer Yazidi fighters.” which also “promotes gender equality in the Middle East”.\(^{219}\)

This ambiguity leads to wonder who qualifies as a terrorist? In the media articles that have been analysed, the YPJ are contrasted with ISIS, in which the Islamist organisation is demonised. The YPJ are the incarnation of the feminine emancipation against the misogynistic and demeaning diktats of radical islamism. And the idea of gender equality that the YPJ are symbolising are represented as a breath of fresh air against the “the murderous fanatics of ISIS” who persecute, torture and rape women.\(^{220}\) The YPJ and ISIS women are therefore like two antagonism.

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214 Holdaway, ‘Three Brave Female Soldiers Kill 10 ISIS Brutes in Iraq a Day’, *Daily Mail*.
219 Holdaway, ‘Three Brave Female Soldiers Kill 10 ISIS Brutes in Iraq a Day’, *Daily Mail*.

44
4. Analysis

4.1. The frames that reduce these women to a simple image

The dichotomy of the YPJ as heroines fighting for gender equality and the women of ISIS as brainwashed victims are illustrated in Cindy Ness’ statement in which some have described the “contemporary female militant/terrorist as trapped by the social circumstances tied to gender or as a ‘romantic dupe’ who had been manipulated into violent acts by a male lover or a male relative.”\(^{221}\) In that sense, the frames used to depict these women are reduced to a simple homogeneous image or idea of them. Falah observed that “Arab and Muslim women are rarely portrayed as having “normal” lives [...]. Instead, images of Muslim women are used almost exclusively to communicate the abnormality of life in Muslim societies marked by violence, religious fanaticism, and political turmoil.”\(^{222}\) She goes further and argues that there are two narratives often used about Arab women: the passive victim and the active activist. After examining the representations of ISIS and YPJ women, there is a binary narrative that stands out in which the YPJ are portrayed and heroines, the amazons of the contemporary world, and ISIS women are reduced to brainwashed victims, housekeepers. As it was previously explained framing allows the media to make sense of something that does not. In this sense, as the YPJ did not meet the profile of the typical terrorist, they have been depicted instead as heroines and women warriors, beautiful and tough who fight for what is right.\(^{223}\) This does not mean that everything that is said about these women is untrue, but rather that it fails to acknowledge other alternatives and aspects about them.

\(^{221}\) Auchter, Gendering Terror, 129.
- **YPJ: offering wider perspectives**

As the previous chapters attempted to demonstrate, the media tend to use the dichotomy of the heroine and the victim. The Orientalist assumption is that women in the Middle East are oppressed and subservient to men, therefore the women who decide to fight back against their destiny as victims are celebrated in the media and become heroines.\(^\text{224}\) Nevertheless, it seems that the fight of the Kurdish women has been reduced to escaping the patriarchy. As Edith Szanto explains “Whereas the protesters had escaped government oppression, these Kurdish women has escaped subjugation by male Islamists.”\(^\text{225}\)

The use of frames that was examined showed that categorising might not allow the objective truth to come out. Therefore the stories and who the story-teller is become important. And what is left unexplored and unheard in these stories matter as well. Hilary Charlesworth wrote that “all systems of knowledge depends on deeming certain issues irrelevant, therefore silences are as important as positive rules.”\(^\text{226}\) As the discourse analysis demonstrated, Kurdish women are only associated to their fight against the barbaric and patriarchal ISIS. The gender equality notions of their fight are emphasised to reinforce ISIS’, or Islam’s, patriarchal side. Kurdish female fighters became known by the western media only thanks to their fight against ISIS, which surprises one combatant who says to the Guardian that “ISIS is certainly a terrible group, and their ideology is dangerous especially for women. But our fight is about much more than that.”\(^\text{227}\) The article will not go further to explain what the combatant meant by that. Daniella Kuzmanovic points out that the representations of the YPJ “are a certain form of orientalism” and that “they are perceived as something completely unexpected in a Middle Eastern context. They perpetuate the image of the Middle Eastern woman as hidden away, clothed and passive, and not as an agent in her own right.”\(^\text{228}\) In addition to this, the ideology of the YPG/YPJ has been kept elusive. Although their link to the PKK has been mentioned in several articles, the ideology behind the party is kept mysterious.

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225 Ibid, 308.
228 Letsch, 'Kurdish Women Pray for Peace as Fears of Civil War in Turkey Mount', *The Guardian*.
This makes it look like gender equality is their only struggle. Which might as well for-get the fight of the Kurdish people for the independence of Kurdistan, which is the main aim of the party. Gender equality is therefore one aspect only of their fight. Leila Khaled, a militant for Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and who was consid-ered a terrorist, argues that women’s issues cannot be considered as more important than national independence. For Leila Khaled, “women cannot be liberated until the entire nation is liberated.” Thus, although the media have reduced their gender equality fight as a fight against ISIS’ patriarchy, the fight of the YPJ is probably much bigger.

Other authors, such as Dilar Dirik, a Kurdish author and researcher, have been denouncing the representations of the YPJ in the western media and have argued that their representations are depoliticised as their ideology is not mentioned, which ignores the decades of resistance of the Kurdish people for national independence and which re-duces their cause to a fight against women and misogynistic islamists. Dirik argues that this “cheapen a legitimate struggle by projecting bizarre orientalist fantasies on it – and oversimplifying the reasons motivating Kurdish women to join the fight.” In ad-dition to this, the history of the mobilisation of Kurdish people, which is still considered terrorism by some, has been completely ignored. The media indeed plays an important role, as according to their representations they can turn political actors into negative or positive actors in the audience’s eyes. Especially in time of war, they are a tool to gain public support as the way they depict certain events are likely to influence how govern-ments and people will regard the events. As this the case for the YPJ, their positive representations in the media have allowed them to gain support from the public as the comments left on media articles suggest: people want governments to help them in their fight against ISIS.

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229 Sjoberg and Gentry, Women, Gender, and Terrorism, 128.
231 Ibid.
ISIS: ignoring the oppression of Muslim women in the west

In order to intend to rationalise ISIS Western women for leaving their liberal, developed and free countries to join ISIS, the discourse seems to have focused on their personal reasons and on the fact that the only way that could explain why they migrated was that they have been manipulated by men. Nevertheless, this might forget the oppression of Muslim women in the West. Interestingly, while the emphasis is put on Islam’s patriarchy and ISIS’ barbarity, the media discourse have failed to find other alternatives than the sake of love, or a missing father, to explain why Western women are joining ISIS. As Aysel Morin argues:

“Multiple forms of oppression plague their struggles: in the first corner, there is patriarchy, the dominant Islamic discourse in the home front, and at times, fundamentalism. In the second corner, there is Orientalism, its fantasy world, and its legacies in the West. Yet, in the third corner, there is the discursive colonization of Muslim women in feminist literature, the implicit hierarchies of feminist theory and the Muslim and non-Muslim feminists who uncritically embrace them.”

Indeed, Islam has been labelled as a threat for gender equality and sexual freedom by some strands of feminism. The difficulty for Western audiences to make sense of women joining ISIS often comes from the fact that from a Western perspective it is hard to believe that freedom might not be their end goal. They are portrayed as lacking agency as their vision of free-will do not meet the Western standards.

Alternatively, Muslim women usually face Orientalism and “Eurocentric intellectual imperialism” when they try to address the issue of gender oppression. Therefore, addressing gender oppression in Muslim societies “requires resisting patriarchy, victimization, along with intellectual domination, both in intra-cultural and inter-cultural contexts.” Interestingly, YPJ women are often described in secular ways, leaving out the question of religion. What distinguishes them from ISIS women is that they are not represented wearing the veil. And usually, this absence of veil is referred to by the

235 Szanto, Depicting Victims, Heroines, and Pawns, 315.
238 Ibid., 405.
emphasis put on the description of their hairstyles, or of a keffiyeh covering their head. For this reason, as they are contrasting with the Muslim women of ISIS, they seem to described as closer to ‘Western’ values.

Moreover, with this emphasis on personal reasons and the ignorance of the multiple motivations that could lead women to get involved in terrorist organisations, Muslim women keep being seen as manipulated, brainwashed, under the influence of Muslim men. This creates a homogeneous and simplistic image of the woman who joins ISIS and suppresses any kind of political agency, which is justified by the fact that Western women converting to Islam, do not fit the Western standards of what emancipation should be, and therefore cannot be considered legitimate political agents.

Also, the discourse on ISIS women have showed that most of them are considered victims who were simply manipulated by men. Some scholars have argued that the Western representation of Muslim/Middle Eastern women as victims can be associated to colonisation. Kahf claims that Western texts dated back from the 18th century mark the invention of the image of the Muslim woman as a victim. In the same vein, Leila Ahmed argues that “the issue of women only emerged as the centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam as Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries”. This representation of the Muslim woman in need of saving served, and might still do, as a justification for the “mission civilisatrice”. But some have raised counter arguments to this representation of victimhood, arguing that these women do not deserve the rest of the world to feel bad for them as it was their decision to leave their Western countries and join ISIS in Syria. In addition, Edith Szanto points out that associating them with terms such as “jihadi brides” might bring the audience to sympathy with them. Szanto argues that “by psychoanalyzing these women, the media reveals its inability to come to grips with this phenomenon and devalues the opinions

240 Mohja Kahf. Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque. 1st Ed. ed. (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1999), 7-9.
242 Ibid, 152.
and actions of these women.” The emphasis is therefore put on these women’s personal lives to attempt to explain their involvement in ISIS. Whereas if the emphasis was put on their agency or ideology they could not be portrayed as victims anymore who needs saving from the West.

The images of veiled ISIS women are contrasted with pretty and smiling pictures of the YPJ who are engaging in a type of violence that is right, while still staying feminine. The YPJ are described as “empowered”, “emancipated” and as active women fighting to liberate other women. They are seen as saviours who come to liberate the naive and irrational muslim women who got manipulated into joining ISIS. As this article about a French woman who joined ISIS but was disillusioned illustrates:

“Mina still ignores it, but the Syrian Democratic Forces are already in Raqqa. (…) We went outside… and there, on a building, I saw the flag of the YPJ flying and, further away, Kurdish women combatants. I couldn’t believe it.”

The YPJ are to some extent portrayed as spreading Western values. This explains why they have found public support in the west. In contrast, the portrayal of ISIS women as naive teenagers lured by men leaves out their complexity as a person. This of course does not mean that they are not abused, or that some have not been manipulated, but rather than reducing them to the myth of the “jihadi bride” shows a lack of complexity that does not allow to fully makes sense of ISIS, women and terrorism, and also avoid to portray them as security threats.

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244 Szanto, Depicting Victims, Heroines, and Pawns, 315.
245 Ibid, 315.
4.2. Is agency politicised?

As Said points out, the Western media tend to use orientalist discourses which reproduce the stereotypes already existing about Muslim women. Arab women are often portrayed as exotic, passive and as lacking agency. In this sense, the media have portrayed the YPJ as something extraordinary for the fact that they transcended this vision of Middle Eastern women as suppressed objects, and instead were emancipated and empowered women. For that, the media can be described as “builders of realities”. They can glorify or minimise events and phenomena. Their power goes as far, that the audience “often responds not to events or social trends but to reported events.” Van Dijk defines the media as “the interface between the interests of the powerful and the public mind” and they “continuously construct and reconstruct social problems, crises, enemies and leaders and so creates a successions of threats and assurances” In this sense, through communication, the elites are able to construct and deconstruct the shared representations, according to their best interests. Chandra T. Mohanty’s work highlights the discursive colonisation of “third world women” found in the Western discourse. One main critic that has been facing ‘Western’ feminism is its assumption that all women suffer from the same forms of oppression, and therefore the solutions can be the same for every woman. Mohanty argues that this implicit assumption reduces women to an image of a homogeneous group, which leaves out all the differences that culture, race, ethnicity etc. can represent in a woman’s experiences. In addition, this creates a hierarchy which leaves ‘third-world women’ being evaluated according to Western standards. In this sense, the YPJ are depicted as empowered women fighting for their freedom against barbarism, but only in the framework of the fight against ISIS, while

252 Morin, Victimization of Muslim Women in Submission, 380.
ISIS women’s choice cannot be understood. While YPJ are fighting for their freedom, ISIS women gave up on it by joining ISIS.

The previous chapters illustrated how women involved in political violence are not represented the same way. While some are perceived as ‘whores’, some as ‘brain-washed victims’, and others as ‘freedom fighters’, we can conclude that the question is not only a question of gender but that their violence is also perceived through the notions of culture, race, and therefore values. While the YPJ are mostly Middle Eastern women, to some extent they are a closer representation of the idea of a ‘Western’ woman for the values that they are said to share: secularism, gender equality, femininity. As opposed to that, white women who have chosen to convert to Islam have been perceived as “traitor to their race” by white supremacist. Their reasons for choosing Islam are not understood as they are supposed to be women from the free world and in choosing Islam they are perceived as becoming submissive and passive victims who have “denied their superiority”. These white women who are converting to Islam, or even worse the ones joining ISIS become “The Others” in the western eyes which draws the link between racism and islamophobia, according to Myfanway Franks.254 This is typical of the Orientalist discourses which reinforces the “Us” against “The Others”. The dichotomy of US vs. THEM in the case of gender in global politics and YPJ and ISIS shows that group membership matters in the construction of women as terrorists. And that this construction can change according to the social context.

Reference to the war on terror is interesting to examine as it has often been described as also being a war in the name of women, and it has been argued that the images of muslim women and women in the Middle East as victims have been used as a way to justify the Western interventions in the Middle East. In this sense, the binary narrative of the YPJ as saviours and ISIS women as victims might be used for the same purpose: women’s rights and freedom emphasised to justify Western interventions in the Middle East and portray ISIS as the common enemy. Hunt and Rygiel have urged about the need to give back agency to women and recognise that the war on terror was not a war for women’s rights.255 While YPJ’s actions are seen as extraordinary and ISIS


52
women’s as irrational, Nacos argues that women do not have different motivations than men, but instead that the social context and the gendered discourses shape our perceptions of these women, which explains that according to the context and the dominant hegemonic discourse, some are portrayed and heroines and some as brainwashed victims. Despite the different reasons that can motivate women to join a terrorist organisation, ISIS women have been reduced to lonely brainwashed women in search of love and protection of men, while the YPJ have been reduced to their fight against the jihadi men.

While the first ones see their agency and political actions being swept away by the Western discourse, the later ones although described as active and empowered to some extent only see a quarter of their actual ideology being presented to the audience. The media frame these women in a way that it gives the audience a context to explain the involvement in terrorist organisations. This demonstrates that as political violence is usually seen masculine, women’s involvement needs to be further explained. Most of the literature on female terrorists agrees that the media usually gives personal reasons as motives for women’s involvement in terrorists, rather than political ones. This is contrary to men who rarely get attributed personal reasons for joining a terrorist organisation. This is illustrative of the gendered frames of these representations. In the process of framing, some elements to the story are deemed relevant and emphasised, and some irrelevant will go unheard. This process allows for the creation of a story which will build an understanding about a phenomenon. This framework usually tells us more about the social and cultural context of the story-tellers than about the subjects of the stories themselves. Indeed, the media seems to have difficulty depicting women as murderers and would rather portray them as victims or heroines. Interestingly, the depictions are rarely showing the YPJ engaging in violent actions. Olivier Grosjean, an expert on Kurdistan, argues that their actions are overshadowed with images of “Angelina Jolie of Kurdistan” and the glamourisation of their fight, which in turn, reinforces the stereo-

256 Nacos, The Portrayal of Female Terrorists in the Media, 436.
257 Auchter, Gendering Terror, 132.
258 Gardner, IS THERE METHOD TO THE MADNESS?, 911.
259 Brunner, Female Suicide Bombers - Male Suicide Bombing?
260 Parkin, Explosive Baggage: Female Palestinian Suicide Bombers and the Rhetoric of Emotion.
261 Gardner, IS THERE METHOD TO THE MADNESS?, 922.
261 Ibid, 224.
types about women and violence.\textsuperscript{262}

According to Jessica Auchter, for subjects to become political agents, it depends on if we are able to rationaliste their actions. If these women are not doing what is considered a rationalised agent would do, then they are denied as political agents. The issue is that therefore agency depends on a particular understanding of the term that has been determined before. Therefore, firstly, it is used as a mean to legitimise or not someone’s political status, and therefore uses a binary narrative that excludes people who do not conform with the Western standards of a rational agents, and secondly, it prevents from exploring other alternatives of the meaning or aims of agency.\textsuperscript{263} The thought that ISIS women might have consciously chosen to join ISIs, without having been lured by men, is often dismissed. Nevertheless, whether or not the Western women migrating to join ISIS found what they were looking for in the organisation, their choice to get involved and join ISIS can still be considered a political choice according to Zakaria.\textsuperscript{264} In addition, while the narrative about the YPJ is a narrative putting women fighting freedom at his core, instead the disproportionate coverage and emphasis on women might not be in the name of gender equality. Accordingly to Bell’s argument that:

“the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will only be served when that interest converges with whites’ interest in consolidating power, and that the service of blacks’ interest will stop when it would cause whites to lose relative power.”\textsuperscript{265}

If we apply this theory of ‘converging interests’ to gender, it can be argued that gender equality might be granted when it meets the interests of the men holding the power, but support will stop once the interests are not met anymore and that patriarchy is actually threatened.\textsuperscript{266} Sjoberg and Gentry therefore conclude that “narratives which keep expanding women’s ‘place’ to the extent that it appears that there are no limits, while maintaining limits, serve the interest of masculine power.”\textsuperscript{267} In this sense, the YPJ sensationalised stories do not threaten the male dominance for the West. Instead, their coverage focusing on gender equality against ISIS’ misogyny serves the Western

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{263} Auchter, \textit{Gendering Terror}, 125.
\bibitem{266} Sjoberg, and Gentry, \textit{Mothers, Monsters, Whores}, 27.
\bibitem{267} Ibid, 27.
\end{thebibliography}

54
interests as it justifies ISIS’ demonisation as a backward and barbaric culture against the liberal Western values.
Conclusion

In regards to terrorism, the attention has long been on male terrorists who are considered to be more politically engaged and violent. Lately, the media have been giving attention to women involved in terrorist organisations as, for interrupting the traditional gender norms, they appear to be both fascinating and controversial to the audience. The gender dimension of terrorism is a topic that has generally been underexplored by scholars and therefore the portrayal of women terrorist in the media is a topic that needs to be further researched. The topic of women and terrorism has not beexploited enough as men are often described as the perpetrators, as the ones who convince and manipulate these women into joining terrorist organisations. Nevertheless, for effective counter terrorism policies, a gender dimension to security is very much needed and the lack of consideration of the concept of gender bias in security needs to be addressed.

This thesis has attempted to point out the way in which the British and French newspapers have been portraying YPJ and ISIS women. More particularly, the thesis sought to highlight how archetypal myths that are regularly used about women terrorists, namely the mother, the heroine, the monster and the whore, could be found in the frames used to represent ISIS and YPJ women. This showed that there was a pattern in the media that tends to use dichotomies, in which the YPJ women are depicted as heroines against ISIS women who are naive brainwashed victims coerced by men. Another question that this topic asked was to why, as of today, some women such as the YPJ are described as heroines and given some sort of agency, while ISIS women are not? The first hypothesis was that as the West such as France, the U.K., and the USA are involved in the Middle East and that the fight against ISIS has been set as a priority, the appraisal of YPJ women might be a way to bring support to the Western interests in the Middle East. Thus, this might lead to an emphasis on the different values that the YPJ and ISIS women might represent. The hypothesis was that ultimately women are not considered legitimate political actors and ideologues in their own right.

In order to study the way in which the British and French media depict YPJ and ISIS in terrorist organisations the goal was to identity frames in order to point out differences in the way that these women are represented. For this research, first a general introduction was given on the topic of women in terrorist organisations. This part high-
lighted that female violence is considered taboo as political violence is considered masculine, while the idea of “woman” is associated to peace, mothering and care. Women’s involvement in conflict is often considered abnormal and is judged more strongly than for men. Furthermore, it was noted that the media use archetypal myths as they help to make sense of events. These myths are cultural resonant narratives that will sound familiar to the audience in order to not leave it confused even when something, such as women in terrorist organisations, is seen as abnormal. In this section, I reviewed four archetypal myths that scholars such as Gentry and Sjoberg or Mohja Kahf have pointed out as being the most used ones to talk about women terrorists. Scholars such as Gentry and Sjoberg pointed out that the media still represent women according to old stereotypes. First, I examined the myth of the mother which used the narrative of the woman with a strong maternal instinct who might seek revenge after the death of her family. Second, I cited the myth of the heroine or female warrior. This myth depicts these women terrorists as strong, smart, beautiful who fight for a cause that they judge right. The “beautiful souls” have not other choice than to fight. Third, I studied the myth of the monster or bad woman in which this narrative condemns strongly the involvement of women in political violence and depict them as deviant, monsters who might suffer from mental disorders. They are described as having a broken femininity. While represented as evil, they might also be a source for sexual fantasies about bad women. Finally, the myth of the whore was also examined as female violence and sexuality is often associated. Special attention to the sexuality of women terrorists is often given in the media. This first section of the thesis attempted to understand how dichotomies and archetypal myth narratives can be dangerous as these women might not be represented as people anymore, but rather as part of a story-telling rather than women with any kind of agency.

In the second section of this research the cases of YPJ and ISIS women were studied in more depth using frame analysis. The aim was to understand how frames, in this context, are used in order to make sense of women involved in terrorist organisations, which leads to the dichotomy of the heroine vs the brainwashed victim. To do so, the frames identified by Nacos were used and the four archetypal myths studied earlier were to be found in the representations of these women. In the frame analysis of ISIS

women it was found that their physical appearance was used as a metaphor for their transition from good to bad women, that they were represented as being influenced and coerced by the men who surround them, and that they were depicted as naive and manipulated young women. The only missing frame out of the six identified by Nacos was the “women’s equality frame”, which reinforces the dichotomy between ISIS women and YPJ women as the frame analysis of YPJ concluded that their representations were mainly focus on their gender equality fight against ISIS. The YPJ have been portrayed as freedom fighters and extraordinary, inspirational and beautiful women.

The last section of the thesis was focus on analysing and gathering what had been said previously. I concluded that the frames might be reducing these women to a simple image in which the YPJ women are heroines fighting for gender equality while ISIS women are brainwashed victims. Nevertheless, the research about this binary narrative needed to open wider perspectives for which I examined the fact that the YPJ women are only described as women trying to escape patriarchy, represented in this narrative by ISIS, which reinforces the difference of values between the Western values, represented here by the YPJ, and the barbaric and backward culture of ISIS. Along with this, the ideology of the YPG/YPJ has been kept elusive and their link to the PKK not obvious, which might reduce the YPJ to their fight against ISIS and leave out their goal for independence. It can be argue that in a way, it depoliticises their ideology. In regards to ISIS women, while this research does not argue that this excuses any kind of behaviour, the oppression of muslim women in the west is often left out. The Western audience has difficulty making sense of women migrating to join ISIS and has therefore failed to find other alternatives than the sake of love, or a missing father, to explain the migration of these women. This homogeneous image of women of ISIS suppresses any kind of political agency.

The final question that might explain the dichotomy of the heroine vs. the brainwashed victim and to why women terrorists are not framed the same way, is: is agency a politicised concept? This research could conclude that as some women are “heroines”, and others are “whores”, or “victims”, the question goes beyond the question of gender, and women terrorists are also assessed according to culture, race, and values. To some extent, the YPJ women are portrayed as sharing common values with the idea of “Western women”, particularly gender equality and their notion of women from the free
world. On the other hand, women who convert to Islam are perceived as submissive and coerced by men, they become the Other. To illustrate this, the example of the war on terror was cited as it has often been accused of using the saving of women as an excuse for Western interventions in the Middle East. Therefore, the dichotomy of the YPJ as heroines and saviours supported by Western superpowers, and ISIS women as brainwashed victims might be used for the same purpose: to highlight the fight for women’s rights and freedom as a justification for Western interventions in the Middle East as it justifies the portrayal of ISIS as an enemy of Western values such as gender equality.

The first hypothesis of this thesis was that these women are not considered legitimate political agents and ideologues in their own right. By studying the dichotomy in the French and British media that portray the YPJ as heroines and the women of ISIS as brainwashed victims, the aim was to study whether or not these women involved in organisations – considered terrorists by some – were considered legitimate political actors. It has been seen that female involved in politically violent organisations are not all portrayed the same way, and it can be concluded that while the YPJ are portrayed as active agents, ISIS women are denied agency. It can therefore make us question about the notion of agency and if agency is actually a neutral term. The study of the constructions of the YPJ and ISIS women have led to think of agency in a politicised context, that is granted or not according to the dominant hegemonic narratives and their interests at stake. In this sense, to understand why some are considered political agents and some are not, the global context and the power relations would need to be examined into more depth. As for now, the YPJ have been valuable assets in the discourse built against ISIS as they are used as a good representations of the contrast between Western liberal values and ISIS’. Nevertheless, we saw that their portrayals are quite reductive and does not allow for more space about their ideology than their fight for gender equality and the ISIS man. As Turkey is a NATO member and a key partner in the region, it might not be for the best interest of the Western countries to praise the YPJ for other than their fight against ISIS. As for ISIS women, they have never been considered legitimate political agents and ideologues in their own right. They have been framed as brainwashed victims, obsessed by men sometimes, or grieving a missing father. They are not granted any political motivations.
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63


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70


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