Until the mid-1990s, scholars and practitioners of international relations largely ignored the relationship between gender and security. A normative shift occurred with the passing of UN Security Council 1325 on women, peace and security in 2000. Despite greater awareness of women’s engagement in conflict settings, they were essentially still attributed the roles of either peacemakers or victims. The dichotomy - victim or peacemaker - leaves little analytical space for other forms of gendered political engagement. This policy brief departs from that normative assumption and illustrates, through the Kurdish case, that women are increasingly active as combatants in conflict.

The policy brief introduces the politics behind their participation elaborated through the ideology of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), which has organic links to the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its female militia, the Women’s Protection Units (YPG). In terms of policy, it is significant to recognise the role of women in conflict because those who are on the battlefield are also those who later sit at the peace table and define the future state of affairs. Understanding their political motivations, gives insights into their expections of future peace negotiations.
Representations of Kurdish female combatants

Media reports prior to 2014 represented Kurdish female combatants as an anomaly to established understandings of Middle Eastern women as victims of gender oppression. Following the YPG´s engagement during the siege of Kobane beginning in September 2014, the media began to focus on their active combat role, particularly when contrasted with the religiously conservative Daesh. While women in armed groups typically perform non-combat support tasks, the Women’s Protection Units were engaged in active combat. However, the discussion of Kurdish female fighters has overwhelmingly been framed as one of gendered resistance. This presentation of female combatants joining the Kurdish struggle for emancipatory motives alone reinforces the stereotypes of victimhood, and depreciates their political agency. The focus on Kurdish female combatants resistance to gender and state oppression limits the scope of their political agency, reducing their politics solely to a form of resistance. However, the ideology of the PKK/PYD has played an equally important role and may provide an equally relevant explanatory lens, illuminating why women participate, and what it means for Kurdish society.

The Kurdish movement in Turkey and Syria

In examining ideology as a motivating force, it is first necessary to understand the links between the PKK and the PYD. The PKK was founded in 1978 as a militant nationalist liberation front with a Marxist-Leninist ideology led by its charismatic leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The links between the Turkey-based PKK and the Syrian Kurdish PYD hark back to the late 1990s when the Turkish state demanded (under threat of war) the expulsion of the PKK from Syria. Remaining clandestine Syrian PKK cells formed the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD succeeded in building up a fighting force to protect its enclaves in northeastern Syria, all the while lying low in the struggle between the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian state. The PYD, led by Salih Muslim and co-chaired by Asiyah Abdullah, considers jailed PKK founder Öcalan as its ideological leader, although the two organizations are separate entities. In 2012, when Syrian government forces withdrew from three Kurdish-inhabited areas, control was handed over to Kurdish militias. In November 2013, the PYD announced an interim government, divided into three non-contiguous autonomous areas or cantons, Afrin, Jazira and Kobane, in the autonomous region of Rojava. It is in Rojava that the struggle of the Kurdish female combatants has captivated international attention. Understanding their willingness to go into battle necessitates a historical overview of Kurdish women’s activism in the PKK.
Recruitment of Kurdish women

In the early 1990s, by some estimates, women made up a third of the fighting force of 17,000 militants in the PKK.¹ They were engaged both in support activities and in active combat. Of the 20 suicide bombings in Turkey from 1996 – 2011, eleven of them were undertaken by women operatives. According to Nihat Ali Özcan, a PKK scholar, the initial decision to enlist women resulted from the practical need to grow as an organization, and the shortage of recruitment initially. Women and girls were recruited from a wide cross-section of society, from rural areas to urban centres, from university and diaspora communities. In the early years, families "gave" girls to the movement, and later, as the myth of the Kurdish freedom fighter grew, many young women left home to join the PKK.

The recruitment of women also served as a tactical measure. Özcan argues that PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan regarded women’s emancipation as a tool to break down the structures of feudal Kurdish society.² In Öcalan’s analysis, the PKK chief recognized that feudal family and tribal structures presented an obstacle towards recruitment: Kurds in Turkey’s Southeast preferred the security provided by families and tribes. Women were at the bottom of a tribal hierarchy, based on adherence to a strict patriarchal system. Advancing women’s liberation weakened traditional structures, and replaced them with the party organization.³ Once dissolved, the unit of the “family” could be recreated within the liberation movement.

PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan’s own thoughts on the role of women spring from the leftist (Marxist-Leninist) ideology of the movement.⁴ In his analysis, the oppression of women begins with the rise of the class society: It is capitalism that has “turned her into merchandise to be offered up for sale on the market.”⁵ Gender oppression is seen as the cornerstone of capitalism, and to defeat capitalism, one must do away with established gender structures. In particular, the institution of the family is seen as “one of the most important building blocks” of the capitalist system.⁶ And while Öcalan’s ideological approach may differ from Özcan’s instrumentalist analysis above, the end result remains the same.

Until the late 1990s, women were engaged with the Kurdish movement based on the aim of Kurdish nationhood. However, after Öcalan’s capture in 1999, the aims of the movement shifted towards the concept of “Democratic Autonomy” or “Democratic Confederalism”, inspired by the work of libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin. The idea of the state disappears, and the social contract which forms the basis of the relationship between the state and the citizen - and which has failed Kurds in their respective states – is replaced by direct democracy. Thus, when Turkish politicians speak of the Kurdish state, it is a misconception of the aims of the movement, who seek to dismember the unit of the state and replace it with the political unit of the community, and its organic, networked system of governance.
Unsurprisingly, this holds considerable appeal to Kurds for whom state power in Turkey, Syria and Iraq is tantamount to oppression. It is through the project of autonomy that confederalism can be achieved. There are five principles guiding the concept of democratic confederalism. These are the right to self-determination, non-statist democracy, grassroots participation, “higher level” decision-making as merely implementation of low level decisions, and anti-nationalism. The concept of radical democracy adopted by the PKK after Öcalan’s imprisonment opened up a greater space for women’s political participation, through the bottom-up creation of a new vision for society.

The Rojava Revolution: Feminism in action

From early on, the contribution of Kurdish women in armed resistance and ideology formation redefined gender relations and broke taboos. The emphasis on women’s liberation, and grassroots demands for more power, has yielded tangible results in the Rojava region where close to one million people are engaged in governance through democratic confederalism. Since the revolution began, Syrian Kurds have formed a governing Assembly/Ruling Council and are administering Efrin Cizire and Kobane via unions and associations in a system of democratic confederalism. However, as of August-September 2016, these systems of governance are at risk from the escalating conflict between the Turkish state, Daesh, and the Kurdish militias in northern Syria.

Conclusion

While the reasons for joining the PKK may indeed be based on individual experiences of gender oppression and/or collective experiences of ethnic persecution, there needs to be a space for women’s engagement beyond these narratives of resistance to oppression. The gender dimension of the Kurdish struggle is also about a political vision of a democratic, egalitarian society. Admittedly, this is not entirely unproblematic, as Kurdish society is not homogenous, with marked divisions across conservative and progressive lines. The idea of building a society in which gender equality is a bearing foundation gives Kurdish female combatants a stake in an egalitarian future in which they play integral political part. Their fight thus becomes a means to an end, not the end itself. By acknowledging Kurdish women’s political agency through their commitment towards the construction of democratic egalitarian societies, we reinforce their equal positions as citizens as well as combatants.
Policy recommendations:

- At a general level, recognising the role of gender in extremist violence and encouraging studies focused on gender as an analytic lens through which to understand conflict.
- At a level specific to the Turkish-Kurdish case, support for any Turkish-Kurdish efforts at dialogue with an expressed focus on those prioritising women.
- Recognition of the ideological nature of Kurdish women’s participation as combatants and their stake in a future Kurdish entity in Northern Syria without which their incentive to reintegrate into society at the end of the conflict is diminished.

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3 Özcan (2007), op. cit.
6 Ibid.
8 Acik (2014), op.cit.
9 The House Organ (2015), op. cit.
10 The Turkish state’s Euphrates Shield operation into Jarablus is aimed both at clearing Daesh from the area but equally importantly, at preventing the unification of the two Kurdish cantons of Kobane and Afrin.