Kurdish Women: Liberation through the Barrel of a Gun?

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, women who were active during the demonstrations that resulted in the downfall of repressive governments did not see the fulfillment of their demands for liberation. On the contrary, the rise of religiously conservative parties further narrowed their opportunities for participation in the public sphere. In Turkey, a country that was long regarded as a model for the post-Arab Spring Middle East, the gender policies of the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) resulted in demonstrations by feminists at the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Regionally, the truism that women were “the losers of the Arab Spring” was clearly justified. This contrasts with the case of Kurdish women fighting Daesh in Iraq and Syria. In fact, Kurdish women’s militant resistance to oppression precedes the fallout of the Arab Spring and the rise of Daesh. However, it was not until 2014 that international media started reporting on Kurdish female fighters engaged in the battle against Daesh. The media portrayal of them often ignores a deeper understanding of their political motivations, and their roots within the Kurdish movement. This policy brief goes beyond the media representations and asks, how has the Kurdish struggle empowered women as political agents?

The policy brief begins by addressing the history of women’s role in the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) – using theories of female recruitment and motivation for militant action from other cases - and then continues with some thoughts on the novelty of the present situation. In particular, the paper examines the role of women in the Kurdish-controlled Rojava region of northeast Syria, as understood through the ideology of the PKK movement.

Media Images of Kurdish Female Combatants

At the end of December 2014, CNN named Kurdish female fighters of the People’s Protection Units, the YPG, (along with a Kurdish Yezidi parliamentarian Vian Dakhil) as the most inspiring women of the year. Their fight against the forces of Daesh, and in particular, their resolute stand in the fight for Kobane, gave them global media attention. For example, a Google search on the word “Kurdish female fighters” for the dates 15 March 2011 (the start of the Syrian civil war) until 31 December 2013, a period of 33 months, yields 5230 hits. The same Google search, conducted subsequently for half the number of months - from 1 January 2014 to the 1 May 2015 - results in 27 500 hits, over a
period of 16 months. In sum, interest (as measured through an informal internet search) rose by almost 20% in the first half of 2016.

Media framing, defined by Entman (2007:164) as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation”, substantiates what Groshek (2008: 316) describes as "ideologically grounded, prevailing socio-political relationships and viewpoints."1 In this case, they reaffirm media perceptions of the oppressed women whose motivation for joining a political movement is described primarily in liberatory terms. This is encapsulated in the CNN headline from 2008 “We Won’t Stand for Male Dominance” with the following subscript: “Female fighters in Iraq say their struggle with Turkey is more about women's rights.”2

Reports from key international news outlets, prior to 2014, focus on female combatants as an anomaly to established understandings of Middle Eastern women as victims of gender oppression. However, the presentation of female combatants joining the Kurdish struggle for emancipatory motives alone reinforces the stereotypes of victimhood, and depreciates their political agency. Ghanim (2009:114) notes: “regarding women as perpetual victims tends to reinforce and legitimize the patriarchal premise that women are weak creatures by nature.” Ironically, by presenting the actions of Kurdish female combatants as extraordinary, the media’s fascination with them speaks to preconceived notions of Kurdish women as passive victims. This is also the case in other reports of Middle Eastern women in conflict. Sedghi (1994) illustrates this by referring to a story on the rape of Kuwaiti women “liberated” by Iraqi soldiers in the Washington Post, in which the focus of the report is on the cultural norms of gender oppression, rather than the international conflict setting. This has the effect of denying women agency, and sustaining the narrative of Third World women as victims.3

In an earlier example from 2003, a journalist from The Guardian, interviewing Kurdish peshmerga women, introduces the female fighters as such: “High in Iraq’s Qandil mountains, 5,000 armed women stand ready to go into battle for liberation and sexual equality.”4 He then continues with a detailed description of a PKK fighter, focusing on her small delicate physique (“five foot nothing in her trainers with hair pulled into a ponytail that reaches the small of her back and a multicolored thread round one slim wrist”) and contrasting this with the violence she has engaged.5 The journalist consistently elaborates on the contrast between her femininity and her combat role (“one hand on her gun and the other fiddling with the scrunchy in her hair”).6

The fascination with the physical aspects of Kurdish women combatants corresponds to the research on media framing of female Palestinian terrorists conducted by Nacos (2005).7 She identifies six separate (if at times overlapping) frames that she notes are used in coverage of women terrorists. These are: (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; and (6) the ‘bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality’ frame.8 Beyond the physical appearance and women’s equality frame, Kurdish female fighters are also primarily described through the family connection frame, through personal stories of hardships
endured as an explanatory factor in their decision to take up arms for the Kurdish cause. As the following story illustrates: Nineteen year old Syrian Kurd, Shireen Taher, loses her mentor, a female PKK fighter, and decides to join the People’s Protection Units (YPG). When her father dies in a car bomb explosion soon after, she pronounces: “I always thought that one day my father would be named as the father of martyrs, but I never thought that I would become the daughter of a martyr.” Her brother notes, “Our father’s death gave Shireen an enormous jolt to…be an outstanding fighter.”

In sum, media framing focuses on “exceptionalizing” the Kurdish female fighter with the focus on her resistance to gender and state oppression. In this reading, the combatants’ political agency is centred on resistance to traditional culture, or in the case of Turkey’s PKK guerillas, assimilation into the Turkish state. Regarding the latter, the implication is that should Turkey satisfy the criteria of a multi-ethnic state, this would in itself be sufficient for Kurdish militants to abandon their political struggle. This, in essence, reduces their political project solely to a form of resistance.

However, ideology has played an equally important role in drawing Kurdish women to the movement. Ideology is understood here as a “a system of ideas and ideals, especially one that forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy” - in short, a proactive vision of a better society. Ideology, which includes elements of gender equality, provides a better explanatory lens, illuminating why women participate, and what it means for Kurdish society.

Overview of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey and Syria

In order to understand the roots of the PKK and its links to Syria, a brief historical background is useful. The Kurds are the world’s largest stateless nation, and Turkey is the state that has the largest Kurdish population within its borders – 14.5 million, almost 20 percent of the population. Until the 1990s, Turkey enforced bans on the use of the Kurdish language, on Kurdish cultural expression, the use of Kurdish place names, and denied the existence of a distinct Kurdish minority. The PKK, formed in 1978 as a militant nationalist liberation front, were defined by a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and guided by its charismatic leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

The Turkish state’s repression of Kurdish militancy defined women’s socio-political role in Kurdish society. The insurgency began in 1984, and by 1990, Turkey had imprisoned tens of thousands of Kurdish men suspected of participating in acts of sedition. At the peak of the hostilities between the state and the Kurds, the Turkish government, in a scorched earth policy, burned 3000 Kurdish villages, leading to the displacement of Kurds into cities. Kurdish women increasingly became the primary income earners for their families, and the principal interlocutors with unsympathetic, and often violent, elements of Turkish officialdom responsible for the detention of their male relatives. These factors contributed towards empowering and politicizing Kurdish women.

The conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurds led PKK militants across the border to Syria, where they were able to operate until 1998, when the Syrian Government, under the threat of war from Turkey, expelled the PKK. Remaining clandestine Syrian PKK cells formed the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which then 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 Democratic Union Party, 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 Kobani, in the autonomous region of Rojava (Referred to as Western Kurdistan in the map below). 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 militant PKK.

![Map of Western Kurdistan](image)

Map source: Wikimedia Commons

**Kurdish Women in the PKK: Motivations for Joining**

In the early 1990s, by some estimates, women made up a third of the fighting force of 17,000 militants in the PKK. 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. (Reinforcing the victim narrative, Turkish sociologist Dogu Ergil contends that the disproportionate number of women used by rebel groups for suicide attacks is evidence of their exploitation.)

In this case study of PKK/PYD women, motivations for joining the PKK resonate with the larger sample case study conducted by Jacques and Taylor (2009), replicated below. Using coding methodology, and drawing on existing literature on female combatants, they examine 54 cases, grouping them into 5 categories of motivation (social, personal, idealistic, key event, revenge). As illustrated below, the social category - based on the motivation of gender equality,
education/career needs, humiliation, repression and family problems - is the primary motivational category by a significant margin.

**Table 2. Female motivations and their frequency within the literature**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation category</th>
<th>Example motivations</th>
<th>Frequency of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Gender equality</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education/career needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humiliation and repression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Personal distress</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monetary worries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social outsider</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealistic</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment to cause</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wish for martyrdom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key event</td>
<td>Loss of loved one</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specific humiliating instances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Displacement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other negative uncontrollable event</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>Vengeance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These motivations are not exclusive and, often in combination with one another, also form the stated reasons for Kurdish women joining the PKK. Collected from existing literature on Kurdish female fighters, the table briefly presents some of these.¹⁷

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational category</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social/Key event</td>
<td>Forced migration from rural areas to urban centres in Turkey - poverty, breakdown of patriarchal structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/ Key event/ Revenge</td>
<td>Family’s role (girls to avenge members killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/Idealistic</td>
<td>High social status attained in community by joining movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/personal</td>
<td>In rural areas to avoid marriage at young age to older men, agrarian work, childbearing. Emancipatory.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social/idealistic/key event.

In diaspora communities, motivation is related to forced migration and issues of integration in host community.

Idealistic/Social

National liberation (intricately linked to feminism through the ideology of the PKK/PYD)

Recruitment of Kurdish Women into the PKK

To gain a more complete understanding of women’s decisions to join, it is useful to address the opposite side of the equation - the question of recruitment. According to Nihat Ali Özcan, a leading Turkish scholar of the PKK, the initial decision to enlist women resulted from the practical need to grow as an organization, and the shortage of recruitment in the earlier years of the PKK. Women and girls were recruited from a wide cross-section of society, from rural areas to urban centres, from university students and diaspora communities. In the early years of the movement, 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 Youth Council of Kurdistan, established in October 1987, organized systematic recruitment campaigns, increasing its activities in the 1990s in high schools and universities, both abroad and in Turkey. According to Alkan (2008), “young people who lived their first revolution experience under YCK later joined the organization’s mountain cadres.”

The recruitment of women also served as a tactical measure. Özcan (2002) argues that PKK leader Öcalan regarded women’s emancipation as a tool to break down the structures of feudal Kurdish society. In Özcan’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. Once dissolved, the unit of the “family” could be recreated within the liberation movement.

Öcalan’s own thoughts on the role of women spring from the leftist (Marxist-Leninist) ideology of the PKK. In a piece from 2010, entitled “The Revolution is Female”, he begins by stating: “No social group has ever been exploited physically and psychologically to the same extent as women”. 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.” Gender oppression is seen as the cornerstone of capitalism, and to defeat capitalism, one must do away with established gender structures. In his words: “It was slavery of women throughout society that paved the way for all other forms of hierarchy and state structures”. The institution of the family was “one of the most important building blocks” of the capitalist system. And while Öcalan’s ideological approach may differ from Özcan’s instrumentalist analysis above, the end result
remains the same. However, the PKK leader’s approach is ideological - to dissolve the family, whom he sees as a “micro-model of the state” conceived by men.23

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. Bookchin seeks to redefine the notion of citizenship through the project of confederalism, explained as ‘a network of administrative councils whose members are elected from popular face-to-face democratic alliances, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities.’ 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. That is, ‘when placing local farms, factories, and other enterprises in local municipal hands’, or, ‘when a community (...) begins to manage its own economic resources in an interlinked way with other communities’.24 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.25 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.

With this, the idea of the grand revolution faded and was replaced by greater emphasis on grassroots feminism, everyday politics, and encouraging change within society from below.26 According to Acik (2014), it was women who supported Öcalan following his incarceration, and his controversial political and ideological shift. Öcalan returned their confidence by advocating even greater gender liberation, raising feminist consciousness.

The Regional Context: Protecting Kurdish Autonomy in Rojava

As reported in the media, one of the greatest boosts to the Kurdish female combatants’ engagement (and by extension greater gender emancipation) has, ironically, been the rise of Daesh, and the Kurdish resistance to its efforts to establish itself in Northern Iraq and Syria. However, even before the rise of Daesh, from the start of the Syrian revolution, the People’s Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) with military training and support from the PKK, protected the Kurdish areas militarily. In fact, the contrast between the religiously conservative Daesh and the Kurdish female combatants was arguably instrumental in building awareness around the latter’s resistance since 2012.27 It also framed the media discussion of Kurdish female fighters as one of gendered resistance.
The civil war and the development of Kurdish self-administered areas have erased the border between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds in the northeast of the country. Kurdish solidarity in the fight against Daesh raised red flags in Turkey - threatened by the strengthened Kurdish position in the Middle East, and its repercussions for the country’s own Kurdish minority. As a result, Turkey’s governing Justice and Development party (AKP) was reticent towards opening its borders for the passage of Kurdish fighters into Kobane in September-October 2014. Eventually, entry was granted and the Kurds, assisted by American air bombardments, successfully resisted the advancement of Daesh.

The role of Kurdish female fighters received particular attention during the siege of Kobane that began on 15 September 2014. As with Kirkuk in Iraq, Kobane in Syria is symbolically important. Sirwan Kajjo, a Syrian Kurdish analyst, explains: “Kobane symbolises the Kurdish resistance, not only in Syria but in other parts of the Middle East. Its loss would translate into a defeat for the entire Kurdish nation.” The success of the Kurds in defending their own enclaves until 2014, served to strengthen the Kurdish cause in the eyes of the international public, raising fears in Turkey of the development of a contiguous zone on its border (connecting Kobane and Afrin cantons). By contrast, Turkey’s earlier support of militant Sunni groups in Syria and its late commitment to the fight against Daesh has cost the lives of its Turkish and Kurdish citizens, doomed the fragile Kurdish-Turkish peace process from 2012, and thrown the country into domestic instability.

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. As noted above, the model of empowering women stems from the PKK’s gender liberation perspective. In the Rojava region, 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.

As a result of the adoption of a Social Contract Charter in Rojava, all decisions are made through people’s houses, consisting of 15-30 people, who deliberate and, as much as is practically possible, use consensus to resolve issues as widespread as energy, food distribution, and social problems (e.g. sexual violence, domestic conflict). Most importantly, a minimum of 40% of decision-making participants on all administrative levels have to be women. This commitment is also reflected at higher levels. For example, the main Kurdish political party in Rojava, the PYD, has a male and female co-chair in all institutions, organizations and associations - including medical, educational, military and police councils. In addition, since self-declared autonomy, Kurdish women have established a dozen women’s unions, associations, and committees, that have conducted widespread gender awareness campaigns in all three cantons of the Rojava region. Thus, the ideal of democratic confederalism and autonomy is enacted in the Rojava region – complete with its
gender vision. Arguably, this makes the idealistic motivation an equally strong incentive for Kurdish female fighters.³⁷

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 two narratives of resistance to oppression. Now, more than ever, Kurdish women are active in transforming everyday politics. Accounts of their struggle against Daesh need to recognize their political agency. In fact, in analyzing their political engagement, it is necessary to understand their ideological position as it has evolved over time. The gender dimension of the Kurdish struggle is also about a political vision of a democratic, egalitarian society.³⁸ Admittedly, this is not entirely unproblematic, as Kurdish society is not homogenous, with marked divisions across conservative and progressive lines. These result in competing groups seeking representation for the Kurdish cause. However, for the PKK, women’s liberation remains a core ideological commitment as articulated by its leader: “The freedom of the Kurdish people can be viewed as inseparably bound to women’s freedom.”³⁹

The idea of building a society in which gender equality is a bearing foundation strengthens the resolve of today’s Kurdish women fighting Daesh, by giving them a stake in an egalitarian future in which they play integral political part. This is markedly different from considering their engagement through the lens of gender victimhood/resistance alone. Their fight thus becomes a means to an end, not the end itself.

In Öcalan’s words: “This opposition by women shows us something: Without the struggle against the patriarchal ideology and morals, against their influence on society and against patriarchal individuals, we cannot achieve freedom in our lives, nor construct a true democratic society…. People aren’t just longing for democracy, they want a democratic society without sexism.”⁴⁰

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.
5 Ibid.
6 In the interview with the PKK militants – a man and a woman - the journalist is criticized by the woman when she asks “Why are you asking me social questions and asking my [male] comrade political questions?” Ibid.
7 It also corresponds to framing of gender in the media in general. For example, women political candidates’ appearance, family status, domestic arrangements and personal lives elicit as much interest as their politics (Bystrom et al., 2001; Falk, 2010; Fridkin-Kahn, 1996; Nacos, 2005; Norris, 1997; Ross, 2010: ch. 4; Conway and McInerney, 2012.)
9 Taher, S. (2015), ‘We are so proud’ – the women who died defending Kobani against Isis. The Guardian online, 30 January. Of the four portraits of Kurdish female combatants, only one is described as motivated clearly by a political agenda. The other three are motivated by their personal histories.
11 Ibid.
12 Kurdish political parties in Syria, with their ties to ethnic brethren in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, have been regarded as a threat to Arab Unity and as a consequence, had to operate clandestinely until 2011. Article 8 of the Syrian constitution outlawed all political parties except the ruling Baath and its coalition partners. This is why Kurdish politics remained below the radar until the start of the civil uprising in Syria. Sinclair, C. and Kajjo, S. (2011). The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria. Middle East Research and Information Project. 31 August. Retrieved 30 May 2016, from http://www.merip.org/mero/mero083111.
20 Özcan (2007), op. cit.


Bakcik, G., (2016) op.cit.

Acik (2014), op.cit.

It is also applied to the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party in Turkey who after the 7 June 2015 elections admitted a record number of women into Parliament. Hurriyet Daily News (2015). Turkey set for Parliament with highest woman representation ever”, 8 June. Retrieved June 2015, from http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=83659&NewsCatID=339. However, the inability to form a coalition government nullified the election results leading to a new election in which the HDP lost votes and the number of women MPs declined.


The empowerment of Kurdish women in Rojava a good example of compliance with UNSCR 1889 (2009) which notes that during armed conflict and post-conflict, women cannot just be considered victims but also stakeholders who need to have an integral role in conflict.


This claim can only be corroborated by interviews with Kurdish female fighters - an undertaking that was not within the mandate of this short policy study.

The Charter can be found at http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/resources/rojava/charter-of-the-social-contract/.

Ibid, p. 2